

Carson's delicately composed lines signal the intense mental focus required to stay atop the faults and crevasses that run through and between his characters. He contrasts the frailty of identity with a series of luxury items that seem to defy time by remaining always functional, reliable, and desired: Montblanc pens, a vintage Omega watch, a famous perfume worn by successive generations of women. Human beings, the book suggests, have a near mastery of mechanical and artistic products, but they continue to fail at their internal inventions: loves, desires, ambitions.

And yet, somehow, all is not failure: *For All We Know* shows how modern ethical life is shaped by a colloquy of economic, political, and (mostly) psychological forces that do as much to bring people together as hold them apart. Carson's work demonstrates the extent to which we are bound to language for the constitution of our identity and our reality; it also reminds us that language is not our exclusive mode of engagement with one another, and that compassion and love bind us in ways we cannot always comprehend, persisting in memory against our every wish and reason.

Michael Baltasi

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Arda Collins, *It Is Daylight*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 93pp. \$16

Arda Collins is the most recent winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize, and this time Louise Glück has selected a book with some bite. Disoriented and bereft, the speakers of these poems don't seem too put out by it. They have been so utterly humiliated by their own reflective lives that they know no shame. One wakes from unplanned, overlong naps and then disaffectedly captures the pulse and glow of the ambient world. Another one drifts through empty rooms in a lonely house in a subdivision or college town where she has not lived for long, where, in one sense or another, she is just passing through. Collins's voice is menacingly meaningless but not without whimsy:

I called my house from a pay phone
down the street before I went home.
I needed to check on the empty situation.
(“It Is Daylight”)

The “situation” is markedly interior, as it consists in a mode of anxious yet bemused introspection. We might think of it as a form of chronic disinterest that wryly places even the most quotidian of activities at an unnatural distance. Here's a sampling of such moments from three different poems.

Every night
at dinner you're sitting with
the phrase "down the hall," because
you look down the dark hall
from the chair at the kitchen table
and wonder if it's snowing.
(“A History of Something”)

I sat on the couch and watched it get dark.
I was getting hungry, but I felt afraid
of seeing the refrigerator light go on.
(“Spring”)

Afterward, I was relieved
that I was still myself. I drove home at midnight,
but maybe it was only nine-thirty.
I was tired, so that was ok.
What did I have going anyway?
Plus I like the part when those things end.
(“Bed Poem”)

These moments work to make things strange; what we read are the dead-panned reports of someone who is an old hand at treating herself as a foreign thing. Her perspective often makes her activities seem not only strange but also homely and a bit sad. The consolation for this is the attainment of a clear-eyed humility about how creaturely even self-reflection is.

Collins often employs speakers who oscillate between childlike and adult perspectives to generate and maintain the distance she seeks. In “Pool #3” the speaker cowers and peeks from inside her house as the ice cream truck comes and goes:

I don't come out until he's gone;
I'm amazed at how still
I always am, but all the time I'm thinking
about the dollar bills in my wallet;
picturing myself out there next to his white truck;
buying a King Cone;
looking at pictures of the ice creams
on a deep blue background;
reading the names and descriptions
of all of them, each one
shown with a bite out of it
so you can see what the inside is like.

The subject matter and the tone of “ice creams” are infantilizing, but the paralyzing self-reflection is markedly adult, as is the somehow perverse

fixation on the ice cream man himself, the King Cone, and standing there “next to his white truck.” This poem works like several of the others in the book; it asks us to abide in moments of ambiguous and awkward childishness and passing moments of mildly erotic panic, probably because these are the moments we are normally least likely to hold up for inspection. “Pool #3” ends with this odd confession:

I would like to do this with people
so that I can see all the swimming pools inside them.
I'm hiding so because *I don't want*
the ice cream man *to see my swimming pools.*

The child-like speaker, the ice cream man, and a little too much intimacy combine to create a certain creepy effect, one that has the smack of a real, private life. Peeking into this life is one of the book's pleasures; like the speaker, “I duck / under the window curtains,” but I keep on looking.

Another poem, “25A,” embeds a narrative that seems to come from childhood, and yet it cannot, as it involves the speaker going to a hospital, “just / to visit his son.” The ambiguity of the embedded narrative works to suggest another uncanny child-adult speaker. The poem ends on the way home from the hospital.

Your sister
makes up a song in the car
about her new couch. You take turns
singing the made-up verses.
You drive past the water.
Do you go ahead
and laugh at the water?

Making up songs together is a children's game, but getting a new couch is an adult's game. The speaker and her sister move easily between these worlds; that is, until the arresting final image threatens such play with engulfment. Their mobility of perspective is evidence of the impermanence and even inconsequence of the identities they pretend to master.

The last two poems cited have fitting, powerful endings, a trait sadly not shared by many other poems in the collection. Consider “Letter Poem #6,” a love poem (to February) that's just a little too impartial to be affectionate:

Your purples—
how do I say it?
They are not even purple;
it's as though you make all the houses ugly again, *every day—*
god how I love that—
what you do with aluminum siding,

it's practically music—
it's like listening to a bus pull away—

These lines oscillate wonderfully between affection and cruelly ill-timed aperçus, in a kind of schizophrenic embrace. But then the end of the poem attempts to make an argument for the human, culminating in a limply inventive catalog of what “February” doesn’t get:

If only you knew how it is
not to understand why seeing people’s breath in the street
is not the same as snowing—
it’s like chewing gum, smoking a cigarette,
getting cramps, throwing up,
making out in the dunes on the hillside above a chimney town.

These last lines try to invoke the uniquely human ability to reflect on our creaturely status without attempting to transcend it, a notion Collins elucidates in a piece of autobiographical prose called “Parts Of An Argument”: “What is so great about being in life though, is that you can lie down and breathe as a mammal in time, and I enjoy that.” So, the penultimate lines of “Letter Poem #6” rattle off a list of unreflective but characteristically human experiences—as if there were something both deflating and yet universal in a good honest puke. This lowers the stakes so much as to obliterate our agency, and the concluding line of the poem feels arbitrary as a result.

Of course, so constantly employing childish speakers narrating embarrassing daydreams runs certain risks, and several of these poems, especially longer ones like “April,” “Pennsylvania,” and “Central Park South” devolve into quasi-surrealist montages laced with tedious extended metaphors. “January” for example, begins with an interestingly alien perspective on a house fire, but the second half unravels as the speaker riffs on the blanket given her by a fireman, complete with a fantasy about running off to a chalet and playing Heidi to an imaginary Heinrich (and/or running off with the fireman). At such moments one mutters, probably with some affection, “Oh stop.”

Dustin Simpson

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Stephen Rodefer, *Call It Thought: Selected Poems*. Manchester, UK: Carcanet, 2008. 193pp. \$38.95

Many critics concur in characterizing Stephen Rodefer’s poetry through cancellation—not American but not not-American, not Language but not not-Language, not at-home but not not-at-home. But none of these and