The Boys Who Stole the Funeral

Summary

Les A. Murray

The Boys Who Stole the Funeral

THE BOYS WHO STOLE THE FUNERAL was first published in Australia in 1980 to wide acclaim and it was a recent Poetry Society Recommendation in England. Les Murray’s strong lyric and verbal resourcefulness has also been recognized by American critics of his poetry in THE VERNACULAR REPUBLIC (1982) and THE DAYLIGHT MOON AND OTHER POEMS (1988). The book is a short “novel sequence” written in verse. Murray tells his tale in a series of 140 sonnets, adventurous and varied in form. Kevin Stace Forbutt (“unemployed/ for speaking proudly under pressure”) and Cameron “Ratchett” Reeby (“famous for his epic fight with women”) decide to honor the wishes of an old soldier friend, Clarence James Dunn, by stealing Clarie’s body from the funeral parlor so that they may deliver him to his rural homeland for a proper burial. Figuring “the cops won’t look for him upright” the boys are suddenly “propping him up on the seat behind,/ putting a toweling hat on him.” They speed off at midnight, railing against life’s injustices, their parents’ perplexing shortcomings, and the “mean spirit in the cities” that is difficult for them to understand or rationalize. In the darkly humorous narrative that follows, Forbutt and Reeby confront hostile members of a motorcycle gang in a rural bar, and lose a mysterious hitchhiker whose babble about blood sacrifice seems crazy yet portentous. They are unprepared for the painful, tentative welcome they receive at the home of Dunn’s grieving nephew. Indeed, after the funeral they find that “the macabre has fallen away/ with the adventure. They have entered the real reactions.” Their “boys’ joke” is on the news, but worse still a series of personal clashes begins which culminates in a confrontation between Ratchet and his father’s lover, and ends with the murder of the boy by police. His friend Forbutt is offered spiritual guidance by
aboriginal healers in the mystical closing scenes. Reliving his country’s bloody history as he soars aloft into the vision he has been granted, the young survivor attempts to heal his soul’s wounds with an understanding of sacrifice and reconciliation. Murray’s language is remarkably beautiful and infused with a sense of ebullient exploration. The story is fun to read and emotionally powerful. American readers will appreciate the spoken flavor of the Aussie slang even if they don’t grasp every cultural allusion.