

# A Process Of Asking

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Anne Carson, *Nox*, New Directions, £19.99, ISBN 9780811218702;  
Allison Funk, *The Tumbling Box*, C&R Press, npg, ISBN 9780981501048;  
Louise Glück, *A Village Life*, Carcanet, £9.95, ISBN 9781847770592

In a curious way these three very different collections dovetail, or rather the two others are contained within the singular cultural and conceptual sweep of Anne Carson's extraordinary new book, *Nox*. Thus Allison Funk's keening account of the impact of mental illness on a tight family group can be contrasted with Carson's elegiac meditation on her brother; while Louise Glück's marmoreal treatment of the cycle of life in an unnamed Mediterranean setting can also be set against the Canadian poet's link between the Classical elegy and the Greek origins of historical inquiry: "It is a process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming and above all standing amazed at the strange things that humans do." Carson goes on to remark how Herodotus stresses that being an historian is one of the strangest of these activities; she hardly needs to add so too is being a poet.

In *The Tumbling Box*, Allison Funk uses a series of recurrent motifs to set against her account of the gradual diagnosis, treatment and, to a degree, recovery of her son from what appears to be a severe persecution complex. His illness, most agonisingly for the poet, attacks her as a mother and forces her to reassess her entire engagement with family. These motifs – the tricks of an escape artist; images of the Virgin by Dürer; and a set of notes on the flora of the prairie where the family live – neatly resolve the lyric poet's dilemma with narrative: the images in which she dwells so richly tend to depict specific separated moments, so the recurrent image and cyclical use of symbol must stand in for plot

She has an almost sumptuous knack for finding images for the self in crisis, like the titular tumbling box, polishing stones which stand for her internalised, never uttered stories as a withdrawn child, which have "the smoothness of a lozenge on the tongue". She posits herself as Echo, remarking:

nothing could have been worse  
than falling in love  
with Narcissus.  
Unless they'd had children.

When her son begins to hear normal sounds as threats, there is a vertiginous moment in which, still echoing, she tests these against her own senses, undergoing a distressing maternal version of the infantile crisis when, as psychoanalysts argue, children experience themselves as separate beings from their mothers. Terrified "she could be blind to what's visible / to her son" she imagines seeing as birds see, "tuned to ultraviolet".

These anxieties lead to identification with the escape artist, "Willingly bound"; and with the Virgin in an engraving, "finding no way out / Of the walled garden"; and, on the prairie, reflection on how "Most wildflowers have at least one counterfeit", her example, "Solomon's seal" leading inexorably back to self-judgment as a true or false mother.

There is a certain amount of hubris in identifying yourself with the Virgin Mary, even if it is

an interpretation of the Virgin as depicted by someone else, and this collection veers at times towards a self-aggrandising rhetoric. We learn little about the son beyond his clearly distressing symptoms, and less about how the father might be Narcissus. Indeed, at times, the poems hint disconcertingly at that narcissistic self our culture has created, for whom suffering always has a goal, a spiritual journey justified by therapy:

I imagine how Turner must have begun  
a painting – needing like me

to burn away what grows up  
unwanted, weedy [...]

But there are, equally, suggestions that we should not take any of these identifications too literally, that these are merely appropriate masks: in the first escape artist piece, there is obviously a disjunction between the present tense enactment, “Now, while I try to slip the knots,” and the artifice of a journal in the title, ‘An Entry in the Escape Artist’s Diary’. It would be a little much to expect even a Houdini to catch up with his journal mid-trick, and we are clearly being invited to regard all these figures in a quasi-allegorical sense as types of the mother.

Funk’s finest allegory is the lush natural imagery of ‘Ephemeroptera,’ dedicated to her entomologist brother, where ecological themes, geological time and family history are all set against the powerful image of healing that sums up the movement of the collection: insects returning to swarm from a previously fouled creek, where the multitudes (“Blizzard. Smoke. Interstellar / dust”) are reduced to a single nymph, who, metamorphosing from Echo into something

filamentous, breaks the water’s surface  
with crumpled wings  
and, fast as sleight of hand

changes shape a final time  
to become the luminous, meteoric  
imago [...]

Louise Glück’s work has long since achieved a magisterial sense of overview, an austere smoothness of utterance in which perspective is as long as her stately lines, simile is rare, and the reader is as likely, as here, to be addressed by an earthworm as an identifiable human voice. *A Village Life*, like previous volumes including its predecessor *Avernus*, modulates between an almost definable present day Mediterranean setting, and a more abstracted pastoral realm that feels more neo-Classicist than contemporary. The experience is rather like being released into the landscape of Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’:

When you got tired of walking  
you lay down in the grass.  
When you got up again, you can see for a moment where you’d been,  
the grass was slick there, flattened out  
into the shape of a body. When you looked back later,  
it was as though you’d never been there at all.

She uses a device of recurring motifs, similar to Funk's, but to indicate a cyclical world-view rather than any narrative progression: the mountain and the meadows reappear, the presence of the village is contrasted to the absence of the city, leaves are burned in four separate poems, young people approach sexuality, older people retreat from it more or less reluctantly. There are times when the sheer non-specificity of this exasperates, as when 'At the Dance' we hear about "the women gathered under the coloured awnings / singing along with whatever songs were popular that year" – whatever, indeed! The one name of an actual person which appears in this book, Margulies, is almost startling in its intrusion.

The stateliness of her observation allows for a slower, deeper rhythm to be established across poems, but at the expense of many of the more local delights we might expect. By great good fortune, I happen to be writing this review in the Mediterranean, and there are moments when what I read jars with what I can see or hear. Olive trees do indeed have "long silver leaves", but "the bark, [and] the trees themselves" are not on the whole "so supple, pale gray", they are generally twisted, stocky things, the bark of the trunk often dark and gnarled, the branches eccentric, hard to see, and only grey in certain lights. Something has been lost in the simplification, just as in the description of evening falling which concludes "crickets, cicadas" – this phrase must be reversed: here cicadas are raucous in the heat of the day, while crickets chirp in the cool of the night.

But when Glück moves into individuals' heads and lets them speak, something transformative occurs: the particularities of voice access a universal note grander utterances do not. The serial monogamist who becomes a perfect reader of women; the teenager disgusted by carnality who makes a vow to her body; a boy irritated with the bland admonitions of a priest; the woman disputing how recipes summon memories; a man disturbed by the shadow of his bureau; an old woman walking by night – the serene, the discontented, and those mad with anger: a series of marvellous small gestures appear which bring the setting if not the book to life.

No one taught me how to care for my body.  
 You grow up watched by your mother or grandmother.  
 Once you're free of them, your wife takes over, but she's nervous,  
 she doesn't go too far. So this body I have,  
 that the doctor blames me for – it's always been supervised by women,  
 and let me tell you, they left a lot out.

This brilliantly fluid piece of self-deception reminds us we are in the hands of a great poet, as do the all too rare images – tomatoes past their best "like human brains covered in red oilcloth"; a man sick of life "breathes out fast, like a king banishing a servant". But those pieces which feel more remote from the speaking voice sometimes end with couplets of bewildering vagueness: "Nothing remains of love, / only estrangement and hatred". "What lives, lives underground. / What dies, dies without struggle". "Nothing proves I'm alive. / There is only the rain, the rain is endless."

Louise Glück is a marvellous writer, capable of moments of climactic utterance, in which recognition and surprise combine for the reader into

delighted apprehensions – the book concludes with one such, about the moon, “meaningless but full of messages” – but the overall augustness of her approach can detract from if not vitiate such moments:

It's dead, it's always been dead,  
but it pretends to be something else,  
burning like a star, and convincingly, so that you feel sometimes  
it could actually make something grow on earth.

If there's an image of the soul, I think that's what it is.

Anne Carson's new book is literally a box of *Nox*, from which the pages are read in a continuous folded scroll, in which the night concerned is the final darkness of death which her brother has entered. It's a meditation on every word of Catullus's elegy for his brother, made famous not least by its incredible concise and poignant three word conclusion, “ave atque vale”, popularly “hail and farewell”. It is an apparent refusal to mourn masquerading as an alleged failure to translate. It is an expansion of that most condensed of texts, interspersing essayistic fragments on classical theories of history between subtly-evolving disquisitions on Latin terms, and folding in to these memories and images – photographs, a letter, paintings – plus short, sometimes gnomic, always poignant lines of verse. It is hypertext made elegy, a short poem exploded into a book, the book become a box, the translation become a trove. As you can tell, it is not like other books.

Carson has constructed her book to perform one trick by sleight of eye, which she is perfectly straightforward about, but which is nonetheless both disarming and deeply moving. She says in section 1.3 “Herodotus is an historian who trains you as you read”, and we are thus alerted that this particular elegy is performing the same service, as all poems must in the absence of a single functioning definition for either the structure of a poem, or its permissible frame of reference.

Therefore we become aware, at our own speed, of recurrences: how each set of definitions tends towards the one word which does not appear in the elegy, ‘Nox’; how the same word, repeated, does not necessarily have the same set of definitions. How many of the photographs focus on the appearance of shadows; how the fact some are cut up makes us treat them as glimpses through letterboxes, types of keyhole surgery. How appropriate it is to have information about the brother withheld as the brother withheld information about himself from his intimate family; how the word “withheld” is misspelt as “witheld” (and the word “mitts” as “mits”).

Back in section 1.3, Carson had referred to “the Skythians who, when Herodotus endeavours to find out from them the size of the Skythian population, point to a bowl that stands at Exampaïos. It is made of the melted down arrowheads required of each Skythian by their king Ariantes on pain of death.” This enigmatic, completely symbolic representation of a people corresponded for her to the uninterpretability of her brother – the reason for his long absence, the nature of his one lost love, why he maintained his traumatising silence – as she says,

alluding to the philosophical concept “*das Unumgängliche* – that which cannot be got round”: “there is something that facts lack”.

By section 7.1, slightly more than halfway through the *Catullus*, she follows up these ideas with the confession “I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101”, adding “Catullan diction [...] at its most sorrowful, has an air of deep festivity, like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind.” (Like an olive tree, essentially.) She goes on to speak of translation “as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch”, and talks about all the meanings of the words she has been compiling throughout the book in utterly distinctive terms:

But all those little kidnaps in the dark. And then the luminous, big, shivering, discandied, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your head when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate.

“Discandied” is a typically Carsonian construction. She need hardly add that the structure of this book therefore corresponds exactly to the bowl at Exampaios: it is a precise demonstration of how the spaces opened up by a poem and by the contemplation of a poem form an irreducible symbolic presence, something that, like the death of a brother, cannot be got round.

Reading *Nox*, like reading Carson’s other work, particularly her last book, *Decreation*, in which forms like essay and libretto slid into or resisted other forms with similar gracefulness, is at once a moving and an intellectually satisfying experience. Unlike other writers who treat traditional form and classical heritage as either fetish objects or taboo areas, she is almost uniquely capable of building entirely new shapes from what seem historically discrete units. This appears to be because the book is almost not interested in such matters: this marvellous invention is quite unselfconsciously about something or rather somebody. In other words it’s not about the author, it’s about the very particular way she could not know her brother. One conversation between them after their mother died sums this up with a laconic, properly tragic, brevity:

Mother is dead.  
**Yes I guess she is.**  
 She had a lot of pain because of you.  
**Yes I guess she did.**  
 Why didn’t you write.  
**Well it was hard for me.**  
 Are you sick.  
**No.**  
 Do you work.  
**Yes.**  
 Are you happy.  
**No. Oh no.**

