

CONTENTS

PAGE

Robert Farnsworth	<i>Correspondence</i>	5
Bruce A. Jacobs	<i>The Black Advertising Copywriter</i>	
	<i>Auditions for Political Drama</i>	6
	<i>The Black Advertising Copywriter</i>	
	<i>Dresses for the Theater</i>	8
Peter Gurnis	<i>Marine Surveyor</i>	10
	<i>47 Main Street</i>	12
Mark Johnston	<i>Little Mother with Claws</i>	13
Cathleen Calbert	<i>Listening to the Voices of</i>	
	<i>Medieval Sainted Ladies</i>	14
David Citino	<i>Naming the Grandmother</i>	16
Christopher Jane Corkery	<i>Dream and Précis</i>	17
Nancy Nielsen	<i>Found Wanting</i>	18
	<i>Extinction</i>	19
	<i>Humming to Myself</i>	20
Matthew Yamagiwa	<i>A Tumwater Morning</i>	22
W. Stalter	<i>Grackle</i>	23
	<i>Equilibrist at Work</i>	24
Kurt Leland	<i>Beard on Vacation: Beach</i>	26
Patty Seyburn	<i>Mourning</i>	27
John Vincent	<i>Tent</i>	28
	<i>Clear Cut</i>	29
Forrest Hamer	<i>Twelve</i>	30
Bob Brooks	<i>For the Memorial</i>	33
Jonathan Aldrich	<i>The Blot</i>	34
Anthony Sobin	<i>Cutting Ties</i>	37

CORRESPONDENCE

What to do with
the stricken
thought of your
putting this
letter away, as I,
having answered
put yours away
just now?
Outside in
the dark the oaks
draw one
enormous breath.
The dead look
down from
photographs at me.
The envelope is
sealed, stamped, so
worth who
knows how much
more than what
flutters nearly
into sight but won't
resolve: your
hands, brusque,
or deliberate
or gentle, refolding
the page. Whichever
image I keep
I must need to.

Robert Farnsworth

Two Poems**THE BLACK ADVERTISING COPYWRITER
AUDITIONS FOR POLITICAL DRAMA**

All he has to do, she says,
is pretend that he's a Vietnam vet
and that she's Japanese.

She's marked his lines with bullets.
His character asks hers,
"Where are you from?"
She pauses, says, "Chicago."
He says, "No. Before that."
She says, "Ohio." He says,
"No. Your parents. The ocean."
She says, "San Francisco,"
then hands him the rice,
his cue to flash back
to the nine-year-old girl
who blew off his right arm
with a grenade in a bowl.

"I've never had dinner with a psychologist
who writes plays," he says.
"Wait a minute," she says in Japanese,
"that's not in the script."
"Sure it is," he says. "After the rice.
I exhibit Post-Uncle Ben Stress Disorder.
You suggest that I write commercials
until I recall my own brand name.
Then the waiter hands me your bill
for eighty-five dollars."

She tells him to stay in character,
close his eyes, come closer,
imagine giving her a piggyback ride
through a muddy creek. Her tiny toes
skirting the cold. His hands
on her body, feeling for grenades.
He follows her orders across her skin.
“Good, good,” she murmurs.
“Now call out my name.”
“Uncle Ben, Uncle Ben,” he says.
“No,” she says. “Before that.”

His mouth opens, an empty bowl
held by small brown fingers.

**THE BLACK ADVERTISING COPYWRITER
DRESSES FOR THE THEATER**

The playwright explains
how she would like him:
Oxford shirt, Wrangler denims,
cowboy boots with silver heels.

She unfurls the smooth shirt
like a curtain, praises its weave
against her skin, tells him
if she were a client,
she'd admire his presentation.

With the mirror to her back,
she is not Japanese.
She calls the woman in glass
"the way I look,"
like a tulip facing itself in water,
a rumor of liquid pastel.

The black advertising copywriter
nods, having been addressed
as "Yo, boss" by store clerks,
and quizzed about malt liquor
by people for whom
he provides a black friend.

He fastens six pearl buttons,
runs a zipper along her spine,
just for the moment,
since he knows
in late morning, she will lean
across cream sheets, a woman

who is not Japanese,
wearing the white shirt
of a black advertising copywriter
off her tawny shoulders,

and he will pull percale about his hips
exactly like a kimono,
ask her if she likes the way he looks
enough to walk with him through mirrors.

Bruce A. Jacobs

Two Poems**MARINE SURVEYOR**

New England's
Beauty in its boulders
Its glacial light

Say as a child might –
My Captain What of the ones
Stayed home?

Suppose I told you
The distances
What good – ever

As Tierra del Fuego is
As Greenland is
As the tail of a swallow

Harpoon – straight ivory
“Cold water business”
The fisheries closed

If it was January
Clocking out of the east
If he could swim

That's silly
Cooking with fat
Haddock and fried potatoes

At his age what could he do
If he could swim
If it was January

Rowing all the way out –
When did Grimes go?
Librarian Town Clerk

Harbor Master
Gather upstairs Monday nights
Before the Water Commission

Testimony
To the moon's thrust
Add frailty

What it must be like
To be a whale
Plotting against happiness

47 MAIN STREET

What's it like at your age
Washing dishes?
Autodidact, skin-head, kind.
Do you still like to kiss?

At Christmas,
Or maybe, playing Monk.
Out the window it looks
As if the harbor's on stilts of icy shells;

Crazy girl-friend
Pregnant from a guy in jail.
Down the side alley and up
Three flights. Two rooms.

Take the bus to Dogtown
Walk back along shingles;
Pale oaks, ledges, waves.
Sketching boats – tipping

Boulders high in the sky.
You walk the love you land
On your feet, living hand to eye.
The head like a hinge.

Peter Gurnis

LITTLE MOTHER WITH CLAWS

(Kafka, upon his native city)

Prague should be a verb
for what she does to you.

Ich prage

First she bears you, but lovelessly:
bells die and spires turn their backs.

Du pragst

The verb should mean to scratch
or claw with hook-like talons.

Es pragt

To make a narrow, barely
visible cut, but one that lasts.

Wir pragen

To incise with a casual, sweeping
motion, causing unconscionable pain.

Ihr pragt

To attack unremittingly,
as an eagle or jackdaw might.

Sie pragen

Prague should be a verb
for what she's done to me.

Ich bin gepragt

Mark Johnston

**LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF
MEDIEVAL SAINTED LADIES**

I went for eleven days
nibbling the new flowers
of my father's lime tree

I ate the petals
of small white roses
soaked in green tea

I took no wine or meat
I lapped a little milk
to satisfy my family

If fish was put to my lips,
I sucked out the juice
but left the rest of the flesh

I lived on watered wine
though I preferred
the river water, filthy
with salt from the tides

I ate only moldy bread

I swallowed scabs and lice

I mixed ash into my meat
I stirred in the dirt of the
earth

I threw in small stones

I sucked the pus from the
dying:
nothing could be sweeter

After fasting for three years,
I was so hungry, I licked
the very earth in agony

I ate seven black widows
and lived alone for seven
years

I stopped menstruating
I stopped perspiring

I stopped eliminating

Then the stigmata came to me
I bled from my nose

I bled from my hands

(stanza continued)

I bled from my feet
The bread by my bed
became unnaturally sweet

The aroma which rose
from my hand caused
one of my confessors
to confess onto me

I shed bits of skin and bone
and gave these to those in need

My wash water,
if swallowed,
could heal disease

My breasts filled with enough
milk
to feed an entire village

My breasts filled with oil
that made a good salve
for the sores of my Sisters

I pressed the Lord to my breast
and gave him suck: what glory

Christ came to me
and bid me drink,
pressing my lips to his side,
thus I did slake the thirst
long held inside of me

A golden chalice,
filled with blood,
came to fill me

The host filled my mouth
with honey

Honeycomb was on my
tongue

“Give me the blood!”
I cried to the priest
“Give it to me!”

Let us go and devour our God

This is His body,
This is His blood

NAMING THE GRANDMOTHER

The ancients believed
a name lives apart
from the person to whom
it is given. This I believe.

The Calabrian girl who sailed
in steerage from Platania
to Cleveland to make a boy
from Serrastretta

a man who would become
father of my father
is a skull full of auburn hair
atop a fine geometry

of bones old as anything
under cemetery grass
far beneath Ohio's winter,
far beyond any dream,

while *Carolina* remains
a flower glowing in my mind,
especially late at night
as I weed and prune

my nighest memories
or move through the kitchen
fragrant with basil and garlic
in the gestures and steps

she taught me, old songs
flitting like spring birds through
my head. *Nonna. Nonna.*
Carolina Scarpino Citino.

David Citino

DREAM AND PRÉCIS

Lily took the saucer down
Thinking to put milk in it.
Eamonn broke the saucer then,
In rosy shards across the floor.
Patrick swept the pieces up,
Into the dented metal pan,
Afraid of Mother's whip-like voice,
The thing behind it, blue, like pain.

Lily died before she was born.
Patrick is five, Eamonn one.
Their mother is older, every day,
Less of a child, some songs begun.

Christopher Jane Corkery

Three Poems

FOUND WANTING

"Women are to men as men are to angels."
 – Ven. Sangharakshita, D.P.E. Lingwood

Woman: having a womb. Womb: a very delicate organ. (ref.) Education, dangers of, scientifically shown to shrivel the womb.* Having a womb, not having b . . . s, therefore wanting in seminal fluid. (def.) A potential, latent within an imperfect object, for attaining perfect development. Woman: incapable of seminal thought, an imperfect object without latency. Without: lacking. Outside. Not within. (Denied entry.) Found wanting: (woman) lacking balls, having a w . . b - uterus - hystera. See: hysteresis, a state of being inferior; hysteros, coming behind**; hysteria, irrationality caused by a disorder of the womb, freq. seen in educated [wait] * this fact, though once widely accepted appears to be unsubstantiated ** (women:men:angels) but if true may account for women seen writing their names over and over around the margins of their history books, around and around defacing the texts writing woman WOMAN, **WOMAN** all over the pages of the history books out of control just as he (he of the epigraph) foresaw when he said that: *women simply repeat the myth of their oppression to one another:* (as he placed himself between me and the angels.)

EXTINCTION

I have eaten the tommycod
and the true cod
and the haddock and the roe
of the haddock and the tuna
and the swordfish and flatfishes
of the western shore and the
eastern shore. I have never
eaten the monkfish. When
the monkfish (about which
we know so little) disappears –
when they go to the fishing grounds
and find no monkfish – when
they drag the bottom and find
no monkfish – when baited hooks
bring up no monkfish – when
the boats go back and forth
pinging and pinging
and the green glow of the CRT
is flat and empty of monkfish
and finally fishermen say
bad year for monkfish
(about which we know almost
nothing) I will say of course
it's shocking, where did they go?
I have never eaten the monkfish.

HUMMING TO MYSELF

Awoke to summer.
Drank cold sweet water. Ate fish from a slow river.
Was lost in cornfields. Walked through trees
growing thick over limestone beds.
Whispered to old grampa, who had marched for the South.
Carried peonies to the graves, my father's mother,
my mother's father, my grandmother's grandpa,
who took up his gun for the North. Sat on a blanket
in the graveyard. Listened to the stories.

Learned the seeds of the corn and the squash.
Learned the paw paw, the black walnut, the sycamore,
the sassafras. Drank the tea of the sassafras.
Dug dandelion greens. Ate dandelion greens wilted
in hot vinegar. Saw black tongues of cloud.
Watched my father break slabs of coal. Touched
the fern in the heart of the coal. Learned to sing
Shall We Gather At The River.

Coughed all night. Coughed all winter.
Made the wool patches of my winter quilt into hills
and valleys. Made cabins in my hills and rivers
in my valleys. Breathed steam, spicebush filling
my lungs, said it was the mist rising from my rivers.
Ate soup made from an old hen. Ate my corncakes
with molasses.

Made a shrill noise with a willow whistle.
Watched the peonies open. Helped spread the blankets
in the graveyard. Helped unpack the food.
Walked on the road with the tall popple. Watched
my cork bob on the water. Made a small hot fire.
Cooked fish rolled in cornmeal. Cooked them in bacon
grease. Helped Mama shave soap. Dipped water from
the rain barrel. Folded sheets.

Went to my grandmother, maker of salves and plasters,
with cuts and splinters and cinders in my knees.
Was tutored in stoicism. Was given a handful of
mignonette. Learned to can tomatoes. Climbed
the cherry tree with a lard pail. Had a swing
hung in the rose arbor. Had another swing hung
from a high high limb. Came down from the sky and
learned to make pies.

Fell asleep waiting for the stars to fall.
Fell asleep on a blanket on the grass, with my father's
strong voice behind me singing. Yes,
we'll gather at the river. The beautiful,
the beautiful river. The beautiful, the shining,
the silver river.

Nancy Nielsen

A TUMWATER MORNING

It was cold and it was slow
air, and white and white and blue and white sky.

It was breath and it was cold
air, and frost that gathered white on white glass.

It was six and it was dawn
cold, the sun spun no heat though bright and gold.

It was sun and it was slow
dawn, and breath running gathered white in blue sky.

Matthew Yamagiwa

Two Poems

GRACKLE

These thoughts
at 4:28 AM:

a flutter flutter flutter,
chipping chunking,
feeding along
each in his own way

wooing

the queen
for his own.

Shall the king have her,
this jackdaw dancing,
this king of the hill?

All compounded by chance,
by circumstance

the king comes tumbling,
calling all after;

the king's in a tight spot,
a parliament of foes

whistle check clucking . . .

this Jack shall not take her,
this Jill to my touch,

she's now in the poem's way,
she stands for the throne

(all in a cloud
of x's and o's)

May 24th,
early on does it –

at birdspring
if even

with grackles,
with delight,
the woods' rim
whirring a-wooing

wooing

the words
in his gift.

Shall the word die,
the word but a notion,
a shudder of wings?

a grace,
a twist of fate,

feeding the ground now
searching for seed;

I hear it all happen,
we make it our own;

this word makes it so . . .

so tinker a tankard
to hold the best ale,

the wedding's a wild one,
this bride has our troth

(she answers me lightly,
then flies on her way)

here ends
this poem.

EQUILIBRIST AT WORK

The woodsy flower flows easy
my mind is set to go
attention wavers straight
where the wind will

*

Here look at this look here
the hangman says
the darkness the dampness
stay out of the road

*

(Watch your step closely,
that stair is quite wet)

*

This pathway leads to water
the river down to sea
There's fennel for you my dear
and rue and rue for me

All that is hidden
all that is plain
instructed by wisdom
I'll speak to you

*

tiny blue brilliant
green scope of eye
the limits of lying
the fair light of pain

*

(Take my hand here,
we must find a way)

*

Instructed by wisdom
pure is her tongue
her words are clearly
the map of my mind

Fennel's for flattery so
my book says the river's
the water the water's
the will this is the way

*

These fragments are all now –
more than we need
a lunar sea of light clouds
these fragrancies of flesh

*

(If form become formula
we'll not this way again)

*

First bird's beck is bitter
early days of spring
you must go alone now
I cannot wait for you

W. Stalter

BEARD ON VACATION: BEACH

Each dawn I awake to a ripping: hands rubbing
the peeled-away-from other half of night's Velcro.

Your cheek dredges the tide-drowned and withdrawn summer
salt of my rising: the neck's soon-to-die sea spines

too small to poison the fresh fish of your fingers,
your lips searching the riptide for pearls of sweat

and that tide wearing down the blond beach of your skin.
So much sand in the eyes, such cyclic abrasion!

Fog parts from the sea mirror's towel-rubbed portrait,
the browned, wind-buried tips of perdurable sedge:

these weeds unlike wheat, never ripened but bleaching –
why harvest what grinds, but ground up makes no bread?

Through a curtain of still-lifting haze the sun draws
my lower jaw's shadings' erasable charcoal,

while spume stiffens in peaks like well-whipped-up egg whites,
a prow soon to plow through them, wake leaving them smoothed.

Kurt Leland

MOURNING

Untouched by grief, you want to know its heft,
assay it in your palm's mimetic bowl
the way Egyptians sought to weigh the soul,
so weighed the body once the soul had left.
They found their scales defective, imprecise;
unable to detect, much less discern.
So would your senses, at both bow and stern
of reason, realize themselves a vise.

But I can give you what it is you crave:
here is a moment bursting with despair
that you may carry with you like spare change –
collected daily, can't be spent or saved,
worth little – but the coins are somehow rare,
that nonetheless, you would *would not* exchange.

Patty Seyburn

Two Poems**TENT**

Cortàzar once wrote
that happiness makes
bad literature
but I wonder
as I watch you
surrounded by friends
flanked by the dogs
telling a story
about a woman visiting Tibet
who
finding it hard
to sleep
feeling like
it was time to wake
though
still dark
put her hand
on the tent's canvas
and found it
heavy and
wet
her heat had
called
to a thousand leeches
like happiness
to fate, always
the unspent
delivered signal
– how alive!
how attractive

CLEAR CUT

Strange.
While I was chopping
there was plenty of shade. . .

Porcupines
emerge, dustballs at an estate sale,
their cries are baby cries.

I forgot its name,
but it's half-otter
half-human, calls from the forest
in the voice of someone you love,
someone you love in trouble.

Amid log smell
and saw leavings puffed to oyster crackers,
in the drizzle, I hear it still.

That thing,
it'll lure you into the forest.
I mean: metaphorically.

John Vincent

TWELVE

And my grandfather was dead for just months, and the family was
unmooring,
his children now the elders among us, several of them living far away.

And my father had returned to Viet Nam for another year, and this time
he volunteered which made no real sense to me, the way his rules made no
sense
but he was leaving them behind, anyway.

And my mother was without the men she loved, and I was a boy.

And the man I looked to to take my father's place drank to the point of
being
a drunk, but he liked me and he liked that I liked him, even if the liking he
wanted
was not the liking I felt.

And I grew what looked like a foot of inches, suddenly, my body reaching
at its final height.

And Martin Luther King was murdered, and the town instantly set a curfew,
and everyone in the North End stayed inside, all fury and despairing
eager to
find the way out.

And the Emancipation Proclamation was what people kept talking about,
as if words by themselves could describe that freedom.

And Master Woodard told him he could stay on the plantation and become
one of their farming assistants.

And from the playground the sixth-graders had all to ourselves, we watched the marchers carrying tall signs, the woman with the deep voice looking straight at me and saying, We're causing this trouble for *you*.

And he left his master, glad, wondering would he want to remember, and who ever would remember him in the far from now.

And I lost interest in any history but becoming 13.

And there was a freedom I could imagine.

And my best friend was my cousin Larry, who was my age and kept secrets.

And the boys just older formed a group we could belong to if we passed one at a time through their gauntlet.

And the 14 children who would be born and who would die waited for him to leave sharecropping, meet Jemima Thompson and become the man who is their father.

And he would tell himself as Benjamin Barnes, born in 18 and 53, who had
been
called already to be a preacher.

And he tended beans, cotton, corn, and peanuts.

And for the first time I cropped tobacco, cropped for four days, the misery of which I would not tell excepting my cousin and my brother and my aunt.

And his friend from the plantation was Willie; they laughed with each other about things, and he promised he would name a son the name of his friend.

And he loved the sound of his freedom, and he sang it often.

And in my bed I felt myself burning between the pajamas and my stomach, and it was a new happiness.

And I began not liking church music, wanting instead to dance on Sundays, especially the Boogaloo.

And I wanted my father's permission by mail to get a Quo Vadis haircut, promising now I would take care of my hair.

And he began thinking someday he could marry.

And my cousin and I debated the meanings of soul, and wondered when
our people
would become free.

And those of us afraid of snakes were sent each to capture one and to care
for it, and those of us afraid of heights were sent to the roof of the North
End

School to stand at the ledge and to look.

And I asked to keep my Papa Willie's pocket watch, the one with the
second hand
bent and the crystal chipped.

And he began making long walks, farther away and back.

And he figured the world laid before him good, anyway, despite the stark
hatreds.

And he thought all the days and nights of that year only
of freedom.

Forrest Hamer

FOR THE MEMORIAL

Why not them:

those two big
housecoated women,
fishermen's wives
themselves,

hugging on the sidewalk
by the Spanish
grocery
like storm-clouds
in summer;

and then slowly
pulling apart,
till only their fingers
touch at the tips,

to show the sky
empty, and the dark
boats.

Bob Brooks

THE BLOT

(Hermann Rorschach 1884-1922)

i.

Later he must have thought
Something twittered at the night window,
Briefly discernible like a rustle
Becoming itself, it whirred and rested
On the windowsill, jubilant, moonlit,
Whatever it was, a folded greeting
With purposes it yet declined
To say fully, some fuzzily huddled
Apparition in the Zurich night.

And these
blossoms falling? From the trees?
I left off wanting to know
an answer decades ago
if we had bats or blossoms
tucked to our sycamore limbs
when night came on.

ii.

In darkness did he get up
 And reach his hand to the small spirit there?
 Something may have moved or spoken.
 A confrontation? a quirk of breeze
 Under the quaint tassle? phenomena
 A boy may take for token joy
 On such a night, before childhood shuts,
 And lie dreaming of a journey equal
 To the beauty of his father's paintings?

But why
 speculate when I
 can simply *say* it was –
 and thus make it as real as
 the darkening air we move through,
 the lost puddles, spring, new
 buds we had forgotten?

iii.

In a corner of the classroom at breaks
 Hermann and Konrad are playing *Klecksographie*.
 Little Hermann and Konrad are laughing today.
 Somewhere a tall teacher watches where
 Formal curtains hang light in the spring sun.
 It will be years before Kerner's sad book
 Of blots and verses that he left behind,
 Of ghosts and monsters, after his wife died
 And he died, will flutter open.

What game
 did I play – the name?
 It may have been Jackstraws,
 pulling a long stick loose
 without budging any other,
 even the slightest quiver
 and you were gone.

iv.

So he became a serious
Handsome man who set ten shapes
For our speculations and died too early.
Then everything changed: he had intended
Statistical elements – how *many*
Answers, detail or the whole picture,
Kinetic or still, and so on – not
To invite ourselves or a lost part
Of ourselves inside, not his idea,

and yet
after his death it's clear
others began to flow
into his images, or seem to,
opening here or there
something to know of light
and dark and longing.

Jonathan Aldrich

CUTTING TIES

You've changed!

You wear the *black* cravat in the bathtub.

You wear the *pink* one to the opera.

What am I to do?

You've stopped eating the olives from your martinis;
but still you bully the bartender out of tons of them.

What a cad you are! He'll lose his job!

And that's hardly all.

Didn't you once say you'd give anything you own
for one little sketch from Matisse's notebook?

Well. You finally sell the family homestead in Kansas
and you can buy anything you want.

So what do you come home with?

Nothing French, oh no, not even a cheap Miro.

Not even a beat-up and bitchy-in-the-first-place
pseudo-French Whistler etching with trimmed margins.

Oh no. You spend it all on a fast Volkswagen and what? – some *other*
real estate in some *other* hillbilly dump like Arizona.

You've left me no choice my sweet.

You're just off the scale.

Next time I see you power-lunching with your banker pals
I'll burst in with scissors! Lights! Camera! Action!

Oh! It's too late now!

You're Curly! And yass, I'm Moe – SNIP SNIP SNIPPING away!

And there it will be,

the tip of your red tie floating in your soup

steaming like some stranger's hot silk bathing suit.

And *moi*? Why there I am, over there! Rowing away like crazy. . .

Nyuk! Nyuk! Nyuk! Nyuk! Nyuk!

SELF-PORTRAIT AS MISS AMERICA

Honest really truly, this is the most
 Special moment of his life. Gosh.
 He's crying, his sash is snagged and rides
 Too high up his hip, his tiara slips
 From crew cut to forehead, but the roses
 Smell so good. Oh, gosh, it's all
 Embarrassing and wonderful. The camera flashes
 Flash and Jeff Mock walks
 The runway and Bert Parks sings out
There he goes, Miss America
There he is, your ideal . . . What a voice
 Bert has. Oh, sing, Bert, sing!
 It's heaven! Right back to Iowa
 The tv brings him straight on home
 And his folks are proud and hug, neighbors
 Hug them, acquaintances hug them, and complete
 Strangers come ringing at the door.
 Soon all of Marion, population
 Twenty-three thousand, is gripped
 In history's most embracing clutch.
 Jeff Mock at the runway's end
 Pirouettes and beams. He's flushed, rosy.
 His spike heels pinch, his lips
 Are weights he can't let down, his gown
 Clings like a date gone earnestly
 Indecent, but here he is, hips and all,
 Live and breathless, on the stage and in America's
 Living room. It's the absolute most
 Exciting night of a boy's life.
 He is the new standard of beauty.
 He blows a kiss a kiss a kiss
 And turns back to the perkily sad

(stanza continued)

Runners-up, semicircled in their clasp
Of disappointment. Jeff Mock would like
To share it with them, partake of failure's bitter
Cup, commiserate with Miss Congeniality,
Fret at home with every girl
Who never made it out the front door.
They all have this in common, the taste
Of hope's wine turned rancid
On the tongue. He knows just what it is not to be
Homecoming Queen. Jeff Mock
Would like to be among them in their distress,
But he can't won't how could he?
Not tonight, this night of nights, consummation
Of every boy's dreams. He turns back
To the country's wide eyes, he smiles,
Waves, smiles, and there he goes,
America's Candy Sweetheart Heartthrob.

Jeff Mock

BOOKS IN BRIEF

Anne Carson is a poet and classical scholar of astonishing diversity and imagination. I don't know much about her: she was born in Canada, teaches at McGill and the University of California at Berkeley, and just won a Guggenheim. I do know that she has restored literary power and excitement to the term *academic*. I want to introduce four of her books and hope to inspire my readers to seek them out for their own astonishment and delight.

The first is called *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton University Press, 1996, 212 pp., 0-691-06681-7, Dalkey Archive reprint, paper, \$12.95), which Princeton presented in a sober black academic gown with flaming rosy-red endpapers. Perfect! The scholarly apparatus is exemplary. The generous quotations are in their original languages, with crisp new translations and explanations of the etymology and word-play. Even a reader like me with little and less Latin and Greek can feel she's drinking from the original spring. The essay is divided invitingly into thirty-four short chapters – one to eight pages each – with seductive titles like “My Page Makes Love” and “Gardening for Fun and Profit.”

Sappho is there, and Sokrates, but I was unfamiliar with many of the sources Carson introduces. I had not thought about how much Greek literature there was beyond the few great names. Nor how absorbed they were in Eros – bittersweet Eros (*glukopikron*, actually *sweetbitter*). And Carson moves with sinuous simultaneity from the earliest Greek fragments to Kafka and Calvino, Welty and Woolf.

I have no intention of “spoiling the plot” by summarizing the movement of ideas from chapter to chapter. What I'll do is toss out a few samples of the questions raised (and often answered) in this delicious intellectual feast. How do oral (pre-literate) cultures perceive their world and fall in love in ways radically different from literate cultures? What are the analogies between language and love? “Just what is erotic about reading and writing?” She considers the geometry of the lover and the beloved and the space between them, complicated by the addition of the reader, with the new space between her and the lovers in the literature. Moreover, Carson is intensely expressive of the literary culture of the end of our century in the way she leads us to think about our own thinking. This is an engaging short book, as packed with nourishment as a nut with meat.

Anne Carson's next book is *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995, 152 pp., paper, \$14., 0-8112-1302-1), with an excellent appreciative Introduction by Guy Davenport and on the cover a glowing painting of two volcanos in eruption – a painting by the author. She gives us five poems and one scholarly essay; not one of the poems resembles in form or intellectual adventure anything I have read before. “The Glass Essay” is actually in its handling of time a classic epiphany story in that it presents a crucial moment from which all we need to know about the protagonist's past and future is visible. It is also a critical reading of Emily Brontë. It is certainly a poem. Here is the first page:

I [pronounced *eye*]

I can hear little clicks inside my dream.

Night drips its silver tap
down the back.

At 4 A.M. I wake. Thinking

of the man who
left in September.
His name was Law.

My face in the bathroom mirror
has white streaks down it.
I rinse my face and return to bed.
Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother.

SHE

She lives on a moor in the north.
She lives alone.
Spring opens like a blade there.
I travel all day on trains and bring a lot of books –
some for my mother, some for me
including *The Collected Works of Emily Brontë*.
This is my favourite author.

Also my main fear, which I mean to confront.
Whenever I visit my mother
I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë . . .

The power of narrative immediately engages the reader. Three strands braid in and out of the story: the narrator's confrontation with her crisis and her recognition and reversal, Emily Brontë's life and poetry, and her characters Catherine and Heathcliff. Speculating on the source of Heathcliff's sexual despair, the narrator recalls a poem from 1839, six years before *Wuthering Heights*:

That iron man was born like me
And he was once an ardent boy:
He must have felt in infancy
The glory of a summer sky.

Who is the iron man?
My mother's voice cuts across me,
from the next room where she is lying on the sofa.

Is that you dear?
Yes Ma.
Why don't you turn on a light in there?

Out the kitchen window I watch the steely April sun
jab its last cold yellow streaks
across a dirty silver sky.
Okay Ma. What's for supper?

Like Blake, the narrator is a visionary, with thirteen dream-visions of herself – as nude. The erotic energy is powerful, and it is bittersweet. In this poem the style is volcanic: a cool container (glass, ice, basalt) with seething magma for content. Blake's "bounding line" is important, but in this poem it is constantly being broken, dissolved.

"The Truth about God" is eighteen short and searing lyrics. Here's one:

GOD'S WOMAN

Are you angry at nature? said God to His woman.
Yes I am angry at nature I do not want nature stuck
up between my legs on your pink baton

or ladled out like geography whenever
your buckle needs a lick.
What do you mean *Creation*?

God circled her.
 Fire. Time. Fire.
 Choose, said God.

“TV Men” is about the making of a film with Hektor (yes, that Hektor) in the lead. Plenty of the book-title’s irony here. “The Fall of Rome: A Traveller’s Guide” is seventy short poems chronicling a man’s visit to a Roman Anna Xenia – a poem complexly constructed of eros and pathos, comic vision and mortal vision, strangeness and paradox (e. g., the Roman is named Xenia). “The Book of Isaiah” shows the poet as much at home in the Hebrew scriptures as in the classic. “The Gender of Sound” is a scholarly essay (prose) on, yes, the gender of sound. Even if gender theory does not interest you, read it. It matters.

Plainwater: Essays and Poetry (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995, 262 pp., hardbound \$23., 0-679-433178-0) is, like *Glass, Irony, and God*, a miscellany. The prose has the intensity of poetry; the poems are in the original sense essays. First is “Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings.” Mimnermos is a real Greek poet, seventh-century B.C., known today only from fragments. Carson first gives us her versions of fifteen of these fragments, then a short account of the poet and his work, revealing how all the hedonistic pleasures in his poems come down to light (the sun) and sex. Carson: “It is true he likes to get the sun into every poem. But the poet’s task, Kafka says, is to lead the isolated human being into the infinite life, the contingent into the lawful. What streams out of Mimnermos’s suns are the laws that attach us to all luminous things. Of which the first is time.” Like sex, she concludes, “light is not a question until you are in the dark.” This section ends with three taped interviews with Mimnermos. We have in Carson a poet illuminated by time and truly capable of conversation across the centuries.

“Short Talks,” which follows, consists of thirty-one tiny prose essays, each of them a catapult for the imagination. A sample:

On Walking Backwards

My mother forbade us to walk backwards. That is how the dead walk, she would say. Where did she get this idea? Perhaps from a bad translation. The dead, after all, do not walk backwards but they do walk behind us. They have no lungs and cannot call out but would love for us to turn around. They are victims of love, many of them.

Part Three of this mercurial book is “Canicula di Anna,” fifty-one short poems and a wry Afterword, in which a painter at a gathering of phenomenologists in Perugia invents, with beguiling post-modern self-reflexiveness, a conferee named Anna, more “real” in the poem than the international scholars who debate and dispute. It is a painter’s and a philosopher’s poem, playing gracefully with the various aspects of phenomenology, but easily accessible to any reader open to the play of the imagination.

Then we move to “The Life of Towns,” thirty-six little towns in an eccentric syntactic patterning. Sample:

Emily Town

Riches in a little room.

Is a phrase that haunts.

Her since the mineral of you.

Left.

Snow or a library.

Or a band of angels.

With a message is.

Not what.

It meant to.

Her.

The rest of the volume (147 pages) is a seven-part chain of essays – “The Anthropology of Water.” It begins with deceptive simplicity: “Water is something you cannot hold. Like men. I have tried. Father, brother, lover, true friends, hungry ghosts and God, one by one all took themselves out of my hands.” From there Carson takes us on a journey in time and space, each section with a date or a location or both. It is a travel journal like no other. I’ll quote just one line: “Pilgrims were people who loved a good riddle.”

This brings me to Anne Carson’s most recent book, *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, 150 pp., hardbound \$23., 0-375-40133-4). Again we have a valuable explanatory introduction: “Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?” This chapter begins, “He came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet.” Again we have a seventh-century B.C. poet, known today from only a few fragments, but acclaimed in antiquity. Like Carson,

he “makes these old stories new” (Suidas). Like her, he is “driven by a craving for change” (Dionysios of Halikarnassos). And according to Hermogenes he had “a sweet genius in the use of adjectives!” Adjectives, Carson declares, “are the latches of being.” Homer’s adjectives latched their nouns in a traditional place: the sea is always *unwearying*. Stesichoros “began to undo all the latches”; he “released being.” Some eighty-four papyrus fragments survive of his long lyric poem on Geryon, a winged red monster who tended a herd of magical red cattle until Herakles came along and, for one of his famous labors, killed him. Stesichoros chose to tell this story from the point of view of Geryon, and it is his autobiography that we have here.

Next in this book comes “Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros” in Carson’s versions. Here’s one she titles “Geryon’s Weekend”:

Later well later they left the bar went back to the centaur’s
Place the centaur had a cup made out of a skull Holding three
Measures of wine Holding it he drank Come over here you can
Bring your drink if you’re afraid to come alone The centaur
Patted the sofa beside him Reddish yellow small alive animal
Not a bee moved up Geryon’s spine on the inside

Next are three appendices on the legendary blinding of Stesichoros by Helen for writing abuse of her. Appendix C is a dazzling display of logical wit. Read three lines and see if you can stop grinning.

Finally we arrive at “Autobiography of Red: A Romance.” It opens with Emily Dickinson’s no. 1748, beginning, “The reticent volcano keeps/ His never slumbering plan – /Confided are his projects pink/ To no precarious man.” The romance is in forty-seven chapters, each with an introductory summary line. Chapter I, “Justice,” opens, “Geryon learned about justice from his brother quite early.” Assigned to escort Geryon to Kindergarten, his brother proclaims him *stupid* and abandons him. The child, “small, red, and upright” made his way “through the fires in his mind” to where “his anger was total.” Justice, he learned early, “is pure.” In these few lines the reader learns a great deal. Little Geryon has been lifted bodily out of antiquity, and he will carry his defining color (even a red shadow) and his wings with him throughout his life. Anyone forced to move cautiously in a society in which he or she is “different” will identify with this strange intense boy. And we learn early on that although the actions and conversations of

the contingent world are vividly and dramatically presented, it is the inner life that Geryon's autobiography records. And that inner life is volcanic.

Carson has adopted for this narrative an extremely flexible verse form – not metric, but one that regularly and rhythmically alternates long and short lines. Here's the beginning of Chapter III:

Geryon straightened and put his hands quick under the table, not quick enough.

Don't pick at that Geryon you'll get it infected. Just leave it alone and let it heal,
said his mother

rhinestoning past on her way to the door. She had all her breasts on this evening.

Geryon stared in amazement.

She looked so brave. He could look at her forever. But now she was at the door

and then she was gone.

Geryon felt the walls of the kitchen contract as most of the air in the room swirled after her.

He could not breathe. He knew he must not cry. And he knew the sound of the door closing

had to be kept out of him. Geryon turned all attention to his inside world.

Just then his brother came into the kitchen.

Want to wrestle? said Geryon's brother.

No, said Geryon.

Why? Just don't. Oh come on. Geryon's brother picked up

the empty tin fruit bowl

from the kitchen table and placed it upside down over Geryon's head.

Here we see a little of Carson's talent for colloquial dialogue, indicated throughout by italics. We can feel the tension between the narrator's voice (to explain what Geryon cannot put in words) and the simple syntax of the inner voice of the child. This tension between the expressible and the inexpressible relaxes as Geryon becomes more articulate, until the reader, moving through the young man's consciousness, cannot guess whether the actual words are those of Geryon or a narrator. In Chapter XXVI, on a flight to Buenos Aires, he muses "What is time made of?"

He could feel it massed around him, he could see its big
 deadweight blocks
 padded tight together
 all the way from Bermuda to Buenos Aires – too tight. His lungs
 contracted.
 Fear of time came to him. Time
 was squeezing Geryon like the pleats of an accordion. He ducked
 his head to peer
 into the little cold black glare of the window.

...

A man moves through time. It means nothing except that,
 like a harpoon, once thrown he will arrive.

Plot is not the main point of this romance. We inherit the plot from antiquity. The harpoon is launched, and we follow its track. But the inner life of the story is wonderfully fresh, as Geryon finds his first lover, Herakles, and is abandoned by him for another. He finds photography, an art of glass, a new mode of vision, a new mode of expression. He re-encounters Herakles and his new companion Ancash and wanders with them to South America where they are making sound recordings of – what else – volcanos.

Autobiography of Red seems a logical culmination of the books that have preceded it. It is a case history of Eros, bittersweet, ambiguous Eros. The inner structure of the novel is in the geometry of the lovers, the spaces between them, the varying distance between the poet and her characters, with the engaged reader at one corner of the quadrangle. It plays with wit and elegance and passion with the classical sources – both the ancient poet and his matter. The reader makes an easy passage through the dark corridors of time. Carson's narrative gifts, so brilliantly honed in "The Glass Essay," carry this reader eagerly from chapter to chapter. The poet's intense linguistic self-consciousness, her fertility of diction and especially metaphor, and her taut, driving lines keep the poetry – whether descriptive or colloquial or meditative – at a high level of energy. This is, above all, a poem, in which the dynamics of the syntax dramatize the action of the mind. Here's one final example, from Chapter XXIV, "Freedom," after Herakles has set Geryon "free":

He switched on the light. He was staring at the sweep hand of the electric
 clock
 on the dresser. Its little dry hum
 ran over his nerves like a comb. He forced his eyes away. The bedroom
 doorway
 gaped at him black as a keyhole.
 His brain was jerking forward like a bad slide projector. He saw the
 doorway
 the house the night the world and
 on the other side of the world somewhere Herakles laughing drinking
 getting
 into a car and Geryon's
 whole body formed one arch of a cry – upcast to that custom, the human
 custom
 of wrong love.

If, as Donald Sutherland has maintained, the classic writer is concerned with Being, Space, Permanance, and One, and the romantic with Becoming, Time, Change, and Many, then Anne Carson is our preeminent baroque writer – absorbed in the tensions and contradictions between classic and romantic, Being and Becoming, Space and Time, Permanence and Change, One and Many. And she is more subtle than this. The energies she invites us to share disturb the traditional boundaries. Her Eve has to choose between fire and time. There is in poem after poem a tension between reality and the lie, between contingency and infinity, between Keats's "virtuous philosopher" and his "chameleon poet."

P.S. A recent *New Yorker* quoted Dr. Thomas Middlehoff, the chairman-designate of Bertelmann – the German company that has acquired Knopf – as saying that Sonny Mehta, Knopf's editor-in-chief, "will work as an absolutely independent entrepreneur publisher, allowed to take risks." This is excellent news, since Knopf has long been laudable in presenting strong books in appropriately strong design. *Autobiography of Red* is elegantly designed by Misha Beletsky with pages wide enough to require no run-overs of even the longest lines.

M.K.S.