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Hither & yon

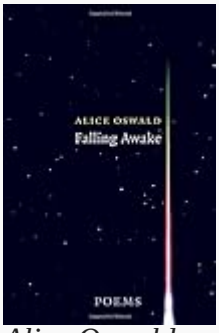
by *William Logan*

On Commotion of the Birds by John Ashbery, Falling Awake by Alice Oswald, Album for the Young (and Old) by Vera Pavlova, Lacunae: 100 Imagined Ancient Love Poems by Daniel Nadler & Fast by Jorie Graham.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE

John Ashbery
Commotion of the Birds: New Poems

Ecco, 112 pages, $22.99

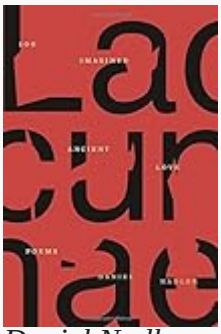


Alice Oswald
Falling Awake: Poems

W. W. Norton & Company, 96 pages, $25.95

Vera Pavlova
Album for the Young (and Old): Poems

Knopf, 136 pages, $27.00

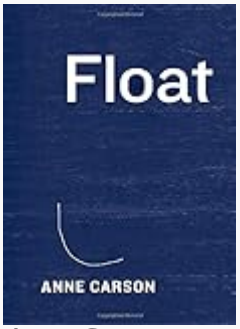


Daniel Nadler
Lacunae: 100 Imagined Ancient Love Poems

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 128 pages, $23.00

Jorie Graham
Fast: Poems

Ecco, 96 pages, $25.99



Anne Carson
Float

Knopf, 272 pages, $30.00

John Ashbery turns ninety this year, an astonishing thing in itself; and the ability of old Puck to write poems as good as those he wrote half a century ago is either testimony to a well-oiled imagination or a revelation that all along he has been writing poems the way a butcher stuffs sausages. The sausages aren't half bad—but I suspect that, like the butcher, the poet doesn't give a hoot what critics think. Or the pigs, for that matter. A typical mid- or late- or later-than-late-Ashbery poem runs like this:

It wasn't always this way.

Somewhere, ants were taking control

of earth's blistered pulse.

Peanuts were jettisoned from the nacelle

of the montgolfière, all moyenâgeux and thrifty

as it came to be about. I ask only for staples

for my staple gun.

How peanuts dumped from a hot-air balloon became medieval is anybody's guess. Those who expect logic or intimacy or the whisper of a point will be confounded by such poems, even with garlic and pepper added.

All along he has been writing poems the way a butcher stuffs sausages.

Commotion of the Birds is Ashbery's umpteenth book since *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1975), still his finest work.[1] His early books (and the occasional outlier later, like *Flow Chart* [1991]) were rip-roaringly avant-garde, but soon he nestled into a cozy absurdist style like a pair of bunny-rabbit slippers.

It's hard to dislike a poet who starts a poem,

We're moving right along through the seventeenth century.

The latter part is fine, much more modern

than the earlier part. Now we have Restoration Comedy.

Webster and Shakespeare and Corneille were fine

for their time but not modern enough,

though an improvement over the sixteenth century

of Henry VIII, Lassus and Petrus Christus, who, paradoxically,

seem more modern than their immediate successors,

Tyndale, Moroni, and Luca Marenzio among them.

Perhaps this is a parody of a witless art historian—or a sneaky way of situating Ashbery's work in a poetic tradition now moribund for many readers. For Webster and Shakespeare and Corneille, read Pound and Eliot and Stevens. Or is it a meditation on the rise of the baroque, a style that might with a little squinching inform Ashbery's own? There are no curlicues without a lot of waste, both in the carving and in the looking. Besides, the double-tongued Ashbery always has one tongue in cheek and one sticking straight out at you. (His chronology is out of whack—Henry VIII and Tyndale were contemporaries; Orlande de Lassus was born a decade after Giambattista Moroni and outlived him; and Petrus Christus painted in the fifteenth century, not the century after.)

You can no more say what an Ashbery poem is about than you can say what a laughing hyena is about. The limits of sense, the tomfoolery that isn't quite foolery, the impending doom that never pends—all the poems are about poetry, more or less. They're like watching a man on a distant breakwater. From his panicky gestures and his leaps and caracoles you know something is terribly wrong, unless he's just rehearsing the fencing scene in *Hamlet*. The tension between the coherence of the parts and the sheer nonsense of the whole has informed Ashbery's career, which puts him in a long line of American charlatans and Ponzi schemers. Imagine a Bizarro World where Ashbery made perfect sense, and Billy Collins and Mary Oliver—the Southeys of our day—were incomprehensible. I'm not sure I'd want to live in that world, but a vacation there would be a relief.

For those who like Ashbery's silliness—delivered with the aw-shucks, gee-willikers grin of a Gomer Pyle flâneur—there are poems enough here. The best have a tale sputtering beneath the surface of comprehension, never to be spoken. Many poems seem a bit more discombobulated than usual, as if the dark matter that once provided invisible glue had dried up. There are too many passages like

(You always need to get somewhere,

civil engine,

some more dumb bunny cheesecake.)

Thanks for having me

slipshod and enjoy

his undistinguished underwear.

Is "dumb bunny cheesecake" a loose reference to *Playboy* centerfolds (those would be Playmates, then, not Playboy bunnies) or just, well, dumb bunny cheesecake? Then again,

Rainbow pencils retracted.

Next, a group of officials withdrew support

of accident forgiveness, and I'm like

Comrade Fuzzy, my gaydar's

gone berserk the way it messes.

If Ashbery's elusiveness, his endless deferral of meaning, is one of the reader's guilty pleasures, the hope that at the end of the next sentence, or the next, all will be explained is here often crushed at the outset.

Poems don't owe us a thing—they don't exist to gratify our idea of what a poem is or should be. Yet in the two thousand pages of poetry Ashbery has published since the title poem of *Self-Portrait*, I can scarcely recall a single poem. That magnificent one-off, as provoking and indelible now as then, was obviously a mistake he decided never to repeat. In his reckless embrace of the folly of life, his love of foreign tongues, his harvest of the slang of the hour ("gaydar," "it went viral," "enuf"), the Old Master of delayed gratification has inherited the spirit of Whitman. You can love Ashbery and find him preposterous. You can hate him and wish he'd never stop.

Alice Oswald's most recent book, Memorial, concocted obituaries for the obscure warriors who died in the Iliad. Her narrow talent burns like a hot needle—it's hard to predict what this quirky poet will do. The book that brought her attention, Dart (2002), followed the course of an English river through the voices of those who lived or worked on its banks. Falling Awake, her new book, is broken into halves, first a group of poems in discomfiting conversation with the natural world, then a long poem on the coming of dawn.2

Oswald has the stunning off-kilter eye possessed by Moore, and Bishop, and Plath:

This is the day the flies fall awake mid-sentence

and lie stunned on the window-sill shaking with speeches

only it isn't speech it is trembling sections of puzzlement which

break off suddenly as if the questioner had been shot

Casting the flies as political hacks should not go unnoticed—but perhaps she means that any

schmuck who gives speeches bears passing resemblance to those Valkyries of the windowsill. Her work displays the long inheritance of nature-obsessed Romantics like Clare and Shelley, and the longer inheritance of the Greeks. Oswald and Anne Carson both trained as classicists.

In acts of description Oswald teases out a nature gorgeous rather than brutish.

The Romantic strain makes her sound at times like Ted Hughes, though in acts of description she teases out a nature gorgeous rather than brutish:

Old scrap-iron foxgloves

rusty rods of the broken woods

what a faded knocked-out stiffness

as if you'd sprung from the horse-hair

of a whole Victorian sofa buried in the

mud down there

or at any rate something dropped from a great height

The natural world is instinct with life, but the poet—like Persephone—finds beneath it the house of the dead: a rotting swan imagines herself "climbing out of her own cockpit"; the badger "shuffling away alive// hard at work/ with the living shovel of himself" cannot know that the dead hear him overhead.

Little raptures of sentiment often trail such meticulous acts of witness; yet it's easy to forget the soft tears when along the way Oswald makes nature so raw and fresh: the lark with a "needle/ pulled through its throat," the dawn that can "fasten the known to the unknown/ with a liquid cufflink," a bat that "swooped in like a pair of leather gloves," and a "flower/ turning its head to the side like a bored emperor." Oswald does more for animals in clothes than anyone since Grandville—when she notices a "fox in her fox-fur," it's hard not to picture Ava Gardner or Joan Crawford.

At home with plants and animals, as Eden was before God snatched up the gobbet of clay, Oswald proves ill at ease in the world beyond nature. "Village" is an updated *Spoon River Anthology* spoken by the living, but gossip about fellow townfolk ("somebody on her knees again not what she was/ somebody screaming again last night being strangled or something") has none of the sympathies evident elsewhere. Oswald's design may be intentionally grim and unforgiving, but something goes dead when she leaves the comforting society of field and wood. Whatever poetic intelligence drives the poems vanishes when she confronts men and women.

"Tithonus," the long poem that closes the book, is divided from the others by a page black on both sides, a leaf of night between the days. Eos, the dawn, asked Zeus to make her lover Tithonus immortal. She was just as ditzy as you imagine, since she forgot to ask for eternal youth—as usual, when a mortal is granted a favor, the god screws him completely. Tithonus grew older and older, but he could not die. None of that makes its way into the poem, a moment-by-moment account—or "performance," as the poet has it—of the coming of dawn. Each page has been dressed with a vertical scale, down which the verse has been spaced according to some obscure system of pauses.

Mostly the poem confines itself to half-thoughts and observations as night hardens into day. (Two facing pages, blank except for the scale, end with a simple "Etc.") In the stirrings and rustlings that accompany the shift to the crepuscular, the animal world steals from the human. Whether it's the wood doves who "start up litigations in the trees" or a lark that "in a prayer-draught/ shakes the air," Oswald loves this mingling of realms. Though the "performance" is rather stillborn, her devilish turns of phrase make an outdoor concerto of bird and bug noise. In her introductory note, the poet explains that the poem starts "when the sun is six degrees below the horizon, and stops 46 minutes later, at sunrise." When she reads the piece, it takes exactly that long. It could be read in jig time—if you're offered a ticket, you might consider watching paint dry instead.

We're in no danger of returning to the Fifties, when so many poems dragged in Achilles or Odysseus, Orpheus or Narcissus, or some other refugee from *Bulfinch's Mythology*. Nevertheless, it's not the worst thing to be reminded of the Greek antiquity to which we owe so much, the lost world that has never quite vanished. It rises in ghostly fashion in our museums, our architecture, in the metaphors of psychology, as it has risen in a weary string of Hollywood blockbusters.

Translation is a bugger. A competent line-by-line rendering of the Iliad will give the reader without ancient Greek the gist of the original. The losses of meaning may not be minor; but the losses of music, tone, and force (form is always force) will be almost crippling—translation can do only so much, and that so much usually gives no more than the ghostly outline of the original. Pushkin is famously untranslatable. Joseph Brodsky in English, even in poems he translated himself, sounds like a man with a wooden ear or two. (I make an exception for the very few poems translated by Hecht, and Heaney, and Walcott, none of whom had Russian.)

Vera Pavlova is a Russian poet, librettist, and music scholar now living in Toronto. She writes short poems, really no more than squibs—stray observations, snippets of faux wisdom, winsome notes about clouds and children. *Album for the Young (and Old)*, her second book in English, was translated by her late husband, Steven Seymour; at times an air of melancholy hangs over the poems, suggesting a foreknowledge that poetry could not assuage.3

Pavlova manages to capture the odd unlikelihood and quiet horror of children's play:

Guess what me, Inna, Katia, and Rita

were doing yesterday at the playground!

We were playing the Crucifixion. I was

Jesus the Saver. They called me

all kinds of names, like “dumbhead,” “idiot,”

whipped me with nettles about my legs,

beat me manually and with a stick, then

tied me to the cross with a skipping rope.

A foreknowledge that poetry could not assuage.

The innocence of the opening, the sublime mishearing of “Jesus the Saver” (I wonder what the phrase was in Russian), the attempt to reproduce the Passion with a child’s limited resources (nettles for scourges, skipping rope for nails)—these reveal the darkness beneath childhood. That the children are ignorant of the implications of their play contributes to the sense of unease.

At times Pavlova sidles toward the Russian past that long went unmentioned except in whispers. A grandmother keeps alive memory of the terrible days after the Revolution with a protective wryness. Her favorite toy was a rag doll: “I called her Nell./ Eyes with lashes. Pleated hair. A skirt with frills./ In nineteen twenty-one we ate her. She was/ stuffed with bran. A whole cupful of bran.” Elsewhere:

“It was a famine, for months and months we had

no bread at all, I have no idea what we lived on,

but for some strange reason my tiny legs were plump.

‘Mommy, let’s cut them off, cook them, and eat them.’ ”

“She laughs joyously as she tells it,” the poet remarks. That’s the nervous laugh of a survivor.

Unfortunately, few poems in this long book of short poems possess such darkened passions. Pavlova’s sugar-coated wittering and Shirley Temple–dimpled mien infect even subjects more adult.

All summer winds come from the sea,

all winter snows come from mountain caps.

If you expand your soul to the limit,

you will discover: space has no bounds.

Apart from the meteorological defects, this cutesy twaddle might have been dropped by some dime-store guru. Or consider: "Sulking is ugly! Instead/ why don't you learn / to say thank you/ in every tongue that exists." Or: "Honest, I do not miss my childhood, cross my heart./ I wonder if my childhood misses me, if only a bit." Or: "lawn please forgive me/ only one leaf of your grass/ will be a bookmark." Readers with high cholesterol or high blood-pressure should not go near this book.

Patches of unconvincing translation turn up, like "What fun it is to be feasting,/ stooped up in the dark!" *Stooped up*? ("Curled up" or "crouched" would probably come closer to the mark.) In a poem about chess, the "Four-knight debut" should surely be the "Four Knights opening." (I suspect the word mistranslated is *debyut*.) There are many lines no doubt better in Russian—among them, "the unhatched breasts painfully itched." The problems, however, run deeper than translation. Had Little Miss Muffet grown up to write poems, they could not have been more tooth-grindingly precious.

In these days of vanishing attention spans, the merciless distractions of media, and flash fiction, why not flash poetry? There's a long tradition of short poems in other languages; and some of the greatest modern English poems are miniatures, so well known their authors don't need to be named: "I never lost as much but twice," "Down by the Salley Gardens," "In a Station of the Metro," "Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries," "Fire and Ice," "The Red Wheelbarrow," and of course "Poetry" in its final and most memorable version.

Short poems often come in gouts, a form of repetition compulsion. When Lowell started scribbling a handful of sonnets a day, poetry became an obsessive act of elation. Daniel Nadler's first book, *Lacunae: 100 Imagined Ancient Love Poems*, is a stampede of shorts, the great majority half a dozen lines or fewer.[4] Love poems, those invitations to suffering, often seem in translation a gallery of clichés (the poems in Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, for instance, come badly into English). Whether Nadler's subtitle is meant to suggest that the poems are fictive strays from the *Greek Anthology* or phony Sapphic fragments from the waste dumps of Oxyrhynchus, they look about as ancient as a Grecian urn that spent yesterday on the shelves at Walmart.

Nadler has something of a talent for similes, as well as a taste for soft-focus romance and the American folk wisdom varnished onto wooden plaques and hung in dry-cleaning shops. Much of the book might be called a paean to the simile, the little brother of metaphor rarely given the respect its big brother commands. I know poets who loathe similes, though Homer did pretty well by them, and a lot of poets since have shown how subtly they can be employed. Even good figures, however, may come to bad ends:

As you sleep

the early sky is colored

in fish scales, and you open your eyes

like a street

already lined with fruit.

The striking metaphor for a mackerel sky is weakened by the extravagant nonsense that follows. It's not that Nadler thinks in platitudes, not exactly—it's that he's a true believer in the soppiest kind of puppy love: "You are as happy as a waterwheel/ when the earth is flooding," "I waited for you like vines around a house that was never built," "My lips are shy,/ like a candle that will not flicker." These would be no better had they been inked onto papyrus two millennia back. Too many sentences drag a simile behind them like an anchor, which is unhappy if you're a trireme, disastrous if you're Leander. It's hard to imagine these phrases exciting a lover to passion; but you should wait for the Hollywood version, preferably with Angelina Jolie in peplos and Al Pacino in chiton.

Nadler is a true believer in the soppiest kind of puppy love.

There are occasions when Nadler's poems possess the ghost of an idea, but he has no ear for his absurdities: "Beside you I sleep with difficulty—/ a cherry rolling along the stem of its thought" (how a cherry rolls along a stem is beyond me). Or: "Your dark breasts glow,/ the pan crackles"—this might have been like Pound's Chinese had the juxtaposition (as if the breasts were just waiting to be grilled) not been eyerollingly silly. Whenever Nadler starts the heavy breathing, the poems go all to hell: "Need I open a sky / to find the last soft shame/ in your nakedness?," "Between kisses the air is quiet,/ like trees after a snowfall. Talking softly, after,/ a branch is shaken loose."

It's an axiom that the would-be profound is often ridiculous:

Sister, the terror

at this immense nudity of unknowing

will in time subside

like a sea burying a billion colored corals with its name.

This immense nudity of unknowing? That the poet is referring to a baby is no excuse.

Islands are pronounced by the ocean without bubbles.

Sometimes the ocean chokes on an island

as it tries to take it back;

these are left alone.

Perhaps such lines pass for wisdom in Silicon Valley or its rivals (Nadler is ceo of the Cambridge startup Kensho, which specializes in data analytics), but they look like rejects from the Hallmark Cards R & D lab out in Kansas. A poet who traffics in fake *sententiae* not surprisingly adores lugubrious guff like "Leave me the moon/ to reflect certainty/ the way a child's face reflects its mother" and "I crystallized my eyes with the liquor of the seed I planted in my mouth./ I cut my destiny in two and kept the heavier one." The jacket copy calls the book an "exercise in poetics of vital import."

Jorie Graham's new book, Fast, is a very slow read—it hurts to make the joke.5 Ages ago, in Erosion (1983) and The End of Beauty (1987), her darkly allusive poems, embedded in the long history of western culture, showed a deep and insinuating eye for nature. Their dramatic juxtapositions fed on lush imagery. Not until Materialism (1993) did the poetry begin to suffer from grandiosity—long passages of Plato, Wittgenstein, Brecht, and Jonathan Edwards were posted between poems like manifestos. As her subjects became the Great Issues of the Day, the style degraded into a twitchy, obsessive record of thought, not a stream but a stuttering of consciousness, like Joyce without brains:

Ode to Prism. Aria. Untitled. Wait. I wait.

Have you found me yet. Here at my screen, can you make me

out? Make me out. All other exits have been

sealed. See me or we will both vanish.

We need emblematic subjectivities. Need targeted

acquiescence. Time zones. This is

the order of the day. To be visited secretly. To

be circled and canceled. I cover my

face.

Emblematic subjectivities? *Targeted acquiescence*? At times Graham writes like a Ph.D. in Theory Theory. A few lines cannot convey the dreariness of the whole, every page like a midnight talk-show fading in and out on a car radio. Whatever subject she turns to, whether the ecological collapse of the oceans or the definition of the human, the result is frenzied and mind-numbing.

Graham has become queen of run-on thought, her poems now no more than phrases strung along the line, with punctuation for clothespins. Her books continue to be visited by outbreaks of bizarre punctuation, and *Fast* will be no disappointment to virologists—the new poems are frequently infested by little arrows (Times New Roman, the colophon helpfully informs us) apparently meant to speed the reader's eye from phrase to phrase.

another mind, prefigured by drones~~al~~gorithms~~im~~age

vectors~~di~~stributive consciousness~~hu~~manoid

roboticsw~~h~~at is required now→

is~~a~~→demarcationw~~h~~at is *artificial*→

technological end-times now only just

beginning~~al~~ong the watchtowersp~~l~~easures

of nihilism, speechlessness,

incredulity→

The lines seem to have stumbled into a museum devoted to the martyrdom of St. Sebastian. Nothing ties the tsunami of phrases together except the big-box themes. Graham is good at drift-netting the stray divagations of thought (the semblance is at best counterfeit), but the writing cannot escape the misery of detours within detours. At one point she gives her credit-card number and expiration date. The reader may be tempted to use them.

Every stratagem to hold the attention—freakish punctuation, uneven leading, juddering line-breaks, shifting margins—only distracts the reader further from what she has to say. Poems that resort to language like "plastic-laden ocean," "a post industrial cock or a derivative/ cunt," "Chemsex," and "death in hyperdrive" need all the help they can get. The language is so desiccated, so lacking in rendering, so removed from the pleasure of words that an attempted bit of wordplay is almost too embarrassing to quote: "But what if I only want to subtract. It's too abstract. I have no contract. Cannot enact impact/ interact. Look: the mirrored eye of the fly, so matter of fact."

Graham has come to treat crumbs of basic science with a fan-girl's awe:

Teasing out the possible linkages I—no you—

who noticed—if the world—no—

the world if—take plankton—I feel I cannot

love anymore—take plankton—that

love is reserved for an other kind of existence—

take plankton—that such an

existence is a form of porn now—no—what

am I saying—take plankton—it

is the most important plant on earth—think

love—composes at least half

the biosphere's entire primary production—

Nothing ties the tsunami of phrases together except the big-box themes.

The private here seems ill at ease with the public. These new poems possess the empty urgency and vacant mutterings of a stranger's deranged cellphone conversation. Graham's world is always in crisis, but poetry remains a terrible medium for ideas. (Hers offer nothing not already plastered on op-ed pages.) The exceptions are poems on her aging mother and dying father, as well as on her own bout with cancer. The airless and harrowing style has unfortunately removed every dreg of emotion—and the poems are never warmed by the whisper of mortality at the edges:

you earthling—awaiting your biochip—

they are taking tranches of the body which is

one—which has been one all of my life—

can you hear me, he says, squeeze this if problems

arise he says, ok? ready? *if if if if*

if yes if yes—here's this to worship—*hi hi hi hi*—

hi hi high high—

That's inside an mri scanner, with sound effects.

As Graham's style collapsed, she started writing books devoted to the big picture, with titles like *The Errancy*, *Swarm*, *Never*, and *Overlord*, which could have been straight-to-video horror films. When you've won the Pulitzer, the MacArthur, and a raft of other prizes, you may imagine that

whatever you write is flawed only by its brilliance. I admire the poet's resolve and even her desperation; but the endless blithering and the dense pages of scat-writing confirm the other signs. One of the major talents of the Eighties has become an old bore.

Anne Carson's eerie, sometimes creepy poems confound expectation—they may confound others things as well, like the reader. Her latest project, Float, consists of twenty-two chapbooks jammed into a clear plastic case, meant to be read in no particular order.6 It's an idea, like many of Carson's, at once compelling and daft. The obvious question, "Why shouldn't the reader take control of his reading?" may be answered by a question, "Who the devil cares?" If subjected to enhanced interrogation (that place where critical theory and the cia meet), Carson would probably declare the reader, not the author, the final arbiter of order. She may eventually hand out bags of shredded paper, a single word on each scrap of confetti, the reader to organize them as he likes.

Over the past two decades, Carson has become one of the most inspired and infuriating of poets. The idiosyncratic designs of her work—the oddball premises, the even odder presentations—have produced one of the most important millennial poems, *Nox*, as well as a hurrah's nest of dilettantish fiddle-faddle. If the reader feels that critical essays have no place in a book of poems, Carson has found the place here. (Think of the even more radical strategy of Lowell inserting the memoir "91 Revere Street" into *Life Studies*.) Some of these chapbooks are poems, some are lectures, some are—well, I'm not sure what to call them: Carsonograms, perhaps.

Carson loves to mess with the reader's expectations. The poetry is as ever elliptical, irritating, uncanny, and frequently as mechanical as one of Yves Tanguy's contraptions. There's a goofy list-poem called "Eras of Yves Klein" ("The Era of One-Minute Fire Paintings," "The Era of Being Flattered by Camus"); and another on the Cycladic people ("To the Cycladic people is ascribed the invention of the handbag," "The Cycladic people were very fond of Proust"). There's also a series of increasingly deranged translations of a short lyric by Ibykos, the sixth-century B.C. Greek—the first is more or less literal, but those following are limited to the vocabulary of Donne's "Woman's Constancy," or Brecht's fbi file, or the instruction manual for a microwave: "bubbling,/ spattering,/ accompanied by you rubbing your hands together,/ without venting the plastic wrap." One uses just the "stops and signs from the London Underground":

Nay rather, like the seven sisters

gardening in the British Museum,

accompanied by penalties,

tooting,

turnpiked,

hackneyed,

Kentish,

cockfostered,

I am advised to expect delays all the way to the loo.

The translations are hilarious, but you wonder if Ibykos might not be justified in rising up and strangling Carson in her sleep. She treats poems like an Erector Set—sometimes she makes something you'd never have thought possible, sometimes she leaves a jumble of gears and girders on the floor.

The most interesting piece in this gallimaufry of chapbooks is the essay from which those translations come, "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent" (a typically droll Carson joke), a knowing discussion of the silence of absence (as in Sappho's fragments) and the silence of the untranslatable (Homer's moly or the Bible's apple). She might have added the accidental silence of the *hapax legomenon*, or the silence of the familiar word used in an unrecorded way, or the complete muteness of a language like Linear A. Those are all problems of translation. Carson's arguments are more teasing than convincing. (Who else would write an essay on Homer, Godard, and Bardot?) She says of moly and other words only gods know,

> Linguists like to see in these names traces of some older layer of Indo-European preserved in Homer's Greek. However that may be, when he invokes the language of gods Homer usually tells you the earthly translation also. Here he does not. He wants this word to fall silent. . . . What does this word hide?

That Carson's poems don't seem like poetry is their claim on the poetic.

Moly, Carson suggests, might conceal the gods' secret knowledge of immortality. This makes a great deal of Homer's failure to provide a translation, though that failure is an old scholarly crux—it's possible that he didn't need to, that everyone in Homer's day knew what moly was, even if the herbal knowledge was later lost. (The plant is thought by many scholars to have been the snowdrop.) What the gods alone possess, she fails to say, is matched by what humans alone possess—they live knowing death awaits them.

This poet is always worth arguing with—she states in the same essay that the French word "cliché" was "assumed into English unchanged, partly because using French words makes English-speakers feel more intelligent." The word strolled into English as a technical word in printing, not because English speakers were ga-ga for French, but because there was no English word available. ("Stereotype" was also printer's French.) When she claims in one poem that the Phoenicians, after inventing the alphabet, wrote on the "back/ of/ envelopes," you know she's kidding—unless she means the hollow clay envelopes, precursors of the written tablet, that held tokens used to keep track of a merchant's cargo. When she remarks about the sonnet, however, that "your eye enjoys it

in a ratio of eight to five," you wonder about her math skills. Despite their weirdness, her sonnets mostly employ the normal Petrarchan octet and sestet.

Carson's poems are designed rather than driven—indeed, they're cold as a row of marble columns. That they don't seem like poetry is their claim on the poetic. She herself has an abstract relation to the world—it's no surprise that she likes Iceland. Despite her sometimes wearisome games, emotion still struggles forth, the more powerful for having been resisted. Carson's a slant poet. Emily Dickinson was another.

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1 *Commotion of the Birds*, by John Ashbery; Ecco, 100 pages, $22.99.

2 *Falling Awake*, by Alice Oswald; Norton, 83 pages, $25.95.

3 *Album for the Young (and Old)*, by Vera Pavlova, translated by Steven Seymour; Knopf, 136 pages, $27.

4 *Lacunae: 100 Imagined Ancient Love Poems*, by Daniel Nadler; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 113 pages, $23.

5 *Fast*, by Jorie Graham; Ecco, 86 pages, $25.99.

6 *Float*, by Anne Carson; Knopf, 272 pages (twenty-two chapbooks, boxed), $30.

William Logan's latest collection of criticism, *Broken Ground: Poetry and the Demon of History*, was published in spring 2021 by Columbia University Press.

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