

REVIEWS

WHERE WATER COMES TOGETHER WITH OTHER WATER, by Raymond Carver. New York: Random House, 1985. 130 pp. Hardcover \$13.95.

Raymond Carver's fourth collection of poems steadily, deliberately traverses and retraverses experience: the gathering dailiness of memories and hopes, energies and despairs. The epigraph for "Harley's Swans," quoted from a letter by Sherwood Anderson, speaks to the whole volume:

I'm trying again. A man has to begin over and over—to try to think and feel only in a very limited field, the house on the street, the man at the corner drug store.

Carver is a devoted and skillful practitioner of the realist lyric, a term applied by Jonathan Holden to poetry which is adequate to what he calls the "unlived life" as well as the life most fully lived—that takes into account daydreams and TV as well as the higher intensities of love and self-discovery—and treats them without ironic distance or self-parody, for what they are worth.

"Woolworth's, 1954" begins: "Where this floated up from, or why,/I don't know. But thinking about this/since just after Robert called/telling me he'd be here in a few/minutes to go clamming." A poetic meditation about the poet's first job is bracketed by an ordinary day, its logistical commonplaces. The lingering mysterious softness of lingerie ("linger-ey") and of first girlfriends gives way to the final bluntness of "All those girls./Grownup now. Or worse./I'll say it: dead."

A similar stubbornness—a playfully gruff, half-belligerently loving insistence on what's true—emerges up in "Still Looking Out for Number One":

Now that you've gone away for five days,
I'll smoke all the cigarettes I want,
where I want. Make biscuits and eat them

with jam and fat bacon. Loaf. Indulge
 myself. Walk on the beach if I feel
 like it. And I feel like it, alone and
 thinking about when I was young. The people
 then who loved me beyond reason.
 And how I loved them above all others.
 Except one. I'm saying I'll do everything
 I want here while you're away!
 But there's one thing I won't do.
 I won't sleep in our bed without you.
 No. It doesn't please me to do so.
 I'll sleep where I damn well feel like it—
 where I sleep best when you're away
 and I can't hold you the way I do.
 On the broken sofa in my study.

This poem shows Carver's kinship, in both rhythm and spirit, with William Carlos Williams, one of his acknowledged great influences. It echoes the unhedged declarative notations of, for example, "This is Just to Say."

Here, as in Williams, the ordinary and the important are one and the same. Habit—its soothing patterns and rituals—is life. Love together, love apart. Love the same way, "the way I do." In these poems Carver speaks as someone who has in another life known the most radical uncertainty, who must now touch things again and again to reaffirm their substance, their lasting value. In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory (in *Mississippi Review* 40/41), Carver says, "I have hope now . . . I believe now that the world will exist for me tomorrow in the same way it exists for me today . . . I still retain a certain sense of pessimism I suppose, but I also have belief in and love for, the things of this world."

Unlike Carver's stories, which often take a non-specific or indoor locale, his poems depend heavily on nature as a source of beauty and energy. The book's title poem is a love poem to water:

I have a thing
 for this cold swift water.
 Just looking as it makes my blood run

and my skin tingle. I could sit
 and watch these rivers for hours.
 Not one of them like any other.
 I'm 45 years old today.
 Would anyone believe it if I said
 I was once 35?
 My heart empty and sere at 35!
 Five more years had to pass
 before it began to flow again.
 I'll take all the time I please this afternoon
 before leaving my place alongside this river.
 It pleases me, loving rivers.
 Loving them all the way back
 to their source.
 Loving everything that increases me.

This poem illustrates what is arguably the greatest weakness of an admirable book: its professed efforts to 'try to think and feel' reach their pay-off somehow too easily; the poems seem to gain too secure a purchase on their subject matter, to display a lip-service fascination with what is difficult. What's missing is the tension of inarticulateness which grips Carver's fictional characters as they try to talk about love or simply to negotiate the uncertain space of their lives. The pressure of the momentous unsaid, the old and new failures, makes reading the stories resemble reading the hairline cracks in a giant dam. Perhaps what's missing is more of the tension between celebration and reportage, between lyricism and declaration, everywhere operative in James Wright's *Two Citizens*, a book that in some ways seems behind Carver's work, where in "Prayer to the Good Poet," Wright says of his father: "I still love the fine beauty of his body./He could pitch a very good Sunday baseball./One afternoon he shifted to left hand/And struck out three men."

Perhaps the poems, in all their abundant and telling detail and truthfulness, are too consummate in their recognitions ("I saw myself through and through./And I understood something, too,/as my life flew back to me there in the woods." ["Elk Camp"]). The poems are often somehow too satisfied with what they say, so that in even the most excited ones mastery takes over for exhilaration, and the poet's love is credited, not felt. What is needed, finally, is more of the drivenness

implicit in Anderson's 'A man has to begin over and over,' in his explanation at the end of the story "Death in the Woods": "I am only explaining why I was dissatisfied then and have been ever since. I speak of that only that you may understand why I have been impelled to try to tell the simple story over again."

— Angela Ball

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY. Mary Fell. Random House, 1984. 73 pp. Paper, \$8.95.

Mary Fell's first collection of poetry, *The Persistence of Memory* (one of the 1984 National Poetry Series volumes, selected by Madeline DeFrees), borrows its title from Salvador Dali's famous painting of melting clocks. Though its techniques and themes are less grotesque and fanciful than Dali's, the book does circle obsessively around the past and its survival into the present. Fell's heritage is working-class Irish, her hometown is Worcester, Massachusetts, and her poetry combines a bitter humor with love for the communion of talk.

"American Legion," for instance, begins with an epigraph presumably copied from a memorial plaque, a wry found-poem in itself: "To all veterans/of all wars/of the Main South Area." "All politics is local politics," Chicago's Mayor Daly was supposed to have said, and we can imagine Fell agreeing. For in "American Legion," a veteran of "all wars" is identified also as a veteran of a distinctive, pathetically localized place: "the Main South Area." His real war begins when he enters the Legion bar after a day's work, where he and his cronies "bathe their wounds/with stories each agrees to swallow," and where he "bends his elbow in slow salute/to himself and his fellow soldiers." There's nothing particularly novel about this scene, nor is Fell's descriptive language dazzling or intricate. She even alludes without irony to that cliché of bar-talk: emptied beer bottles as "dead soldiers." What's moving about this poem is Fell's scrupulous fidelity to reality—not to sentimental posturing or condescending glorification, but simply to the fact of this veteran's life, with "this pain near his heart/where something went in he can't wash out."