

Review of *The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre*

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NOVEL IMAGINES THE FEVERED DECLINE OF LOUIS DAGUERRE

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Memory is our first camera, capturing imperfectly images from our youth. Such images haunt French inventor Louis Daguerre in Dominic Smith's lyrical debut novel, "The Mercury Visions of Louis Daguerre." The namesake 19th-century protagonist, of course, won renown for his discovery of how to "fix" light-created pictures, creating the first proto-photographs or daguerreotypes. He did this using mercury, which undoubtedly contributed to his ill health later in life. But in Smith's poetic and darkly romantic fictional take on Daguerre's decline, the madness caused by this toxic element is also what spurs the inventor to follow up on his most poignant memory to seek the lost love of his youth.

Smith's Daguerre is a complicated man. Vaguely aware that his health has been compromised, he nonetheless succumbs to his delusions, fostering them as his latest discoveries. His most prominent delusion is that the world is ending. There's some reason for this: In 1849 Paris, society is fragile. Revolution, which Daguerre had survived in his youth, again rumbles in the streets. And while Daguerre has won acclaim (and a state pension) for his discoveries, he feels ambivalent about his fame, proud of his Legion of Honor cross but wearing it hidden beneath his shirt.

Such uncertainty is full of portents to his paranoid brain. "Signs were everywhere now," he thinks. "Men read poetry in the squares before bands of moved and cheering peasants. Funeral processions marched along the riverbanks with open coffins." Smith clues us in to the rational world, noting workers' strikes and bread lines. But Daguerre's delusions have a personal weight. As he becomes sicker and crazier, the world is indeed ending for him.

Not that Daguerre has many regrets. He has accomplished much. But before the end, he decides, he must fulfill some final wishes. Ever aware of his reputation, he creates a checklist of 10 images he wants to capture, which he shares with his younger friend, Charles Baudelaire. The idea intrigues the poet, who "believed in Louis Daguerre's apocalypse as an invention of the artistic mind, no different than a belief in God or Beauty or Piety." Baudelaire may quibble with a few items on the list, such as "a perfect apple." "The apple is not exotic enough," he complains. And he dismisses the last entry, one Isobel Le Fournier, as boring: "Lost love and all that how tiresome." But he agrees to aid his friend anyway, particularly with what seems the most difficult request: finding a nude model willing to pose during the long and arduous process of making a daguerreotype.

Is it any surprise that one goal leads to another, and that Daguerre does end up finding the woman he fell for on the same day that he discovered the play of light, at age 12? Perhaps not, but this inevitability does nothing to mar Smith's evocative work. In fact, the way Smith jumps back and forth in time, as well as between Daguerre's fevered mind and reality, nearly removes any element of predictability, instead immersing the reader in a fully imagined and wildly sensual world. With a keen sense of detail, the author re-creates the countryside of Daguerre's youth and his current Paris, and lets them mingle in suggestion and imagery. At a party with Baudelaire, for example, the inventor smells something "earthy and fungal" and is reminded of truffle-hunting pigs, their "bristling necks . . . bulging from short catches of rope." Soon after, he meets members of the demimonde who also seem to spring from his past, including Eggshell, a barmaid, and Pigeon, an "alleged cabaret dancer" and prostitute.

Isobel, when we finally find her, has also reconnected to this country past, as well as to the illnesses of Daguerre's youth and his present incapacity. But if finding her is not what the inventor imagines, neither, he realizes, is the future. As with his invention, Daguerre must learn to wait for the light. "I open the eye of the camera to something I sense is there but cannot fully name or see," he explains. Smith presents these visions in a similar fashion, images to be experienced and enjoyed.