

## INTRODUCTION

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.

What we learn from *Eros the Bittersweet* while being spun alive by its brilliance is that its author is a philosopher of much cunning and an agile reader, a scholar with a mind as fresh as a spring meadow, no dust anywhere on her. Classicists tend to be a sprightly lot. Erasmus was as charming a person as God makes them. A. E. Housman, now that we know his secret life, vied with Norman Douglas for being the last authentic pagan. My first Greek teacher, James Nardin Truesdale, had swum, mother-naked, many laps of the pool in the Duke gym, before he met our eight o'clock class. At our very first meeting he strode in and said in the voice of a drill sergeant that the first letter of the Greek alphabet is *alpha*, the second *beta*, the third *gamma*.

My second text by Anne Carson was an article in a learned journal, "Echo with No Door on Her Mouth: A Notional Refraction through Sophokles, Plato, and Defoe." Defoe! There are classicists whose writing is just short of terrifying to read (Zuntz, Kirk, Cunningham, and Page for starters). Bringers of the Law down from Olympos are stern and earnest men, and they carry a cane to deal with Eros should he show his impudent face. Yet it is precisely the classicists who see our culture as one among many (Greece, like ancient Israel, was a traffic circle of belligerently different peoples, and Rome

was a United States of meddlers in all the affairs of the world) and who are least embarrassed by the pagan topsoil in which our culture still grows its garden.

The past for the classicist is simply another room in the house, as familiar as any other. Jane Harrison grew up with a county father who intrepidly, for grace before meals, said, "For what we are about to receive, may the Lord be truly thankful." Both Zeus and Yahweh would have seen nothing askew in this prayer, and little Jane grew up to be a diligent explicator of Greek ritual. In Anne Carson's poetry we are everywhere looking into depths, through transparencies of time and place. As with Virginia Woolf, she gives us scenes—moors, rooms, orchards, deserts—in which vivid action holds our attention.

Poets distinguish themselves by the way they see. A dull poet is one who sees fashionably or blindly what he thinks poets see. The original poet sees with new eyes, or with imported vision (as with Eliot seeing like Laforgue or Pound like the Chinese). Anne Carson's eyes are original. We are not yet used to them and she may seem unpoetic, or joltingly new, like Whitman or Emily Dickinson in their day. She writes in a kind of mathematics of the emotions, with daring equations and recurring sets and subsets of images. As with Matthew Arnold, truth and observation are more important than lyric effect or coloring. If a good line happens, it happens. Anne Carson's poems are like notes made in their pristine urgency, as fresh and bright as a series of sudden remarks. But they are the remarks of a speaker who remains silent until there's something to be said, something that has been processed in the heart and brooded over in the imagination and is not to be further processed in rhyme or meter.

The poem called "Book of Isaiah" may give us a clue as to the circuits of Anne Carson's genius. This is a poem that reminds us of Shulamith Hareven's *Navi (Prophet)* in its ability to imagine archaic theology and the deeply primitive *feel* of ancient Judaism. Both Hareven and Carson can enter Old Testament ways of thought and narrative, Hareven into the *numen*, Carson into the human (and even witty) narrative eccentricities of biblical style, a gathering into what sounds like history of disparate events, an oral tradition written down by different chroniclers without regard for sequence or consistency. Carson's Isaiah and Carson's God are both authentically bibli-

cal, no libel anywhere. They look wonderfully strange because we were rarely taught to read the bible with an honest mind.

I had begun discovering Anne Carson's poems about the same time as James Laughlin, who knows a poet when he sees one. He alerted me to "a poem about God that you have to read." Sitting at his back window at Meadow House in Connecticut, from which he observes his flock of sheep and where he writes his own poems and keeps in touch with hundreds of writers whom he has come to know in sixty years of publishing ("the Godfather of Modernism," Andréi Codrescu calls him), Laughlin's knowing eye saw Anne Carson for what she is: a real poet whose poems are unfailingly memorable. Hence this book, which I gather wasn't easy to come by. And then this inadequate introduction, as Laughlin thought "she needs explaining." I don't think she needs explaining at all, but Laughlin has lived through the slow acceptance of his New Directions poets—three decades for William Carlos Williams to advance from small-town doctor who wrote poems between patients, and whom Laughlin was discerning and brave enough to publish, to Old Master—and wants to speed things up. There are probably beguiling ways of going about this far better than anything I might do (I know nothing of Anne Carson except her writing and the stray fact that she is also a fancier of volcanoes and paints them erupting).

The test of poetry, however, is easy. Read "The Glass Essay," a poem richer than most novels nowadays. See how in its utter clarity of narration it weaves and conflates one theme with another, how it works in the Brontës as daimons to preside over the poem and to haunt it, how it tells two strong stories with Tolstoyan skill, how it reflects on its themes in subtle and surprising ways. This is a boldly new kind of poem, but neither its boldness nor its novelty make it good. It is good because of its truth and the sensibility of its telling. These qualities maintain from poem to poem, though no two poems are alike. Anne Carson's powers of invention are apparently infinite. The range of her interests is from horizon to horizon.

It has been the spirit of the arts for most of the century to dare new forms. Joyce's daring is evident on every page he wrote; so are Pound's and Cummings's. Sometimes the daring was more for its own sake (as with about half of Gertrude Stein and much of Picasso) than toward a technique useful to others. Anne Carson's daring suc-

ceeds. She is among those who are returning poetry to good strong narrative (as we might expect of a classicist). She shifts attention from repeating stanzaic form (which came about when all poems were songs) to well-contoured blocks of phrases: analogues of paragraphs in prose. Prose will not accommodate Carson's syncopations, her terseness, her deft changes of scene.

She writes philosophy and critical essays that are as beautiful and charming as good poetry; it is not surprising that her poems are philosophical—in the old sense, when from Herakleitos (if his fragments are from a poem) to Lucretius, and even longer (Bernardus, Dante, Cavalcanti), poetry was a way to write philosophy. When Sokrates took Sappho's desire for the young and fused it with the process of learning, sublimating it and disciplining it with stoic restraint, he gave the genius of the West a philosophical idea that lasted almost two thousand years. Desire is now a medical and sociological problem. The god Eros and his mother Aphrodita are outlaws again, a new puritanism descends, but there are still poets—Anne Carson is among them—who allow Eros his dominion and can tell us that while prophets sleep, the asters in the garden unload their red thunder into the dark.

—Guy Davenport

## Book Of Isaiah

II.

There is a kind of pressure in humans to take whatever is most beloved by them and smash it.

Religion calls the pressure *piety* and the smashed thing *a sacrifice to God*.

Prophets question these names.

What is an idol?

An idol is a useless sacrifice, said Isaiah.

But how do you know which ones are useless? asked the nation in its genius.

Isaiah pondered the various ways he could answer this.

Immense chunks of natural reality fell out of a blue sky and showers of light upon his mind.

Isaiah chose the way of metaphor.

Our life is a *camera obscura*, said Isaiah, do you know what that is?

Never heard of it, said the nation.

Imagine yourself in a darkened room, Isaiah instructed.

Okay, said the nation.

The doors are closed, there is a pinhole in the back wall.

A pinhole, the nation repeated.

Light shoots through the pinhole and strikes the opposite wall.

The nation was watching Isaiah, bored and fascinated at once.

You can hold up anything you like in front of that pinhole, said  
Isaiah,  
and worship it on the opposite wall.

Why worship an image? asked the nation.

Exactly, said Isaiah.

The nation chewed on that for a moment.

Then its genius spoke up.

So what about Isaiah's pinhole?

Ah, said Isaiah.

A memory fell through him as clear heat falls on herbs.

Isaiah remembered the old days, conversing with God under the  
Branch

and like an old butler waking in an abandoned house the day the  
revolution began,

Isaiah bent his head.

A burden was upon Isaiah.

Isaiah opened his mouth.

A sigh came from Isaiah's mouth, the sigh grew into a howl.

The howl ran along the brooks to the mouth of the brooks  
and tore the nets of the fishers who cast angle into the brooks  
and confounded the workers in fine flax who weave networks  
and broke their purpose.

The howl rolled like a rolling thing past slain men and harvests and  
spoils  
and stopped in a ditch between two walls.

Then Isaiah unclamped his mouth from the howl.

Isaiah let his mouth go from the teat.

Isaiah turned, Isaiah walked away.

Isaiah walked for three years naked and barefoot with buttocks  
uncovered  
to the shame of the nation.

All night you could see the Branch roaming against the sky like a  
soul.

## Book Of Isaiah

### III.

Isaiah walked for three years in the valley of vision.

In his jacket of glass he crossed deserts and black winter mornings.

The icy sun lowered its eyelids against the glare of him.

God stayed back.

Now Isaiah had a hole in the place where his howl had broken off.

All the while Isaiah walked, Isaiah's heart was pouring out the hole.

One day Isaiah stopped.

Isaiah put his hand on the amputated place.

Isaiah's heart is small but in a way sacred, said Isaiah, I will save it.

Isaiah plugged the hole with millet and dung.

God watched Isaiah's saving action.

God was shaking like an olive tree.

Now or never, whispered God.

God reached down and drew a line on the floor of the desert in front  
of Isaiah's feet.

Silence began.

Silence roared down the canals of Isaiah's ears into his brain.

Isaiah was listening to the silence.

Deep under it was another sound Isaiah could hear miles down.

A sort of ringing.

Wake up Isaiah! said God from behind Isaiah's back.

Isaiah jumped and spun around.

Wake up and praise God! said God smiling palely.

Isaiah spat.

God thought fast.

The nation is burning! God cried pointing across the desert.

Isaiah looked.

All the windows of the world stood open and blowing.

In each window Isaiah saw a motion like flames.

Behind the flames he saw a steel fence lock down.

Caught between the flames and the fence was a deer.

Isaiah saw the deer of the nation burning all along its back.

In its amazement the deer turned and turned and turned

until its own shadow lay tangled around its feet like melted wings.

Isaiah reached out both his hands, they flared in the dawn.

Poor flesh! said Isaiah.

Your nation needs you Isaiah, said God.

Flesh breaks, Isaiah answered. Everyone's will break. There is nothing we can do.

I tell you Isaiah you can save the nation.

The wind was rising, God was shouting.

You can strip it down, start over at the wires, use lions! use thunder!  
*use what you see—*

Isaiah was watching sweat and tears run down God's face.

Okay, said Isaiah, so I save the nation. What do *you* do?

God exhaled roughly.

I save the fire, said God.

Thus their contract continued.

## Book Of Isaiah

IV.

When Isaiah came back in from the desert centuries had passed.

There was nothing left of Isaiah but a big forehead.

The forehead went rolling around the nation and spoke to people  
who leapt to their feet  
and fled.

If the nation had taken Isaiah to court he could have proven his  
righteousness.

But they met in secret and voted to cut him off.

Shepherds! Chosen ones! Skinny dogs! Blood of a dog! Watchmen  
all! said Isaiah.

Isaiah withdrew to the Branch.

It was a blue winter evening, the cold bit like a wire.

Isaiah laid his forehead on the ground.

God arrived.

Why do the righteous suffer? said Isaiah.

Bellings of cold washed down the Branch.

Notice whenever God addresses Isaiah in a feminine singular verb  
something dazzling is  
about to happen.

Isaiah what do you know about women? asked God.

Down Isaiah's nostrils bounced woman words:

Blush. Stink. Wife. Fig. Sorceress—

God nodded.

Isaiah go home and get some sleep, said God.

Isaiah went home, slept, woke again.

Isaiah felt sensation below the neck, it was a silk and bitter sensation.

Isaiah looked down.

It was milk forcing the nipples open.

Isaiah was more than whole.

I am not with you I am *in* you, said the muffled white voice of God.

Isaiah sank to a kneeling position.

New pain! said Isaiah.

New contract! said God.

Isaiah lifted his arms, milk poured out his breasts.

Isaiah watched the milk pour like strings.

It poured up the Branch and across history and down into people's  
lives and time.

The milk made Isaiah forget about righteousness.

As he fed the milk to small birds and animals Isaiah thought only  
about their little lips.

God meanwhile continued to think about male and female.

After all there are two words for righteousness, Isaiah could not be  
expected to untie this  
hard knot himself.

First the masculine word TSDQ, a bolt of justice that splits the oak in  
two.

Then in the empty muscle of the wood, mushrooms and maggots and  
monkeys set up a  
livelihood:

here is (the feminine word) TSDQH.

God grave the two words on Isaiah's palms.

God left it at that.

And although it is true Isaiah's prophecies continued to feature  
*eunuch cylinders* and  
*clickfoot woman shame*.

And although it is true Isaiah himself knew several wives and begot a  
bastard son.

Still some nights through his dreams slipped a river of milk.

A river of silver, a river of pity.

He slept, the asters in the garden unloaded their red thunder into the  
dark.