

All That Held Us

by Henrietta Goodman

Winner of the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry
Selected by Kate Daniels

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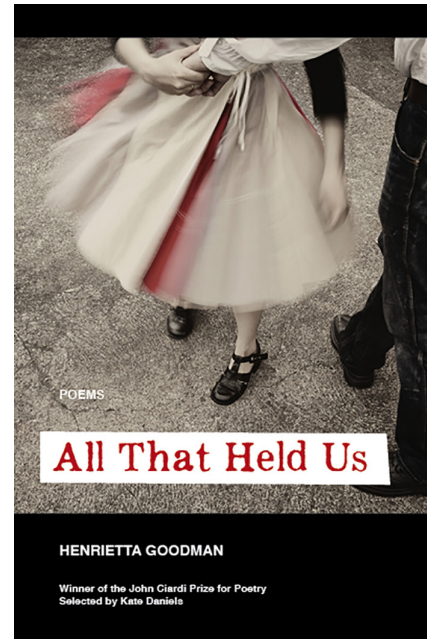
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INTERVIEW BY MARIE MAYHUGH

QUESTION: In the first half of your book, a few poems concern a girl pondering her sexual experiences. The speaker questions whether they were about love or promiscuity, and in the poem “Think of the Window to a Room, the Space,” the speaker confesses her feelings after her wedding night with, “I stripped her off/gave her away/called her liar.” Is this because she did not truly enjoy the experience? Do you feel no matter who the woman is, that her first experience will end with feelings of doubt, shame, or displeasure?

ANSWER: This is a complicated question, because “Think of the Window...” isn’t really about the loss of virginity; it’s about the very weird experience of bleeding on my wedding night despite not being a virgin at all (“...Could blood spring from the mind, and flow / from the body, a phantom hymen ripped / by force of—what?...”). That’s why the poem earlier references the idea of “misplacing” virginity, because the speaker’s virginity is long gone but seems to momentarily return on the night of the wedding. (I should pause here and explain that the whole sonnet sequence is a memoir, so the experiences are mine, although I’m using the term “speaker” to refer to the voice of each individual poem.)

The poem that is actually about the loss of virginity is “Virga, it’s called, like virgin...”, and this poem describes an experience that is definitely not enjoyable. So, to answer the question, in the “Window” poem, when the speaker says “I stripped her off...” she’s describing the lack of value she attributed to her previous virginity and innocence. But, no, I don’t think loss of virginity causes doubt, shame, or displeasure for every woman. I’ve long envied girls who lost their virginity in the context of a loving relationship, because sex can be such a beautiful,



wonderful experience and our culture often attaches so much unnecessary shame to it and to the body in general. The end of the poem before the “Window” poem describes the kind of mutuality the speaker is looking for: “...He’s climbing in to her; / she’s climbing out—do you conceive? That’s love.”

Q: A mother’s old-fashioned advice “to find someone to provide for you” appears in the poem, “The Clamor for a Partner—How to Give.” Throughout the poem, the speaker struggles with this. You’ve said this is a memoir—did your mother give you similar advice?

A: The speaker doesn’t believe there’s value in following the advice, “find someone to provide for you.” My mother gave me conflicting advice (unsurprising, given her individual and cultural experience): she told me to find someone to “provide,” but also urged me to make sure I could take care of myself financially so I wouldn’t have to depend on someone else. She was born in 1931, but by the time I was a child, in the ’70s and ’80s, she had seen major changes in women’s rights and roles, and she had also lived through her own brief marriage and its aftermath. The poem rejects that advice on the grounds that looking for a “good provider” ignores the need for real desire and love in a relationship. I took the other part of her advice (not in the poem): to make sure I could take care of myself. The idea of choosing a lover or partner based on his wealth or status disgusts me. In a good relationship, both people should try to provide for each other’s emotional needs, but I don’t need anyone to provide for me materially.

Q: There are repeating phrases from poem to poem. Do these point to any deeper connections between the poems?

A: In the whole sequence, each new poem begins with a line or a portion of a line from the previous poem. I did this for two reasons. The first was purely practical: it's hard to start a poem, but if you already have a line or part of a line, it's easier to keep going because you're already in it. The second reason was that I wanted to scrutinize what I felt and what I was saying about what I felt very closely, sometimes by turning claims and phrases inside out, making them mean something different or making them operate in a different context. Or sometimes, I felt that one poem wasn't finished contemplating its subject, so borrowing part of a line allowed the next poem to continue the contemplation. For example, in "My mother picked the figs in August," there's the claim "I want to doubt / she knew what it was like..." as the speaker considers whether her mother was aware of her discomfort. The following poem begins with the claim "She knew what it was like to fall..." suggesting the mother's understanding of her own mother (the speaker's grandmother). Those poems are in the section titled "Where She Stopped," in which the speaker is considering the connections and divisions between her mother and herself.

Q: Your book contains many poems that echo difficult relationships and growing pains. Do you feel a poetic exploration of such trials and tribulations can help the human spirit reflect and thrive from their experience?

A: I hope so. It's often easy to feel isolated in one's own experience, and literature can help us to see that others have felt the same as we have and have had similar experiences, or drastically different experiences. And this can enlarge our sense of connection to and understanding of others. And, I think the making of art can function as a kind of revenge against circumstance. We can't control what happens to us, at least not always and especially not when we are children, but we can make art out of our experiences, and the making of art is something that we can control.

Q: In the poem, "It Would Be Mine, That Coat She'd Never Worn," the imagery is vivid and vibrant. At what point do you decide the imagery has reached its fine point in your work?

A: Imagery should be precise and should exist for a thematic reason, not just as ornamentation. In "It would be mine, that coat..." I wanted to capture the grotesqueness of the coat through imagery and comparison, but I also wanted to play ironically with the notion of the Golden Fleece and with an allusion to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and those things needed to happen more through diction than through imagery. My favorite poetic tool is comparison, so I think in general I tend to rely less on straight imagery than on comparison, as in the comparison of the color of the coat to "old teeth."

Q: How did you choose the three section titles, "The Opposite of Us," "Where She Stopped," "Which Way I Flew"? How do these titles further the book's content?

A: The section titles are all phrases from a poem in each section. I chose them because I felt they encapsulated the speaker's focus and progression in/through each section. The first section considers the speaker's placement in the family and her placement in the outer social world beyond the family: where she belongs or doesn't belong. The second section considers the connections and divisions between the speaker and her mother, and the third section moves more into the speaker's teenage and adult relationships and her process of trying to disentangle herself from the negative aspects of her upbringing. "Which Way I Flew" is a reference to the quote from Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* ("Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell") that appears in "He showed me what he was—" one of the poems in the last section.

Q: The poem "I Slept Then Woke, Most of Those Years a Dream," appears near the end of the book, and it recalls memory as a dream. Do you feel that both writers and poets who find inspiration from memory recollect with accuracy or unconsciously recollect events differently?

A: Memory is always problematic. For example, in "I called desire a lie..." the following lines end the poem:

...Did my father
really send us the envelope of dimes
that rained onto the yellow carpet? Less
than a dollar's worth of scorn my mother
denies if I remind her, every time.

I remember this incident clearly: my mother had asked my father to send money for child support, and his response was to send an envelope full of loose change, either to imply that he had no money, or to imply that the change was all she (and I) deserved. But I've asked her about this, and she insists it didn't happen. So whose memory is reliable? What really happened? I was a child...could I have dreamed or imagined it? Or did my mother simply forget it? Or did she remember it but deny the memory due to her desire for me not to see my father in a negative way? I don't know. But what a person remembers reveals a kind of truth about that person, not necessarily an objective truth about what actually happened. In the poem "I slept then woke..." the waking I describe is the experience of being raped by a gynecologist at the age of ten: an experience that unquestionably happened. The "dream" prior to that is pretty much everything else: the blurriness of childhood cut off by a sudden waking, or birth, into that experience.