

# Love, Anne Carson

: a fictional essay in the wrong order  
(for Iain)

Up against another human being one's own procedures take on definition.

— Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red*

## 1. *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986)

Who ever desires what is not gone? No one. The Greeks were clear on this. They invented eros to express it.

There are the great subjects, the critics have told us: love, war, death. In her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson talks about how "It was Sappho who first called eros 'bittersweet.' No one who has been in love disputes her." What is it about love that gets us, guts us? How does Carson manage to write so tangibly on the intangibles of the heart? Are all her books about love? For Carson, perhaps, it's eros, love, beauty. Or is this all about desire. She writes in her preface:

The story concerns the reason why we love to fall in love. Beauty spins and the mind moves. To catch beauty would be to understand how that impertinent stability in vertigo is possible. But no, delight not reach so far. To be running breathlessly, but not yet arrived, is itself delightful, a suspended moment of living hope.

An interesting opening salvo, for Carson, potentially shaping all the books that follow. Is this all about the Greeks? A decimation, an idea they took from Latin, another of their favourite roots. Perfecting it. A massacre so great it had to be measured by tens, a measure of punishment to a cowardly army, killing every tenth man. What did these Greeks say about love, about eros? And just what is the difference between the two? Is eros just a matter of how the Greeks approached the nuances of emotional complexity?

*Love is just a feeling*, you said. *You don't have to "do" anything*. I stumble over the word "just." I stumble over many things. I collapse into a stack of bone.

*Desire*, as John Newlove wrote, as opposed to passion, love or longing. Carson continues in her text:

But no simple map of the emotions is available here. Desire is not simple. In Greek the act of love is a mingling (*mignumi*) and desire melts the limbs (*lusimeles*, cf. Sappho fr. 130 above). Boundaries of body, categories of thought, are confounded. The god who melts limbs proceeds to break the lover (*damnatai*) as would a foe on the epic battlefield [...].

Does destruction signal the beginning of lack or an essential component before starting to rebuild?

Perhaps there are as many ways to answer this. One comes clearest in Greek. The Greek word *eros* denotes 'want,' 'lack,' 'desire for that which is missing.' The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting. This is more than wordplay.

How perfect, to talk through the Greeks on love, on *eros*; those who talked about the Arabic invention, zero. Your mother tongue, coming in through your own discrete absence, and the Greek Parmenides, who talked about the impossibility of the "non-being," citing the presence-absence paradox. How does this contradict zero itself, the number known by its own lack, its absence through this, a part of the elements that make up love, that *eros*, that bitter-sweet; contradicting halves that make the whole? How does Carson even begin to express the facets? As Newlove himself wrote in "Love, and other affairs," originally delivered to the Saskatchewan Writers Guild in 1988 as the very first Caroline Heath Memorial Lecture (later published in *Canadian Notes & Queries*, number 55):

I write about desire, which often means to think about right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate. I praise endurance.

What is it about desire? This is where she begins. Is it impossible to desire what you already have? This seems contradictory, somewhat. An over-simplification. I have desired what I have had, but desire is temporal, love is not. One can love and let love, but desire is further wanting, later. I desire you now because of where you might eventually be. Is this the romantic love of Don Quixote, tilting further down his dusty trails? They say, if you love someone who knows you completely and still loves you, then everything else is going to be okay. Is this any different than desire? Carson writes:

It is a compound experience, both *gluku* and *pikeron*. Sappho begins with a sweet apple and ends in infinite hunger. From her inchoate little poem we learn several things about *eros*. The reach of desire is defined in action: beautiful (in its object), foiled (in its attempt), endless (in time).

*I believe in free love*, you told me, back at the beginning. *Everything costs*, I said. I thought you almost naïve, and secretly envied that. Have I inadvertently managed to change your mind?

## 2. *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001)

Beauty does not rest.

What was it Keats said about love? Love, and giving in to desire, what Carson calls surrendering to beauty. When is love mere surrender, to beauty or anything else? Is love a giving or a giving in? Giving in to desire, you should, but first your own. In *The Beauty of the Husband*, Carson writes her "fictional essay in 29 tangoes," writing Roman numerals through the Greeks; between Keats and this husband who is no more. A book/essay on love through its beginnings, middles and inherent failures through the end. Didn't you tell me you hadn't found anyone who had a perfect romantic relationship? I don't even know what that means.

Beauty. No great secret. Not ashamed to say I loved him for his beauty.  
As I would again

if he came near. Beauty convinces. You know beauty makes sex possible.  
Beauty makes sex sex.  
You if anyone grasp this — hush, let's pass

to natural situations.

*The tension between temporal desire (suspended hope) and love is irreconcilable, you said. What is perfect? Is it lack of pain, feeling, a stillness? An unchanging state of concrete bliss?*

*I could deny you almost nothing, you told me, least of all more words.*

Beauty does convince, but doesn't always cohere. Certainly not alone. It always needs to be mixed with something.

This is a book about love through theft, infidelity, betrayals and divorce. Even writing out "hopeless" is admitting an echo of hope. Is this Carson exploring failure for the potential of something further?

you used to say. "Desire doubled is love and love doubled is madness."  
Madness doubled is marriage  
I added  
when the caustic was cool, not intending to produce  
a golden rule.

I know what it's like to have been married, or at least some equivalent, back in my own, nearly two long decades behind me. *Past turns to memory, mutable*, you said. How much do I remember of my own? How much do I remake? Is this what all past becomes? Whatever we wish it to. A mutable fiction, a story told to ourselves; we all become the heroes (or villains) of our own lives. *Am I speaking directly to you or only to myself?* Carson writes, "The seduction of force is from below."

Kissing her, I love you, joys and leaves of earlier times flowed through the husband and disappeared.

Presence and absence twisted out of sight of one another inside the wife.

They stood.  
Sounds reach them, a truck, a snore, poor shrubs ticking on a tin wall.

His nose began to bleed.

Where do imperfections reveal themselves best but through the result of poor romantic choices? It is often through failure when we learn ourselves best. *You, in Alberta, so dry that your nose begin to bleed, changing a headlight on your little blue car.* Throughout the poem, he cheats, she cheats, and love crumbles. They remarry, but not each other. The Greeks would have loved that, and probably did; not a betrayal but an added nuance. Old Greek married men who helped young men find sexuality and subsequent wives. Carson's is a fictional essay of

betrayal and beauty, as opposed to one, it would suggest, that is true. It begs the question: what is a true essay?

She had to unlock him she said.  
Meaning sex.  
I guess.  
You know what's good for that is tango.

What is this tango she talks, of this dance she mentions, some twenty-nine times? A dance done in pairs, danced either in open or closed embrace, connecting either chest-to-chest (Argentine tango) or at the upper thigh/hip area (American and International tango). Carson writes, "Love is not conditional. / Living is very conditional." *This seems to relate to your earlier comment about inaction.* Or back to Carson's opening lines, that include the fact that "A wound gives off its own light," and further down the page, writing:

What is being delayed?  
Marriage I guess.  
That swaying place as my husband called it.  
Look how the word  
shines.

### 3. *Autobiography of Red* (1998)

Words, if you let them, will do what they want to do and what they have to do.

Why an essay in the wrong order?

Carson's *Autobiography of Red* retells Helen of Troy through other eyes. Like Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, seeing its alternate and inevitable conclusion through the framing of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and the spaces he left. The story of Helen, and the destruction of Troy, reordering all those points of view into something new and singular. The face, they said, that launched a thousand ships. Is this, itself, a love story or dire warning? Is this a romantic tale or story of revenge? Is this an extreme form of Stockholm Syndrome that only the Greeks could relay, thousands of years before given the name? Adding themselves to the mix.

No it is not the true story.  
No you never went on the benched ships.  
No you never came to the towers of Troy.

The titular section sub-titled "A Romance," problematising "true" against "love." Is this telling or deflection? Is this her herring, red on inevitable red? Like blood spilled on the carpet. Death and then, *what else* but sex. Taxes and death. What else we could never learn to protect ourselves from.

This was also the day  
he began his autobiography. In this work Geryon set down all inside things  
particularly his own heroism

and early death much to the despair of the community. He coolly omitted all outside things.

*Sex is certainly taxing*, you said, tongue planted firmly in cheek. In yours, when it wasn't in mine. In French, the "little death" we never recover from, in that half-moment before potential creation. One half feeding into the other. *Where are you now?*

The tale of the affair and relationship between young Geryon and Herakles, and what developed; rewriting the red monster into something else, a boy. A photograph in Polaroid, slowly fading into view. Developing. What is it the light contains? "The human custom of wrong love," Carson writes. Is she an optimist or a pessimist, exploring such failures, or are these choices oversimplified, outdated? A set of extremes book-ending what we no longer believe.

*You are a romantic*, you said, from driver's seat, eyes wide. Amazed at the revelation. *Am I?* (Isn't everyone?) *So what does that make you?*

"How does distance look?" is a simple direct question. It extends from a spaceless within to the edge of what can be loved. It depends on light.

What is it the light contains? A throw of particles. A throw of particulars.

#### 4. "The Glass Essay," *Glass, Irony and God* (1995)

Everything I know about love and its necessities  
I learned in that one moment  
when I found myself

This is the essay she wrote around what could be seen. Her search through glass. Or is this about the glass itself? As Guy Davenport writes at the beginning of his introduction to Carson's *Glass, Irony and God*:

Anne Carson begins her *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), a book about love and learning, with a fragment of Kafka's in which *ein Philosoph* tries to catch spinning tops, "for he believed that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things." *War die kleinste Kleinigkeit wirklich erkannt, dann war alles erkannt.* Our planet spins on its axis; atoms spin; the liveliest equilibrium seems to require vertigo. An earlier *Philosoph* who also liked to be around playing boys thought that Eros, himself a boy, was necessary to philosophy, a *love* of learning. Behind Kafka's *Der Kreisel*, half a page long, are Greek boys tossing knucklebones, watched by Sokrates, who knows that as long as they are playing their minds are spinning and alive and open to intelligent questioning.

Love and learning. Isn't any great love also education? What each can bring to the table, learn from the other, growing into a single merged point, combined sum of their parts? You have become my other half. How do any of these conversations begin? She spins her

theories like silk, a series of threads. The vagaries of love, the many splendoured shapes and purpose. Writing about the Brontë sisters in "The Glass Essay," Carson notes:

Whatching a north wind grind the moor  
that surrounded her father's house on every side,  
formed of a kind of rock called millstone grit,

taught Emily all she knew about love and its necessities—  
an angry education that shapes the way her characters  
use one another.

This is Carson writing about marriage through *Wuthering Heights*, and about one sister's love for the other, including Charlotte's introduction to her sister's posthumously-published novel. This is Carson writing a narrator recovering from a love gone wrong. How does one text shake apart another? Carson writes the spaces between the Brontë sisters, Emily and Charlotte, the spaces between *Wuthering Heights*. This is not Monty Python performing parts of the novel in semaphore, or Kate Bush singing, the space between two distant hills.

To see the love between Law and me  
turn into two animals gnawing and craving through one another  
towards some other hunger was terrible.

Perhaps this is what people mean by original sin, I thought.  
But what love could be prior to it?  
What is prior?

What is love?  
My questions were not original.  
Nor did I answer them.

*Wuthering Heights*: first published in 1847, a novel of frustrated and eventually thwarted love, compounded by Heathcliff's cruelty. This is Carson, shaking the text into parts. I have no interest in cruelty. How does love so easily turn? The opposite of love and hate is indifference, a pendulum of rising and lowering passion.

Does it matter what the author thinks about love? Can such a position even remain fixed? Does thinking vs. biography make much of a difference to this poem, this essay written on, or even through, this unknown, unknowing glass? I can see right through you. Do we expect authors to live and think the same as their poems? When Leonard Cohen's selected poems and lyrics *Stranger Music* (1993) did so well in stores, bestseller lists didn't know where to place it. Some placed the title in "fiction," and others in "non-fiction." Where does poetry place us?

What was that you said, in response? *It allows us to choose for ourselves.*

In a piece about Carson on the *Ar: Poetry Magazine* website, Catherine Joyce writes: "We come to such a poet not for music, not for lyric intensity but for the art of fearless observation." Carson writes her narrator and mother going to visit the narrator's father in

hospital, suffering Alzheimer's. "There is no known cause or cure." This is the narrator's mother in a cab twice a week for half a decade, visiting a husband that no longer knows her.

Marriage is for better or worse, she says,  
this is the worse.

Carson's poem exists in the first person, blurring the distinction between author and narrator easy to confuse. Is this glass half-empty or half-full? What does this say about love? Is her glass simply the wrong size? Is this something on the other side, or our own reflection we see?

It is generally anger dreams that occupy my nights now.  
This is not uncommon after loss of love—

*Love doesn't require intellect*, you said. *The mind and the heart have two different agendas*. Not always, I responded. And then you silent a while.

How do these conversations begin to hold? *Any relationship exists in compromise*, I told you. That doesn't have to mean a loss on either side. A meeting, instead.

This is the poem returning back to a life lived, post-everything else. This is Carson, writing:

I stopped watching.  
I forgot about Nudes.  
I lived my life,

which felt like a switched-off TV.

This is Carson, at the end of the same page, the end of the poem:

It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all.  
It walked out of the light.

Again I ask, what is it the light contains?

##### 5. *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001)

Philosophers say man forms himself in dialogue.

There is that oft-repeated quote from the Greek historian Heraclitus that George Bowering likes to use, including as epigraph to his collection *Curious*, writing "Men who love wisdom / should acquaint themselves / with a great many / particulars." Whose particulars, here, are even whose? As the book copy reads, "*The Beauty of the Husband* is an essay on Keats' idea that beauty is truth, and is also the story of a marriage. It is told in twenty-nine tangos. A tango (like a marriage) is something you have to dance to the end."

I am married again now. To hear myself say this. The nerves know. I tried to stop it happening.

Here is Carson on love, and Carson on marriage; is there a difference, or are they shades of the same thing? The narrator of Carson's poem aware of just how she moves through knowing and unknowing, seemingly unable to stop the contradicting schemes of the heart and the mind. A few lines further, Carson writing:

I thought changes were holy. I spilled them like grain. How could I know. How could I know she would lose.

So this is the strong part.

This is the book written around marriage and Keats, but written as much around the lines Keats had written outside of his poetry, at least twenty-nine Keats quotes from marginal notes, lesser known works and letters to friends. An essay on love around Keats just as much around what was peripheral. Outside the central issue; what might have been. Is this about beauty and truth or something more? Is it merely something beside, aside, an extra? As John Thompson wrote in his *Stilt Jack* (1976):

I'll read Keats and eye the weather too,  
smoke cigarettes, watch Captain Kangaroo.

The rain hits the ground so hard it bounces. *Today I am arrow-proof*, I tell myself.

The arrows of Apollo, you told me, that signified both love and disease. *When you see that arrow coming*, you said, *don't assume it's love...* Can I no longer distinguish? Have I confused it again? On an episode of *The Simpsons*, Grandpa Simpson unable to tell if he's in love or if instead he's had a stroke (it was love, in the end, as his gurney rolled out of the back of the ambulance).

But today arrow, not bullet, proof. The Superman of Ancient Greece, refusing to be even the least bit affected. Will it even matter?

Keats, throughout his life, wrote many things, including these lines from "Ode on Melancholy":

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:

Writing on *The Beauty of the Husband* in *Jacket* magazine, Nadia Herman Colburn notes that "...Carson shows language itself to be a medium of desire..." What is it Keats himself wrote about love? In a letter to neighbour, fiancée and later, wife, Fanny Brawne (1800-1865), Keats wrote:

Love is my religion - I could die for  
that - I could die for you. My Creed



is Love and you are its only tenet -  
You have ravish'd me away by a  
Power I cannot resist: and yet I  
could resist till I saw you; and even  
since I have seen you I have  
endeavoured often "to reason against  
the reasons of my Love." I can do  
that no more - the pain would be too  
great - My Love is selfish - I cannot  
breathe without you. (13 October 1819)

Should we hold him to all? Is one expected to be personally responsible for every word? What is it Diane Schoemperlen wrote, in her novel *Forms of Devotion* (1998)? "Remember that love is blind. This is what you know." In another part of her book, Carson asks, "What really connects words and things?" The connections exist, but only if we see them. And then this section of the poem, just at the end:

Well life has some risks. Love is one. Terrible risks.  
Ray would have said  
Fate's my bait and bait's my fate.  
*On a June evening.*  
Here's my advice,  
hold.

Hold beauty.

#### 6. *Glass, Irony and God* (1995)

My religion makes no sense  
and does not help me  
therefore I pursue it.

What does a classicist want or need with God? We could talk about Emperor Constantine; we could talk about faith, the whole point believing in something that can't be proven. I don't know if this is what her light holds. All of her subjects knew God, to be sure. One has to admit the existence of God, I suppose, before claiming the deity dead. You can't hate and deny in the same single breath.

Some people have to fight every moment of their lives  
which God has lined with a burning animal—  
I think because

God wants that animal kept alive.

All her poems are about men somehow, even her Sappho, writing men out through the absences. Her poems about "TV Men."

TV is inherently cynical. It speaks to the eye, but the mind has no eye.

Do the eye, then, and the mind have different agendas? It might not matter, if they exist in constant negotiation, as opposed to conflict. Otherwise, the whole body might fail.

TV wastes nothing, like a wife.

Again, Carson writes out her Greeks. Again, I return to George Bowering, as another writer using one archetype with which to navigate human experience, writing and rewriting the same base phrase throughout his *My Life: A Poem* (2000):

Classical  
relation makes a family of us all

We are obvious constructions of history, both ours and that of the world. In relation, both in family and how we relate to the world. This is Carson, working her own sense of classical relation, recognizing her world through a particular broad filter of history, through Dante, Proust, Marco Polo, Isaiah, God and gender. What is it the light brings, that gaze of some thousands of human history?

From Marco Polo you find out

exactly how to get to China.

From Herodotos,  
a theory of why

Egyptian women urinate standing up  
(because the men do it sitting down).

Or, as Neil Gaiman wrote in an issue of *The Sandman*, speaking through his lead character, "All of our stories will return to their original form." The wolf eats grandmother, and later on, young Red, before folk tale added cloak and a hood, crouched naked by the fireplace. Cinderella's step-sisters die horrible deaths; what Walt Disney told but the fable's first half. Atlantis and Avalon go back to Ur, and stories of the Biblical flood. Hans Christian Anderson's little mermaid dies without legs or voice or tail or a soul, her body turning into the tide's final foam. From Herodotos to the classics, from the fall of Rome, from Sappho to Sokrates to sleep, Carson moves her way over, around and through familiar territory. Where is it she's going, and are we smart enough to keep up?

Before the robin's red surmise we were at the prison gates  
on Sokrates' death day.

Like Silenos discovered asleep in his cave  
by two boys

who fetter his enemy legs before he awakes  
lest he

once more deceive them in their hopes of a song, Sokrates

opens his—

eyes stacked with the motions of roses in that other dawn  
and a torn coolness—

reluctantly. It is so early,  
why are you here?

7. *The Economy of the Unlost* (1999)

There is too much self in my writing.

Exploring the lives and the works of the ancient Greek lyric poet Simonides of Keos and post-WWII Romanian poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan, apart from her original *Eros the Bittersweet*, this is Carson's most straightforward book-length work, writing a relatively straight essay. But by removing herself, how does she manage to appear far more often than before, subversively present underneath each line? Is this, again, Parmendes making his zero-theory known?

Carson works best in mixture, in combination of connections that blend perfectly in her volcano-painting hands, but wouldn't necessarily occur to anyone else. Carson's essays and poems are like Richard Brautigan novels, blending what otherwise would have water and oil been, including his *A Confederate General in Big Sur* (1964), *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966* (1971), *The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Western* (1974), and even his selected poems, *The Pill versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* (1968). Springhill, Nova Scotia, known both for the mine disaster, and as the birthplace of chanteuse Anne Murray, made somehow infamous throughout America by a four line poem by Beat poet Brautigan that gave title to his selected:

When you take your pill  
it's like a mine disaster.  
I think of all the people  
lost inside of you.

In Brautigan, it was pure hippy surrealism, mixing concepts and things that perhaps shouldn't have mixed, a la Jack Spicer perhaps. For Carson, it is a way of looking from such a long and interested distance, that even the seemingly-irrelevant begins to connect. This is all about having the larger perspective. One needs, in Anne Carson's case, the longer view.

But the question remains, What exactly is lost to us when words are wasted? And where is the human store to which such goods are gathered?

It is in the combination of ideas that new elements are introduced.

In her essay, Carson writes economy as both brevity and commerce, writing about Simonides of Keos, said to be the first poet in the western tradition to not only take, but demand money for his compositions, a poet who emerged around the same time as the

invention of money itself. Taking cash instead of trade, barter or gift. What has this to do with love?

*I understand now that love requires pain*, you said. You begin to say. *That freedom and safety aren't at all the same thing*. What is it Carson says? "For the Greeks, memory is rooted in utterance [...]." Why do I feel as though speaking your breath? If only I could speak to what I think I remember.

According to myth, Kastor and Polydeukes are brothers (one mortal, the other immortal) who could not bear to be parted by death and so divide a single eternity between them, spending alternate days on and under the earth, infinitely half-lost. "Now they are living, day and day about," says Homer. Mortality and immortality continue side by side in them, hinged by a strange arrangement of grace. A poet is also a sort of hinge. Through songs of praise he arranges a continuity between mortal and immortal life for a man like Skopas. And although Skopas believes he is paying Simonides a certain price for a certain quantity of words, in fact he acquires a memory that will prolong him far beyond all of these. He will be one of the unlost. Gratitude is in order.

There is halving, there is that space between lost and found, called unlost. *Where are you now?* This is a story that, of two brothers, lost and unlost, almost echoes that of Gilgamesh and his lost "brother" Enkidu. The idea that a person by themselves can remain halved, can remain incomplete. Lost, but unlost. I write your name in blue ink all along my left side.

*Everything costs*, I said, wondering earlier if I had managed to change your mind on the concept of free love. *It costs so much*, you replied, *I doubt you get change*. But there is a difference. A maturing, perhaps. Learning the cost of anything is realizing value. What else can I tell you?

#### 8. *Men in the Off Hours* (2000)

Even in the off hours, men know marks.

This is my favourite of Carson's texts. Writing a poem about war, Carson is back to Virginia Woolf, the Greeks, Lazarus, Sappho, Augustine, Longinus, Edward Hopper, Artaud, Van Gogh, Catullus. Just who are these figures, men or otherwise? Just what is it she wants us to know? How many texts can she shape from these same sources? How does she not grow weary with her own repeated retellings? There are mythologies she points to, like significant fictions, telling in and around her own stories. Just what is it, inside of that light? What does it contain?

Audubon understands light as an absence of darkness,  
truth as an absence of unknowing.

*If I say anything enough times, I wonder which one of us might start believing first*. I wonder if one of us might stop. What do either of us know about hope? Carson even asks the question through the voice of Catullus, asking "Why does love happen?"

Dear old red eyes, what did you hope—

Later on, through the voice of Hara Tamiki, Carson writing "Love made me endure." Is it a weakness she creates, or a strength? Don't you know that it's both?

*You ask too many questions, you tell me. And provide not enough answers.*

It almost makes me think that Anne Carson already knows you. I have said barely a word.

I wanted to run away with you tonight  
but you are a difficult woman  
the rules of you—

She writes Augustine and Edward Hopper; but what does Hopper have to do with Augustine's *Confessions XI*? These are the measures, she suggests, that we take. A concept of risk, and a concept of just what can be gained.

For in what does time differ from eternity except we measure it?

In the space of Carson's hours, there is Tolstoy, desire, and the question of desire. This is her men in their downtime, away from the main thrust of their lives. Or is this simply men as they're "off," documenting imperfect moments, captured like image to film? Is this, through Tolstoy, where the poem begins?

Desire, the trees are rags. Desire, streaks of it  
scalding the fog.

Desire, and the indiscreet dreams of her TV men, writing the author of *War and Peace*, and his nameless wife, "After his death she dreams of roses and bones." Carson's voyeuristic poems write an action that she, as writer/narrator, is a passive instead of an active part. But even the watcher, as someone said, alters that which is being seen. Carson writing out what happens and has, writing out past in a present tense, and, through the voice of another, speaking (perhaps) her own process:

Yes I admit a degree of unease about my  
motives in making  
this documentary.

The poet and classics scholar Anne Carson writing out her documents, her long poem, her documentary, her (as Dorothy Livesay once coined it) "documentary poem" on men that exist on her own fictional television screen, what Ed Sanders later termed "investigative poetics." Carson writes out a poem investigating things that happen, happened, and documented, to historical figures. But even Carson writing Carson exists in the past. Just how far back must a poem go? Even here, where Carson moves back into God, Lazarus, Mary and Martha, and the dead man listening to the silence of the women's own voices; the recently-dead-and-buried Lazarus, as Carson peers through these archival bushes, instructed to stand up and walk.

There is gender even through writing out an absence of such, Carson's poem and poems on men, even as Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* wrote out the story of women. Back to the story of zero, mistaking capital *Ob*. When Gaiman tells a story passed from father to son, there is the acknowledgment of the absence by the father, of a version of (potentially) the same story passed from mothers to daughters, that only they know. Even through *not* telling, the story is women-built, just as Carson's poems talking of men. Just who are these men? Who are these two men, for example, she writes Russian poet Anna Akhmatova marrying, even as another female in her list of TV men, in the opening of Carson's Akhmatova poem?

Do you love him? I don't know. I believe he is my fate.  
    Inside the church ikons glowed vastly.  
Out on the steps the fog hustled people away, in groups or alone.  
    At last only she was left. She had tossed her wing  
over one arm. Poetry has no such use,  
    and starkly paced inside her.

This is one marriage and another one, Akhmatova's son jailed once and then a second time, unheard of and then even unheard from. One document leading quickly and directly into a further one. Everything connects. Carson writes her poetic forms through screenplays, scripts and film sets, setting the stage for television, documentaries, film and war. In the voice of actress Catherine Deneuve she tells us "Beginning are hard."

*What do you want?*  
*Want to be in the same room with him.*

Is this desire or love, eros or marriage, or something else entirely? Is this just following some kind of script?

Sappho stares into the camera and begins, *Since I am a poor man—*  
Cut

#### 9. *Short Talks* (1992)

The actions of life are not so many.

This is the Carson book that introduced her work to Canadian audiences, where we first saw her, this thin volume published out of London, Ontario. These are short prose poem blocks with her (another) painting of a volcano on the cover. This is where we were introduced to Carson the poet, where I was introduced too, and she even introduces herself, in her self-titled "Introduction," ending with:

I have to be careful what I set down. Aristotle talks about probability and necessity, but what good is a marvel, what good is a story that does not contain poison dragons. Well you can never work enough.

The pieces here talk around love, next door to love, talk the next county over, but never directly address the topic. How is it these poems so different than what else came after?

Carson, through her own texts, finding herself, discovering the shape and the sound of her eventual voice.

*Short Talk On Hedonism*

Beauty makes me hopeless. I don't care why anymore I just want to get away. When I look at the city of Paris I long to wrap my legs around it. When I watch you dancing there is a heartless immensity like a sailor in a dead calm sea. Desires as round as peaches bloom in me all night, I no longer gather what falls.

How are we to know? This is when Carson was still using Canadian spellings as well, unlike all that came after, writing the "u" in "colour," for example. Is this as arbitrary as format, in her only book published in her country of origin? Who can talk of origins? Between Canada and ancient Greece texts, she talks about God, she talks about marriage, she talks about the Brontës, she talks about rain, she talks about Sylvia Plath. What is all of this talking? In "*Short Talk On Rectification*," through the voice of Franz Kafka, she argues again about marriage: "He made a list of arguments for and against marriage, including inability to bear the assault of his own life (for) and the sight of the nightshirts laid out on his parents' beds at 10:30 (against). Hemorrhage saved him."

This is Carson at her most exploratory, moving poetic exploration through the guise of expositions. She is not telling us what she knows but talking her way through what she is trying to learn, working slowly to discover. Where her poems begin, before wrapping up like a dna strand into her essays, wrapping what the poetry of her *Short Talks* started into what the critical thinking of her *Eros the Bittersweet* did, until the two could no longer be separately read.

*Short Talk On Where To Travel*

I went travelling to a wreck of a place. There were three gates standing ajar and a fence that broke off. It was not the wreck of anything else in particular. A place came there and crashed. After that it remained the wreck of a place. Light fell on it.

Is it not what the light contains, but instead, what it illuminates?

10. *Decreation* (2005)

Who can sleep when she—  
hundreds of miles away I feel that vast breath  
fan her restless decks.

Here it is, Anne Carson talking by tens, creating something so large that she could only frame in Latin, by way of Greek. Through structural means, her greatest play through poetry, essay and opera, writing through all of her touchstones: Sokrates, Plato, Achilles, Virginia Woolf, John Keats, Homer and Elizabeth Bishop, among others. But Carson seems unfocused, lost even to herself. Has she been too broken and retooled?

When we are children, it is through play that we begin to learn, something discouraged as we age. Changing play into serious work. Doesn't this mean we learn less efficiently, once the aspect of fun becomes removed?

*I wanted to memorize you, molecule by molecule. I want to memorize the shape of you beneath my tongue. I want what I wanted, what I can never un-want.*

[...] To my mother,  
love  
of my life, I describe what I had for brunch. The lines are falling  
faster  
now.

In *Decreation*, Carson talks again of the narrator's mother and death, and of the narrator's father, who died of dementia. See how this goes all the way back to "The Glass Essay," on the dying and death of the father. Is this in fact where destruction leads, back into the personal, and universal?

My personal poetry is a failure.

A matter of recreating and rediscovering self through the death of a parent. A facet that develops through the birth of a child as well. Becoming more of what you already were. Becoming something that relies less than is reliant. Paraphrasing Stein, I am I because my little girl knows me. When child becomes parent, and the cycle continues. A love that isn't halved, but grows out by halves. *To halve*, as they say, *and halve not*.

Heaven's lips! I dreamed  
of a page in a book containing the word *bird* and I  
entered *bird*.  
Bird grinds on,  
  
grinds on, thrusting against black.

This is Carson writing the words that make up the world, that make up desire, that make up belief. *Is this why I wrote all those letters?* I write you now, in the spaces left amid Carson's own words. I write letters, mail them, still, a five-day delay in-between.

*Do you remember still what you dreamed?*

My earliest memory is of a dream. It was in the house where we lived when I was three or four years of age. I dreamed I was asleep in the house in an upper room. That I awoke and came downstairs and stood in the living room. The lights were on in the living room, although it was hushed and empty. The usual dark green sofa and chairs stood along the usual pale green walls. It was the same old living room as ever, I knew it well, nothing was out of place. And yet it was utterly, certainly, different. Inside its usual appearance the living room was as changed as if it had gone mad.



In this book, Carson writing Kant, Monica Vitti, Beckett, Sappho and marriage; has her scope broadened or merely thickening? Marriage: she seems almost obsessed with the word. Why is biography the first place any reader of poetry and fiction wants to go? So bitter, so sweet, and so hopeful, still. Like Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1989), this book almost sees fragments of all her previous texts, where every thread of her writing ended up, but not necessarily end. Where else can she go from here?

It is no simple red, he said.  
Each thread  
spun from a different reason for marrying.

Each thread, then, finding its own different reason. Where else *can* she go? Carson, writing those who have changed not only the shape of text but through their writing, changed the shape of thought.

It was 1930. Marriage was going well with the Sapphic Vita, marriage was going well with the virginal Virginia. Besides that, they were enjoying their affair, looking forward to spending the weekend after the eclipse together at Long Barn (Vita's ancestral estate). Still, totality is a phenomenon that can flip one's ratios inside out.

This is Carson pushing through a destruction, preparing to rebuild. The binary of endings and newly-minted beginnings. Don't you know there is always a certain amount of pain enmeshed in any pleasure? One idea blends into another, one body too, to the point of indistinguishable. A gain, not a loss. We do not lose ourselves, as it is supposed to work, but grow.

#### BLENDED TEXT

You have captured:	<i>pinned</i> upon
my heart:	the wall of <i>my heart</i> is your love
with one glance:	as <i>one</i>
with one bead:	as <i>an exile of the kings</i> of royalty
of your eyes:	<i>my heart</i>
you have something of mine:	a torn thing
again the moon:	<i>now</i>
the rule:	(who knows)

#### 11. *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1995)

After a story is told there are some moments of silence.

In *Plainwater*, Carson starts the first section with questions on Aphrodite, goddess of love, suggesting Sappho's own fragments, pinpointing lines as the suggestions of larger, lost verse. She writes essays that float through the poems, placing the two side-by-side, writing that "What streams out of Mimnermos's suns are the laws that attach us to all luminous things." and "Sex and light. Let us consider how they move him." Further on in the same piece, adding:

Like sex, light is not a question until you are in the dark.

How does this add to or further her original query, of what the light holds?

Is it necessary to keep repeating names that Carson brings up? Every writer knows what they know, every person too, and Carson is no different. What is it she's telling us? In the voice of Mimnermos himself, she tells us:

[...] the closer I get there is no hope for a person of my sort I can't give you facts I can't distill my history into this or that home truth and go plunging ahead composing miniature versions of the cosmos to fill the slots in your question and answer period it's not that I don't pity you it's not that I don't understand your human face [...]

In her *Plainwater*, a section made up of what was once her collection *Short Talks*, shortened from her original list and slightly tinkered, including Canadian spellings "corrected" to American. Again, is this a matter of the publisher, of context? And her introduction to same, too, rewritten and altered, as she introduces again what she had already done, writing shades of the former version, which now ends:

I begin to copy out everything that was said. The marks construct an instant of nature gradually, without the boredom of a story. I emphasize this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime. You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough.

Carson writes of women craving personal and intellectual freedoms and that perfect love, goals that her troubled characters seem to rarely achieve, or achieve with great difficulty, writing her "Anna" in the section "Canicula di Anna":

In the convent  
Anna took the name  
Helena. The nuns  
were content (Preserver  
of the True Cross).  
It was painful  
for them to learn  
she meant Helen of Troy.  
And meant  
the love of innocence.

## 12. *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986)

Eros is an issue of boundaries. He exists because certain boundaries do.

*You are in another city. I am in this one, waiting for the phone to ring. Are we holding these boundaries merely to cross?*

It is the poetry of those who were first exposed to a written alphabet and the demands of literacy that we encounter deliberate meditation upon the self, especially in the context of erotic desire.

*Bittersweet*, Carson not only said but repeated. What else Sappho left in pieces. Is this the tearing down before something further? You can find examples to go along with any argument. What exactly is she telling us? And the first written alphabet, is this all back to your Arabic roots, my self-proclaimed Phoenician? Was Carson attempting to write us all along?

Desire for an object *that he never knew he lacked* is defined, by a shift of distance, as desire for a necessary part of himself. Not a new acquisition but something that was always, properly, *his*. Two lacks become one.

No matter what else, I wait; for what I never knew I lacked. We aim ourselves both to a singular point, the same one. There is the binary, the double, mixed, a dna strand becoming a single strong entity. The thread that becomes so much stronger in turn.

“To reach for something else than the facts will carry you beyond this city and perhaps, as for Sokrates, beyond this world. It is a high-risk proposition, as Sokrates saw quite clearly, to reach for the difference between known and unknown. He thought the risk worthwhile,” Carson writes at the end of her essay. Again, like the Greek, Carson’s dialogue, two-sided. Desire, and not-desire; love, and not-love. Where they both can end up. Where love surely writes itself.

A city without desire is, in sum, a city of no imagination. Here people think only what they already know. fiction is simply falsification. Delight is beside the point (a concept to be understood in historical terms). This city has an akinetic soul, a condition that Aristotle might explain in the following way. Whenever any creature is moved to reach out for what it desires, Aristotle says, that movement begins in an act of the imagination, which he calls *phantasia*. Without such acts neither animals nor men would bestir themselves to reach out of the present condition or beyond what they already know. *Phantasia* stirs minds to movement by its power of representation; in other words, imagination prepares desire by representing the desired object as desirable to the mind of the desirer. *Phantasia* tells the mind a story.

*I understand now*, you said. Working toward our own happy ending. Writing out a new end to the story, there, back at the beginning. Back to the beginning that is *only* beginning, crossing over desire into all that comes next.

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