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Thoughts from a Queen-sized Bed (review)

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Even where they are funny, they are gently, wryly so. Cooper is poet of uppercrust refinement, though stripped of upper class prejudices or sensibilities. Mentally tirelessness, she questions. But these questions are posed as grown-up-to-grown-up observations, never disrespectful bullyings. She is a woman of taste, commenting on matters of the heart and body. Her poems are quiet at the level of corporeal self and ideational strangeness, precisely where Carson is most wild.

Ultimately, Cooper's gift to the reader is the belief that the how of a poem's making, its unfinished and honest uncertainties, can be of as much value as a polished but repetitive or less honest moment of song. She takes this gift from a close association with the feminist cannon (though she stands toward it a bit the way Thomas Hardy might had he made a visit to Rukeyser, Stein, Jordan, and Rich). Cooper reminds us that the route to these moments of epiphany and honesty is to keep revising and revisiting our lives, our words, our lines, and ourselves. And to respect and choose

the flashboat!
work,
the starry waters

Mimi Schwartz, **Thoughts from a Queen-sized Bed**, University of Nebraska Press

Reviewed by Maureen P. Stanton

Throughout the ages the notion of love, and the trials we humans endure as we seek and find and lose and seek again this universal yearning, have been a persistent and fundamental problem. Sappho was the first to call love "sweetbitter," an experience of pleasure *and* pain. And Erich Fromm in his book *The Art of Loving* said, "There is hardly any activity, any enterprise, which is started with such tremendous hope and expectations and yet which fails so regularly as love." Mimi Schwartz's new book, a collection of thematically related essays focused on her forty-year marriage to her husband, Stu, is – after all is said and done – a love story.

An endless stream of advice books on love and marriage is available, particularly for women, many regressive, most saying nothing new at all about the subject. Schwartz's memoiristic essays offer no advice at all, yet there is something to be learned from reading this book. After all, Schwartz has been married, and in love with, Stu, her high school sweetheart, for four decades, an increasingly rare phenomenon that the writer herself ponders. Together they've soldiered through the restrictive gender roles of the fifties, the monogamy versus "open" marriage sixties, the challenge of a two-career family in the seventies and eighties, and illness and mortality in the last decade.

In the early pieces in this collection of thirty-four essays, the author recalls her childhood home – just two blocks from where Stu’s parents still live – her father, his stories of escape from Nazi Germany, his advice on life, love, and marriage. She progresses to the early years of her marriage, through parenthood (her two children are now both grown and married themselves), through the blossoming of her career later in life, through the throes of aging – her breast cancer and her husband’s heart attack. Yet while we move (somewhat) chronologically through the book, we visit themes inherent to all relationships: the shifting border between autonomy and compromise; the changing nature of gender roles; learning to live with another human being (one who snores, one who gets up early while the other is a night person, one who refuses to ask directions when lost).

Schwartz’s style is reminiscent of E.B. White’s; she does for middle-class, married suburban professionals what White did for New England gentlemen farmers. That is, she captures the grander themes of life, love, and relationships in small, quotidian moments with such grace and humor that the reader is caught almost unaware by the subtle wisdom embedded in each essay. Schwartz’s book is, above all, honest. Yet she manages deftly to avoid the almost unavoidable problem when writing of love, the difficulty of conveying sentiment without being sentimental.

Schwartz’s style is often lyrical, employing metaphor to express a larger point, a tool she uses skillfully to avoid the pitfalls of writing about relationships. Her opening line in the preface, for instance, sets the poetic and reflective tone of the essays that follow:

I am lying in bed, watching white vines climb pale blue walls as they have, day and night, ever since we bought this house with its indestructible wallpaper. Thirty-one years and not a ripple, a bump, a tear, as if we’d just moved in.

The image of the sturdy wallpaper contrasts nicely with the narrative that follows, her marriage to Stu, with all the ripples, bumps, and tears of their relationship, which like wallpaper becomes background to the concerns of raising children, building careers, enduring illness. And yet, there is that circular movement implied in the opening gesture, “as if we’d just moved in,” the cycle of a love that is as – or more – trustworthy and enduring as it was at the beginning.

In a poignant piece called “Towpath Therapy,” quiet, contemplative moments are juxtaposed with the inanities of daily conversation and petty squabbles – who needs to lose twenty pounds, who snitches peanut butter at night. The essay contemplates the couple’s ritual of walking a towpath, formerly a mule passage, yet the essay is also about aging. “Do you think we’ve passed our prime in tennis?” the author asks her husband. “Our bodies, maybe, but not our souls,” he responds gamely. This question, presented casually in the context of a recent defeat to another

couple in a tennis match, resonates later in the piece when Stu is away on business and the author is walking the path alone, lost in her reverie.

"I walk farther than I planned to in this world where Time seems to stand still, and when I turn, the sky has darkened. A rumble comes up, still far away, but I sprint, my heart beating fast, waiting for lightning that doesn't come."

Schwartz's words describe the simple scene around her, but the walk signifies life itself, the darkening skies portend a storm, something ominous ahead. Schwartz makes her way home through giant raindrops, contemplating her husband's return, then imagining a possible delay in his return, and finally, she thinks the unthinkable: if her husband were never to return. Her final note about walking the towpath is both elegiac and hopeful: "I vow, as my shadow lengthens into dusk, I'd still come here."

Like the other essays in this charming book, the story that on the surface appears to be a meditation on the ritual of walking, underneath contemplates a more serious subject: the passage of bodies from one stage of life – one's "prime" in this piece – into whatever lies beyond. Yet in spite of the challenges and vicissitudes of this couple's shared life over four decades, Schwartz remains upbeat, her attitude imbued with the survivor's instinct and forward-looking determination that she witnessed in her father, that she admires in her husband, that she nurtured in her children, and that she hopes for her soon-to-be-born first grandchild, whose spirit she imagines in the final essay:

"I can picture my grandchild on the tiny beach, playing with a small, blue pail left by someone. It is filled with sea shells, and she is lifting them out, one by one, as her curled toes dig into warm sand until she flings them as far as she can, assuming they will float back. And if not, she – or he – won't care. The circles widening across the glassy surface stretching toward Mount Kearsage will be enough."

Walt McDonald, **All Occasions**, University of Notre Dame Press
Norbert Hirschhorn, **A Cracked River**, Slow Dancer Press

Reviewed by Stephen C. Behrendt

A new collection from Walt McDonald is always an occasion to celebrate. This has never been more true than with *All Occasions*, a remarkable retrospective collection that records a lifetime in poetry, from childhood through manhood, marriage, wars, children, baseball, ranching, and open heart surgery. Quite an array – quite a life, a life that presses forward with all the vigor and insight that has always characterized McDonald's poetry. And here again, too, is that singular artistry with image and word – with the sheer music of language – that we have grown accustomed to