

BOOK REVIEW

James Degan

Where Water Comes Together With Other Water, Poems by Raymond Carver. New York: Random House, 1985. 130 pp.

THE TITLE OF Raymond Carver's first major collection of poetry calls to mind a couple of earlier Carver titles, those of his story collections *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. In all three one hears the unsettling echo, the peculiarly distended phrase, the sentence somehow folded back on itself. They offer a foretaste of the "Carver" voice, an oddly arresting monotone that pervades his stories and poems, a variant of the "ordinary" voice. It is inchoate, even banal, frequently groping for the precise word but all too often rising only to vagueness, a hopeless, verbal shrug:

The nights are very unclear here.
But if the moon is full, we know it.
We feel one thing one minute,
something else the next.
("Romanticism")

Life is full of disaster and ruin, and no one knows this better than Mr. Carver. No one can chronicle it so keenly, and no one seems more sensitive to the fatuity of language, especially poetic language, in evoking desolation. To call Mr. Carver a "minimalist" is too easy. More simply and accurately, as a teller of tales he knows the value of understatement:

Much later,
he remembered making a disastrous phone call.
One that hung on and hung on,
a malediction. It's boiled down
to that. The rest of his life.

Malediction.

("Late Night with Fog and Horses")

I say teller of tales rather than poet, because that essentially is what Mr. Carver is, even when he is writing poetry. The absence of "poetic diction" in these poems is so resounding as to be almost self-conscious. Unlike his near-namesake Raymond Chandler, or his literary forebear Stephen Crane, Mr. Carver's attempts at poetry do not abandon the austere brilliance of his prose for an assumed and uneasy prosody. If anything, the language here is more constricted than in the stories. Sentence fragments—sometimes a mere word—are charged with the task of imparting imagery and emotion:

Once more he found himself in the presence
of mystery. Rain. Laughter. History.

Art. The hegemony of death.

He stood there, listening.

("Listening")

And in places Mr. Carver is content to do away with any "formal" notion of "poetry" altogether, as in "Fear", which is nothing more than a stark catalogue of phobias:

Fear of seeing a police car pull into the drive.

Fear of falling asleep at night.

Fear of not falling asleep.

Fear of the past rising up.

Fear of the present taking flight. . . .

It is this unadorned directness that gives these poems their power, their peculiar beauty.

Of course, Mr. Carver is also a teller of tales in the most obvious sense of the term. Almost all of the poems in this volume are short stories, and the people in them are the same sort to be found in "Cathedral", "Tell the Women We're Going", "Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit", any of those stories in which his spiritually listless characters drift inexorably downward. Drinking, a major theme in Mr. Carver's fiction, also figures in the poetry. "Anathema" is a relentless account of the absolute ravages of alcohol upon an entire household. Moreover, it is a modern retelling of the Loss of Eden collapsed into the dissipation of the American Dream:

. . . our children . . .

pleaded to be taken anywhere but here.

And then mice entered the house in droves.

Followed by a bull snake. My wife

found it sunning itself in the living room

next to the dead TV. . . . We saw we couldn't hold out
any longer. We were beaten.

We wanted to get down on our knees

and say forgive us our sins, forgive us

our lives. But it was too late.
Too late. No one around would listen.
We had to watch as the house was pulled down,
the ground plowed up, and then
we were dispersed in four directions.

There are other, bleaker variations on the theme of alcoholism. In "To My Daughter", a kind of response to Yeats's "A Prayer For My Daughter", a father who is a recovering alcoholic laments his daughter's obsession with the bottle; "Next Year" details a couple unable to salvage their sodden lives ("this time next year/things were going to be different."); and "Locking Yourself Out, Then Trying To Get Back In" includes a comment about the alcoholic life that is grimly sardonic: "if this sounds/like the story of a life, okay."

But there are poems about recovery, too. "The Old Days" is a moving account of the long-distance conversation between two drinking buddies, one of them now sober:

I love you, Bro, you said.
And then a sob passed
between us. I took hold
of the receiver as if
it were my buddy's arm.

In what is perhaps the most joyous piece in the collection, as well as the poem from which the volume's title is taken, the speaker celebrates rebirth in a voice full of astonished gratitude:

I'm 45 years old today.
Would anyone believe it if I said
I was once 35?
My heart empty and sere at 35!
. . . It pleases me, loving rivers.
Loving them all the way back
to their source.
Loving everything that increases me.

Recovery exacts a price, however. Clarity and fullness of vision can arise only if accompanied by the absence of delusion. I think that if there is an overriding preoccupation on Mr. Carver's part, it is a preoccupation with death. About half the poems in the volume deal with this subject, and Mr. Carver's unblinking recognizance of his own mortality emerges again and again, often in unexpected places. "Woolworth's, 1954" is ostensibly a pleasant reminiscence of adolescent sex, yet it manages to end grimly enough:

. . . All those girls.
Grownup now. Or worse.
I'll say it: dead.

"In the Year 2020" is a reflection about the long sadness of aging, the loneliness of outliving one's friends. "The Eve of Battle" is an unusual

piece for Mr. Carver—it is set during the First World War, and the speaker is a German officer who describes, almost as a kind of Ingmar Bergman scenario, the sudden appearance of Death, “dressed in coat-and-tails.” In a moment that is comic and chilling at the same time, the speaker notes that

When I turn back, everyone has gone. Everyone
except Death. He’s still there, unmoving.
I give him his plate. He’s come a long
way. He is hungry, I think, and will eat anything.

A couple of cemeteries figure in “A Walk” and “Ask Him”. One of them is a rural churchyard in Washington State, the other the cemetery in Montparnasse, where du Maupassant, Sartre, Verlaine and Baudelaire are buried. Mr. Carver senses all too well what he terms “the hegemony of death,” swallowing the obscure and the illustrious alike.

The poetry of Raymond Carver should not be regarded as a body of ancillary work, the effluvia of his prose fiction. We will, of course, always regard him as a master, perhaps *the* master, of the latter, but readers of *Where Water Comes Together With Other Water* will discover that the poetry is its own excuse for being. While informed by a “Carverian” language found in the stories, it is nonetheless a distinct and admirable form of utterance. It is intensely personal; at once vigorous and startlingly tender. Mr. Carver has in the past described himself as an “occasional” poet, adding that it is better to be that than no poet at all. Readers of this volume will not only agree with that sentiment, but wish him to be a more frequent poet than he is at present.