

AN UNFLINCHING GAZE: THE POETIC ART OF HENRY CARLILE

By Eleanor Berry

This spring Henry Carlile's fourth book of poetry is being issued by Carnegie Mellon University Press. Called simply *Oregon*, it follows three earlier books spaced about a decade apart: *The Rough-Hewn Table* (1971), *Running Lights* (1981), and *Rain* (1994).

This relatively slow pace of book publication suggests an exacting art. When I discovered Carlile's two earlier books in the Oregon Poetry Collection at the Oregon State Library. I was glad to be able to take my time with the poems. They seem distillations of long looking, still longer reflection, and deliberate weighing of phrase and line.

The first book takes its title from the last line of a poem called "The Job." This poem speaks directly to anyone who has doubted the work he or she felt driven to do. It dramatizes self-doubt as a double, "Wearing your look, speaking your speech." "At one point he comes simply to ask, why bother?" When this intruder finally leaves,

You remove the cotton from your ears
And return to that unfinished perfectly useless whatever-
It-was-you-were-about-to-do-before-he-called which lies
Where you left it, impossible, urgent and necessary
On the rough-hewn table lost among mountains and waterfalls.

While this scene will be familiar to anyone trying to pursue a self-chosen vocation, it is particularly apt to the situation of the poet in the Pacific Northwest.

Born in San Francisco, Henry Carlile grew up in the Pacific Northwest and has lived here ever since, studying at the University of Washington and then teaching for many years at Portland State University, from which he retired in 2003. Through lifelong residence, he has developed a deeply affectionate familiarity with the wild animals and plants of this region, but the poems suggest a less comfortable relationship with the human society around him.

Among the poems of Carlile's second book are several that show sympathy to a quirky resistance to prevailing social norms, like that of "The Bird Man of Redmond," who "will not be told / the rock-crusher's legal weight, / or why the courts consider / the rights of birds worth less / than gravel or money."

The poet's identification with such resisters is most evident in one of my favorite of his poems, "Go Study the Spots on a Daffodil." As the poem opens, the quotation that constitutes its title is revealed to have been an ironic jibe from a friend. The poet explains why he doesn't do what the friend implies he should:

I don't want to write about racial insults,
the poverty of the poor, a poetry of larger
social consciousness, because I have been poor
and insulted, and it's a relief, after all,
in the time I have left, to look at flowers[.]

Instead, he declares, "I'll write / ... what / I have always written out of love and necessity."

However, Carlile's poetry does not ignore a social world far from the aesthetic enclave of the university. His first book opens with a vivid portrait of a woman whom I take to be his grandmother, evoking the squalid, hard-pressed conditions of her life. In his second collection, two poems are addressed to the poet's Cuban-born father, who deserted his wife and young son: "And if I miss // You now I miss for both of us. At two, / A small imperfect replica of you."

Common to all the poems is the attentiveness of the poet's gaze, directed both outward and inward. It is unflinching, and it recognizes that the cost of sight can sometimes be no less than sight itself. As in "Narcissus: A Notebook," a long meditative sequence at the end of his first book, Carlile's gaze sees at once violent destruction and golden renewal.