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Loy Gunn Cupid

Joshua Weiner

Spring of 1989 I had the good luck to work as the T.A. in Thom Gunn's modern poetry course at Berkeley. Thom's lectures, like his critical essays, were probing, exacting, direct, dry, turned by wit, honed by good sense, and full of surprising insight at all points—in truth, much like his poems. The students, some fifty or so, sat alert twice a week for ninety minutes, and wrote down what Gunn said. They knew they were getting the goods. We started with Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, H. D., and Marianne Moore. I was super excited about half-way through the semester when Gunn brought copies of Mina Loy's poems to class—she was long out of print. I knew her work only from brief quotations in "Three Hard Women," Gunn's essay on her, Moore, and H. D. published the year before, and a few pages each by Yvor Winters, Kenneth Rexroth, and before them, Pound. One page Gunn distributed contained the first four poems of Loy's notorious "Love Songs" (as the sequence was known from its first publication in the inaugural 1915 issue of the little magazine, *Others*).

I

Spawn of Fantasies
Silting the appraisable
Pig Cupid his rosy snout
rooting erotic garbage
"Once upon a time"
Pulls a weed white star-topped
Among wild oats sown in mucous-membrane

I would an eye in a Bengal light
Eternity in a sky-rocket
Constellations in an ocean
Whose rivers run no fresher
Than a trickle of saliva

These are suspect places

I must live in my lantern
Trimming subliminal flicker
Virginal to the bellows
of Experience
Coloured glass

Gunn took his time reading the poem aloud. He had a wonderful reading voice—soft, warm, but flat, with a finely reined in affect, and clean at the acoustic edges of the words. The practice he had put into finding a level of projection for his own poems that conveyed a trust in the language itself to make its impact—this vocal style, as plain and modest and effective as his writing, made his reading aloud of difficult modernist poems especially useful to students, who often felt, when Gunn read to them, as if they were hearing the poems for the first time. Much of the effect relied on Gunn's intuitive timing, the way he read rhythm and syntax like a kind of

counterpoint against the meter, articulating subtle hesitations: it infused the poem with the sound of spontaneous speech, which woke up students' ears.

This is surely the first erotic effect of poetry, the aural one; the first penetration that awakens desire for more, it floats through the ear canal, one of the "passages of joy," that Gunn alludes to (borrowed from Samuel Johnson) in the title of his book of poems from 1982. But Loy's "Songs to Joannes" (their original title)—"the best since Sappho," she bragged—if their acoustics arouse our ears to poetry, their subject of failed and frustrated love bites hard with satire and what Gunn calls "a quite unforced indignation at the comedy of male complacency, and not incidentally exploration of new poetic material, of which the potential excites her as a writer." The erotics of language condensed into an arousing music is even more fully charged, in Loy's poem, by the anti-erotic subject, Loy's sharpened tongue, and her edgy point of view.

Gunn lingered in his discussion of the poem on that opening image of Pig Cupid with his snout in the sexual trash. He delighted in Loy's Ovidian invention that turns the god of love from a mischievous archer into swine, sniffing through fairytale fantasies where sexual energies and feelings are sublimated and hidden. Gunn lead the students through the poem line by line, taking care to sound out the caesura marked by interlineal spacing which add so subtly to the drama of cognition and feeling. Students could hear the slant rhyme between *Pig* and the second syllable in *Cupid*; the assonance and consonance in "rosy snout / rooting erotic garbage."

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Smith to post-punk feminism.*

They could hear how the musicality crossed senses to become pungent, how Loy activated the smell of sex through sound. Gunn matched Loy's own frankness about the body in glossing "mucous-membrane." He demonstrated how to read Loy, not just at the level of prosody, but through image and statement—the way she juxtaposes imagistic fragments that build a tension released in direct address distilling its mysteries:

These are suspect places.

Suspect because female sexuality, and female desire, are kept under wraps. These places are in Loy's own mind, where sexual attachment is prone to be romanticized:

I would an eye in a Bengal light

—she *would* what, exactly?—Gunn asked the rhetorical question knowing most students wouldn't have the temerity to speak up in the lecture hall. The incomplete phrase, a conventional ellipsis commonly heard in Elizabethan poetry, is the sound of the virginal self, absorbed in subliminal fantasy, hiding out from Experience, a bellows that intensifies the fire of life and produces the colored glass of the visionary: she would *have* such an eye herself, such an organ of powerful perception, if only she dared. She must dare! There would be no P. J. Harvey without Mina Loy—she trail-blazed a way forward that leads through Patti Smith to post-punk feminism.

Students walked out of that lecture with an understanding of how Loy's poetry worked and the

effect it had when it showed up on the magazine stands in 1915; that as much as readers were shocked by the clinical candor, they were even more unsettled by the idea that a woman could write with such bodily revelation and social condemnation. If the poems survived their own condemning by the public, followed by the public's subsequent neglect over decades, it's because they are honest, they sound great, and they make fun of social pretensions. People say they don't like them, but then they want to read them. This rare combination of gag and savor is no doubt the reason why we've been re-discovering Mina Loy's poems since the nineteen-teens. You could deride them in the town square, and enjoy them in your room—they were, in this sense, a kind of poetry porn: sexual, feminist, charged with psyche, devoid of cant; hard, sharp, cold; disabused and disabusing. (Later that afternoon, when I asked Thom what he thought of the idea of my writing my dissertation on Loy, he said, "Oh, yes, you'll get into all kinds of trouble." He signed on as director the next week.)

Loy's appeal to Gunn was no surprise. In addition to being an Anglo transplant on American soil, the two—born nearly fifty years apart—share an unusual combination of candor and tact. Gunn disliked the melodramatic strain he heard in the poems of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, their "poetic" self-aggrandizing, though I believe he sympathized with their need to counter a social myth of female passivity. What he admired in Loy was the intensity of her aggression against artistic and social convention, tempered by a steely wit. She liked having sex with men, and she was explicit about it. But she also busted balls, such as the big ones hanging on the misogynist and proto-fascist Futurist, F. T. Marinetti, a lover and something of an early mentor of hers. At the same time as she's direct in her attack, Loy approaches her subjects from oblique angles of figurative thinking that is never gratuitous, but energized by insights into the actual. Where Eliot's Prufrock is locked in the solipsistic fantasy of his "Love Song," Loy's "Love Songs" detonate the binding double-standards of gender with bristling linguistic originality, and an intensity amplified by her restraint, the iron control of her wit, which relies on precision. But her satire is directed at both men and women, and might be another reason she often slipped from view—if you take her entire, she's not going to fit into your political program. She's an equal opportunity iconoclast. Her poems, says Gunn in an interview, "are clever, and they are unkind, and they are difficult—and people don't like that . . . She must have been a great deal of fun to be around."

Ten years later, Gunn published what was to be his last book, *Boss Cupid* (2000). However differently Gunn plays with the figure of the god, it was impossible not to hear his debt to Loy in the title, or, for that matter, in one of the book's poems, "The Problem," wherein Gunn names Cupid as a kind of crime boss who presides over a mob of "red-haired errand boys," one of whom Gunn is making it with, in a converted Central Park West brownstone, circa 1961. Just as Loy depicts herself, in her "Love Songs," on the losing end of amore, so Gunn, too, in this poem, has some poignant fun at his own expense. After their "self-delighting" love-tussle—"almost like fighting"—gives way to a kind of draw, Gunn sees in post-coital relaxation, on a scrap of blackboard hanging in the room, a math problem written in chalk, "still incomplete." His pick-up, he discovers, is a grad student in math, studying to become a teacher. While the problem

————— Weiner continued on page 27



on the blackboard stubbornly eludes the student, Gunn feels the boy's "true passion cyphered in chalk beyond my reach." Yes, there are at least two problems facing Gunn in the room: for the student, the unreachable solution to the math problem; and for Gunn, the preoccupied student, whose intellectual passion, the "true passion," puts him, in a sense, beyond Gunn's reach (the cliché, "beyond reach," is ironically turned and revived by the physical proximity, the rough-and-tumble physical intimacy they've shared).

The whole book feels governed by this spirit of Cupid as tough guy. The vigor of Loy's vision of the god as pig, which likely leant Gunn the suggestion for his own invention, joins an even more complex influence, that of Fulke Greville, whose late sixteenth century sequence, *Callica*, express complaints against fickle Cupid with a rigorous intellectual and carnal intensity. In Gunn's *Boss Cupid*, for example, Eros fuels the grief of "a young novelist," who loses his lover to AIDS, a bewilderment Gunn connects to the boyhood loss of this mother to suicide; he is present in the jealousy the partner of another friend feels toward Gunn from his death-bed; he's there, in the rape of Arethusa; and in the verse essay on Rimbaud, "the marvellous boy," who jerks off an older poet under a café table; and we find him in the majestic communal history, "Saturday Night," that elegizes "our Dionysian experiment / to build a city never dared before," an experiment flagrant in the bathhouse known as "The Barracks," which will catch fire and burn down, but not before sliding into a preliminary ruin of drugs and dereliction. The book's last section ups the ante considerably by opening with "Troubadour: Songs for Jeffrey Dahmer"—a sequence that makes the most of psychosis as expression of obsessive love pushed to its darkest logical conclusion: the literal ingestion of the beloved. But Gunn, ever cunning and attuned to the contradictory but mutually inspired impulses of eros and thanatos, of sacred and profane, plots the counterweight by ending the book with "Dancing David," the Hebrew king whose figure becomes embodiment of "the final leap" into the ultimate unknown passage, a leap powered by Eros in the physical form of Abishag. A pubescent girl "sweet to the point of sharpness" and "present in the God-dance," she lies down as a concubine with the elderly king to share her warmth with him, who can no longer generate his own heat.

The final image, the final improvisation. This leap across the mortal divide, powered by Eros, captures a fundamental value running through Gunn's poetry, the idea of sexual energy as an anarchic force that nonetheless pulls people together, connects them, gives their lives meaning, creates new life, and governs how we live the life we have. Nowhere is the subject more poignantly treated than in a poem from *Boss Cupid*, "To Cupid," a poem in praise of the god that seems to me to join the earlier poems so central to Gunn's

body of work (and so far receiving scant discussion in critical quarters).

You make desire seem easy.
So it is:
Your service perfect freedom to enjoy
Fresh limitations. I've watched you in person
Wait for the light and relish the delay
Revvng the engine up before you spurt
Out of the intersection.

There is humor here—the notion of Cupid in a hotrod, the staging of that "spurt" at the end of the line—coupled with comprehension of: desire as instinct, desire as freedom and limitation. Gunn turns then to the delicious paradox of how we keep ourselves from the objects of our desire in order to increase that feeling of desire (as if the feeling were itself the object).

How all your servants
Compose their amorous scripts—scripts of
confinement,
Scripts of displacement, scripts of delay, and
scripts
Of more delay.

The exemplar here of such delay is Fabrice, the uncertain hero of Stendahl's *Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), who, having escaped imprisonment, returns to the prison room in order to see again from the vantage of its barred window the jailer's daughter, with whom he has fallen madly in love. "Of course," writes Gunn, "they could not touch. In later life / They touched, they did touch, but in darkness only." Then Gunn switches off his light, to enter his own darkness of sleep, alone; but before he falls into it, he hears

The pleasant sound of voices from next door
Through windows open to the clement darkness.
A dinner for the couple one floor up,
Married today. I hardly had the time
before falling away, to relish it,
The sociable human hum, easy and quiet
As the first raindrops in the yard, on bushes,
Heard similarly from bed. Chatting, the sounds
Of friendliness and feeding often broken
By laughter. It's consoling, Mr. Love,
That such conviviality is also
One more obedience to your behest,
The wedding bed held off by the wedding feast.

Good will within delay within good will.
And Cupid, devious master of our bodies,
You were the source then of my better rest.

One of the great love poets in English, Gunn here envisions Eros as the force that creates not only the charged bond between two individuals, but between everyone in the human community, where

"the wedding bed" is "held off by the wedding feast." Such "conviviality," such *living with*, is also Cupid's charm; and the intensity of Gunn's insight is to find in Cupid's energy not just the expected arousal, but the source of "better rest." (The soft acoustic effect of the triple-rhyme at the end—behest / feast / rest—creates that gentle finality, like a quietly spoken blessing.) It is a moving and convincing paradox, human and humane, to tap the *agape* running through the erotic.

But for Gunn, such paradox is not a final culminating notion. The erotic, the sexual drive, he writes a few pages later, in "A Wood Near Athens," is "ridiculous, ridiculous / And it is our main meaning."

At some point

A biological necessity
Brought such a pressure on the human mind,
This concept floated from it—of a creator
Who made up matter, an imperfect world,
Solely to have an object for his love.

Beautiful and ridiculous. We say:
Love makes the shoots leap from the blunted
branches,
Love makes birds call, and maybe we are right.
Love then makes craning saplings crowd for
light,
The weak being jostled off to shade and death.
Love makes the cuckoo heave its foster-siblings
Out of the nest, to spatter on the ground.
For love has gouged a temporary hollow
Out of its baby-back, to help it kill.

If love can help us imagine a kind of communal heaven, it can also be a kind of biological hell. The truth, as Blake would have it, is in their marriage: "Without contraries," he writes, "[there] is no progression." Progression towards what, one might ask. Perhaps, towards *comprehension*. Gunn approaches Blake in having brought to life in his poetry this never-ending dialectic, a tense opposition that we *all* live. If we feel it, we are not always aware of what we feel. Gunn's poetry helps us understand how we are caught in a kind of endless work here on earth, in our bodies; how Cupid, our devious master, inspires us, in our earth-bound generational tangle, to imagine the angels above us, caught up in a performance "together, wings outstretched" where "they sang and played / The intellect as powerhouse of love."

Joshua Weiner is the author of three books of poetry, including The Figure of a Man Being Swallowed by a Fish (2013). His Berlin Notebook, prose about the refugee crisis in Europe, was published in 2016 by the Los Angeles Review of Books, and funded by a Guggenheim Fellowship. He lives in Washington D.C. and teaches at the University of Maryland.

It's then I like your chanter-pipe,
John Anderson, my jo.

When ye come on before, John,
See that ye do your best;
When ye begin to haud me,
See that ye grip me fast;
See that ye grip me fast, John,
Until that I cry "Oh!"
Your back shall crack or I do that,
John Anderson, my jo.

John Anderson, my jo, John,
Ye're welcome when ye please;
It's either in the warm bed

Or else aboon the claes:
Or ye shall hae the horns, John,
Upon your head to grow;
An' that's the cuckold's mallison,
John Anderson, my jo.

What's noteworthy about Burns's new version is how he keeps the basic framework of the dirty original: an aging husband and his wife's lament. With the two poems side-by-side, one is even tempted to suspect a lewd slant to the "mony a canty day" mentioned in the final stanza of the clean version. This is not to mention that the second stanza of the dirty original is itself probably as tender and touching a description of erectile dysfunction,

as our language possesses. While it is certainly true that, "Burns appears to have been one of the most important bowdlerizers and expurgators of folksong, on a wholesale basis, of whom any record exists," he had perhaps a fonder love for the dirty originals than did any other censor, and could see beneath some comically lewd hectoring a substrate of tenderness.

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