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Men In the Off Hours, and: The Flashboat: Poems Collected
and Reclaimed (review)

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REVIEW

Anne Carson, **Men In the Off Hours**, Alfred A. Knopf
Jane Cooper, **The Flashboat: Poems Collected and Reclaimed**,
W. W. Norton

Reviewed by Jenny Factor

Sylvia said: *When I was younger –
you know how in the work of most composers
a single line dominates, the melody line? –
Well, years ago I'd think only about my daughter
or only about my marriage, about how to sing,
what Freud meant or some friend . . . But in Bach,
every voice is equal, each line has invention.
That's how it is for me now . . .
. . . But I don't know, she broke off,
whether I'm making myself clear. . . .*

from "My friend," by Jane Cooper

What is a "life of the mind?" Can it be separated out from the life of the body, the spirit, or the nerve-endings? How does a psychologically-savvy modern poet organize the miasma of nonhierarchical sensations, impressions, and meditations that arise during her personal life? And do we as readers prefer the traditional, melodic, singular voice over the post-Freudian multi-fluent one? Do we crave that poetry call out for us, even artificially, a single line of melody from within our own compendium of multi-sensate fugue?

During a period where the multiple and multi-fluent voices of an Alice Fulton or a C.D. Wright are more and more common, and are progressively inheriting the province of mind, Anne Carson and Jane Cooper write mentally-engaged books of poems that individuate, personalize, and humanize their cerebral themes. These strange but friendly books make remarkable companions, contributing a funny, lively intellectual presence to an otherwise somewhat cool and impersonal mental-poetic landscape.

Witness Anne Carson. Carson's contribution is funny, fresh, strange. Like the adolescent girl who copies her favorite quotes into a diary, then spills her relevant life-stories out around them, Carson weaves her deeply-engaged reading life into diverse, emotionally passionate, formally hybrid poems. As Carson has turned the essay into a poetic form, it can be difficult to count her number of previous books. *Men In the Off*

Hours is approximately her fifth (fourth? sixth?) volume of poetry. Another book (*The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos*) is already here.

Imagine lacing quotes and anecdotes about Homer, Saint Augustine, Christian mysticism, Freud, Audubon, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Edward Hopper, the Chinese painter Hokusai, Tolstoy, and others with the death of one's mother, the relationship between men and women, the sensation of passing time, and the rumination on self and others.

Like the modern photographer, Uta Barthes, whose photographs use shifts in focus and refraction of perspective to enact multiple layers of reality, Carson pulls her references together in a way that kaleidoscopes range and history. A seemingly personal poem about sitting still on a long day ("Room in Brooklyn") can also be a meditation on a specific painting on that theme by Edward Hopper, illuminated by cross-references to St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Like anyone in possession of a powerful thinking mind, Carson in her poems brings up ideas that come to bear on her personal life. Or has her life experience illuminated her view of Hopper's painting? Or has her reading in St. Augustine reminded her of a painting and a way of feeling? This poem represents, of course, all three cases inextricably. Similarly, a winter squirrel bouncing down his "empire of branches" to a "peg of tears" contains at once the blueprint of the nature poem, a reference to football or tennis, and a Grecian sparseness to become a "new rule" for the endurance of relationships:

Not enough spin on it, said my true love
when he left in our fifth year. . . .

The way to hold on is
afterwords
so
clear,

While Carson uses footnotes and parenthetical attributions to anchor her found material, it is not always possible to tell beyond a doubt where a quote in a Carson poem comes from. This is the clear and musical poetry of a poet-scholar, not scholarship per se. Saturated with mental activity, with visual and ideational input, this voice is unified not by provenance nor by footnote, but by the way Carson's mind makes strange but effective modern bedfellows.

Carson is funny. She'll interview Antigone, then retell the story with the same words but a totally opposite import and call it (*reporters beware!*) a "sound byte." She'll envision major figures from myth in a TV script. She'll play with font size. And she'll faux-translate Catullus in laugh-aloud fashion (though the reader needs to know what's necessary to catch the joke). It was Catullus who opined that the oaths of women could be written in sand and running water. So here is Carson's take on that:

No one but you she says she swore.
 Why one night a god threw open the door.
 I loved you more.
 River.
 River.
 River.
 River.
 River.
 River.
 River.
 River.
 River river river river river river river.

Carson repositions language. These excerpts from her "First Chaldaic Oracle" show how one part of speech can be used for another:

There is something you should know
 And the right way to know it
 is by a cherrying of your mind . . .

But keep chiselled
 keep Praguing the eye . . .

Because it is out there (orchid) outside your *and*, it is.

Does this a-grammatical though melodic deconstructing of syntax (using the "and" as a metaphor for "and's" action, using the proper noun "Prague" as a gerund) owe something to e.e. cummings? Perhaps. Carson has his word-level humor, his blend of traditional iamb with non-traditional leap of logic. Carson, however, sounds like nobody but herself.

Carson is also a remarkable innovator of form. In the series on Edward Hopper's paintings, like this one called, "The Barber Shop," clever nonce verse forms use patterns of repetition, visually stylized lineation, and strong consistent meter (here a deconstructed pentameter).

It takes practice to shave the skin off the light.

Polarity
 means
 plus or
 minus
 total
 night.

Her personal glossary of self-defined forms includes the essay (lineated both as prose and poetry), the epitaph (a four to eight line, stylized meditation after Donne, Freud, and others, often using their vocabularies and orthographies), the TV script, the interview, the faux translation, the Oracle, and the "draft." This last is especially interesting. *Men in the Off Hours* is woven with several sets of two-three related poems, separated by pages, and called "drafts." But these do not read like progressive versions

of a single under-construction poem. Rather, numbered drafts are Carson's way of revisiting a world of knowledge with an entirely different focus for the second, third, or fourth time. This motion moves not the way a poem is crafted, but rather the way a thinker considers a topic that intrigues her. One imagines Carson, say, driving alone in a car, opening the imaginary book of an idea to an old chapter, and finding a new poem in it.

In this use of "draft" as a process-oriented poem, Carson resembles Jane Cooper. The very concept behind Cooper's *The Flashboat: Poems Collected and Reclaimed* announces this quality of revisionary attention. Unlike the typical "Collected Poems" that represents a poet's life-work as a perfected, completed thing, Cooper takes on the more serious challenge of asking her work to be representative of her process, a process of statement and recapitulation, consideration and shifting focus. Some poems in this volume were never before published. Others were reconsidered with the feminist's consciousness-raising dedication to truth, and were, in that light, reordered into something closer to chronology. Some poems are written one way, then reused, rewritten, several pages later with a different slant or conclusion. An example follows:

95°

Lost in summer, I worry about your silence.
 You stick your head into loneliness as into an oven,
 holding out, holding out . . .
 All your friends are out of town.
 On the fringe of the park, your building is turning to dust.
 Letters come, the phone rings, you sit by your window
 balancing yourself like a last glass of water.

Contrast that with this poem, set beside it, with different emotional backstory:

Holding Out

Letters come, the phone rings, you sit by your window
 balancing yourself like a last glass of water.

All over the city the hospitals are crammed with wounded.
 Divorce, like marriage, requires two adversaries.

But what is left now is not to exaggerate:
 your grief, his grief – these serious possessions.

How specific to Cooper to revisit her own language, to refine it, to measure it against something – be it a new circumstance or a new sense of the truth.

The styles in this volume are as varied as a long life permits. There are mythic clean early pages about a young woman's emerging sexuality during an era when the young men were leaving for war ("The Faithful," "Blind Girl," "Song"). Poems of sensual initiation and confusion: "I take

your hand. I want to touch your eyes. / They are water-soft. I know. I could push them in." And

Here I am yours, and here, and here:
 In body, wit, and in responsibility.
 And here I am not yours: inquire
 Of my first lover for my fire
 And of my second for my subtlety."

Does one hear some foreshadowing of Sylvia Plath in these formal, violent tropes?

Then, there is a European imagist strangeness (as throughout "Dispossessions"):

Last night a voice called me from outside my door.
 It was no one's voice, perhaps it came from the umbrella stand.

Finally, Cooper lands on an exactness of fact learned from Rukeyser (like the her-storical essay, "Nothing Has Been Used in the Manufacture of This Poem That Could Have Been Used in the Manufacture of Bread"). Herein, there's a quietly pervasive political consciousness (poems of illness, race, and class, like "The Infusion Room" or "Threads: Rosa Luxemburg from Prison") set beside others that are organized around a single, classic, romantic ideal ("The Olympic Rainforest," and many of the other poems from her book, *Scaffolding*), like, "Rent":

If you want my apartment, sleep in it
 but let's have a clear understanding:
 the books are still free agents.

If the rocking chair's arms surround you
 they can also let you go,
 they can shape the air like a body.

I don't want your rent, I want
 a radiance of attention
 like the candle's flame when we eat,

I mean a kind of awe
 attending the spaces between us . . .
 Not a roof but a field of stars.

Some of Cooper's poems are funny (e.g., "a poem with capital letters").

john berryman asked me to write a poem about roosters. . . .
do your poems use capital letters? he asked. *like god?*
i said. god no, he said, like princeton! i said,
god preserve me if i ever write a poem about princeton. . . .
 o john berryman, what has brought me into this company of poets
 where the masculine thing to do is use capital letters
 and even princeton struts like one of god's betters?

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.