

Ciaran Carson, *For All We Know*. Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2008. 100pp. \$12.95

Ciaran Carson, *Collected Poems*. Edited by Peter Fallon. Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Press, 2009. 591pp. \$19.95

Flip quickly through the nearly six hundred pages of Ciaran Carson's *Collected Poems* and the narrative of the poet's career reveals itself in the relative tautness or slackness of the lines skimming past. Expansion and contraction denote the poet's struggle to capture both Belfast's Troubles, and the troubled emptiness of love and friendship eviscerated by political violence. With his more recent efforts, particularly since the ceasefires of the mid-1990s, Carson has allowed the thematic primacy of Northern Ireland's sectarian conflict to recede into memory. At the same time, he has continued to explore how emotion and violence shape personal experience—albeit from perspectives that increasingly traverse history and locality. His latest work clearly displays a richly textured awareness of other lives that his early poetry promised us.

The improvement over *Selected Poems* (2001) is vast—but not only for reasons of expansiveness. Poems in the earlier volume stress images, tones, and moods that are alternately violent, decayed, timorous, and frightened. They also reinforce the widely held critical perception of Carson as a poet of place, one who explores Belfast's streets and alleys, its maps and cityscapes and ancient place names, in an effort to trace a centuries-old history of strife. By contrast, *Collected Poems* shows Carson's full range of interests. He invites the reader to share in his chronicling of *events* of everyday life in Belfast, including wakes, religious processions, excursions to the countryside, and dances. With "Céili," the poet enticingly relates how an evening at an Irish dance might develop for a young man wanting to attend, especially once a good helping of Irish moonshine has limbered his spirits. The second stanza reads:

And when you did get in there'd be a power  
Of *poitin*. A big tin creamery churn,  
A ladle, those mugs with blue and white bars.  
Oh, good and clear like the best of water.  
The music would start up. This one ould boy  
Would sit by the fire and rosin away,  
Sawing and sawing till it fell like snow.  
That *poitin* was quare stuff. At the end of  
The night you might be fiddling with no bow.

Carson displays not only the attention to detail and the biting realism for which he is well known, but also a sense of humor. He works in elements of Hiberno-English idiom, as well as the repetition and internal rhyme schemes that derive from ancient Celtic poetry, giving this poem an unmistakable

Irish heredity. Yet the poem is far removed from the desolate wordplay of Carson's poetry about Belfast City, substituting for it an undefined locale where the vocabulary of courtship and frivolity has its currency. Events are tinged with hope, as they populate a youth's imagination and memory. This poem (and many others like it in the collection) refuses to be submerged in the logic of trauma and obsolescence.

*Poitín* might be "quare stuff"; so, too, is Carson's ongoing experiment with poetic structure. The extended-line form, whose verbal abundance breeches the right margin and expends itself—often without metrical formality—in the space below, seems to have allowed the poet to unfetter his more deeply held impulses. The lid comes off of both thought and emotion in many of these poems, leading to the disjointed narration of "Dresden" or the seething, hallucinatory ire unleashed in "John Ruskin in Belfast." In the latter, Carson succeeds at his own version of folding history upon itself to expose the constancy of humanity's vilest traits and conditions:

The air is sick with vitriol, the hospital-sweet scent of snuff,  
tobacco, linen.  
And the labyrinthine alleyways are bloody with discarded  
bandages, every kind of ordure:  
The dung of horses, dogs and rats and men; and the knitted,  
knotted streets  
Are crammed with old shoes, ashes, rags, smashed crockery,  
bullet casings, shreds  
Of nameless clothes, rotten timber jaggy with bent nails,  
cinders, bones and half-bricks,  
Broken bottles; and kneaded into, trampled, or heaving,  
fluttering, dancing  
Over all of these, the tattered remnants of the news, every kind  
of foul advertisement,  
The banner headlines that proclaim an oceanic riot, mutilated  
politics,  
The seething yeast of anarchy: the very image of a pit, where  
a chained dwarf  
Savages a chained bulldog.

In this imaginary excursion, Ruskin's elevated sensibility recoils at the encounter with this city as he goes in search of a Turner painting hanging in a gallery. Carson seems focused on refuting Ruskin's well-intentioned but nonetheless inane observations about mid-nineteenth century Irish political and social grievances. What makes his poem more compelling is its placement within the framework of the original text, *Belfast Confetti* (1989), where it contrasts with an interior of tightly constructed poems dealing with a single object or theme—plus the occasional sober essay on regional history or etymology.

Carson has used the structure of his books to his advantage, but his experiments in this regard are not uniformly effective. Sometimes, they seem like gimmicks: *Opera and Et Cetera* (1996) uses not one, but two sequences of poems based on alphabetical succession. *The Twelfth of Never* (1998) explores variations on a sonnet form that chokes off the vitality of each poem. Consider “The Rising of the Moon”:

As down the glenside I met an old colleen,  
She stung me with the gaze of her nettle-green eyes.  
She urged me to go out and revolutionize  
Hibernia, and not to fear the guillotine.

She spread the madder red skirts of her liberty  
About my head so I was disembodied.  
I fell among the People of No Property,  
Who gave me bread and salt, and pipes of fragrant weed.

The pale moon was rising above the green mountain,  
The red sun declining beneath the blue sea,  
When I saw her again by yon clear crystal fountain,

Where poppies, not potatoes, grew in contraband.  
She said, *You might have loved me for eternity.*  
I kissed her grass-green lips, and shook her bloodless hand.

This poem succeeds as a mild knock at the Celtic Twilight poets for their overbearing principles of sacrifice and spirituality, but, like most of the other sonnets, it comes across as flimsy and pallid against the other work in the collection. Thematic unity, rather than structural (or formal) unity, shows this poet at his best; in the second half of *Breaking News* (2003), with a series of poems under the title “The War Correspondent,” Carson hits the same brilliant stride he had in the late 1980s. These seven poems take as their ostensible theme the battle sites and cities of Crimean War, weaving historical fact and imagination into a poetic reportage of horror and absurdity. From “Balaklava”:

The skeleton of an English horseman  
had tatters of scarlet cloth hanging to the bones of his arms;  
all the buttons had been cut off the jacket.

Round as shot, the bullet-skull had been picked clean  
save for two swatches of red hair. The remains of a wolfhound  
sprawled at his feet. From many graves the uncovered bones  
of the tenants had started up, all of them lacking boots.

Here the images of violence from a battlefield in Eurasia recall the assassinations and reprisal killings of the Troubles, of bullets shot cleanly into the back of an informant's head, of a body dumped unceremoniously along the River Lagan, as in the poem "Campaign": "They took him to a waste-ground somewhere near The / Horseshoe Bend, and told him / What he was. They shot him nine times." Or "The Mouth": "By the time he is found there'll be nothing much left to tell / who he was." Or "The Knee": "His first bullet is a present, a mark of intelligence that will / End in the gutter behind The Clock Bar, since he keeps / on doing what / He's not supposed to." The reader almost senses in "The War Correspondent" Carson's relief at the ubiquity of pointless political violence—it somehow contextualizes, if not quite justifies, his own experience in Belfast. A soldier is a soldier, and a war is a war, whether that soldier rides with the 13th Light Dragoons or sips pints a full century later at the Arkle Inn.

With the recent *For All We Know*, Carson has added another exemplary investigation of the frailty of life and love to his oeuvre, even though it too is based on a somewhat contrived structure in which two parts each follow a sequence of poems with the same titles. The poems do not adhere to an obvious thematic arrangement or develop a coherent narrative, although they all involve the same two characters, the Irish Gabriel and the French Nina, who struggle to negotiate some respite from internal failings and external disruptions, to find a place where they might reconnect emotionally and physically. The patterns that do emerge are generated by Gabriel's memory only, and seem to resemble what an epigraph from Glenn Gould describes as the "shifting melodic fragments" and "perpetually unfinished" state of a fugue. *For All We Know* is perhaps best read for the first time cover to cover, then by reading each corresponding poem side by side, and then again from first to last. This method, or some variation of it, helps to bring the interconnections among all the poems to light.

The book as a whole takes up the problem of doublings and disjunctions within the self and between self and others. Carson's two main characters are both of "doubled" progeny that erodes their sense of coherent unity. Gabriel, like Carson himself, is split between the Irish and English languages, while Nina appears to be of French and English extraction, still haunted by the wars on the Continent that helped tear her family apart. Gabriel describes their condition in "On the Contrary":

It's because we were brought up to lead double lives, I said.  
Yes, you said, because of the language thing it was one thing

with my father, another with my mother. Father tongue  
and mother tongue, all the more so when they separated

irrevocably.

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.

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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.