

Anne Carson, *Wrong Norma*
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GOOD MISTAKES

Anne Carson doesn't always overthink her titles. She called her 2013 book *Red Doc* because that was the default name of her draft, automatically generated by her computer—a title derived from an abdication of one. *Red Doc* is a sequel to Carson's popular 'novel in verse', *Autobiography of Red* (1998), an adolescent love story inspired by the surviving fragments of a poem by Stesichoros about the myth of Herakles and a red, winged monster named Geryon. In the middle of *Red Doc*'s black cover are horizontal streaks of red. It looks like the residue of a hasty swipe of a calligraphy brush, or as though the cover of *Autobiography of Red*—also black, with a pristine red circle at its centre—has been smeared. In one of Carson's oblique manifestoes, 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent', which is about Joan of Arc and Francis Bacon and their shared aversion to cliché and the 'boredom of storytelling', Carson explained that Bacon defeated narrative by making 'free marks' on his canvas: 'He uses brushes, sponges, sticks, rags, his hand, or just throws a can of paint at it'. *Red Doc*'s cover could be described as a similarly resourceful defacement. The red brushstrokes—almost like a 'Keep Out' sign—echo the spirit of its 'found' title. It rebuffs interpretation and so of course incites it.

Carson's new book is called *Wrong Norma*, she explains on the back, because it is a 'collection of writings about different things, like Joseph Conrad, Guantánamo, Flaubert, snow, poverty, *Roget's Thesaurus*, my Dad, Saturday night. The pieces are not linked. That's why I've called them wrong.' As with many of Carson's utterances, the aroma of a joke wafts off this deadpan explanation. Why is a miscellaneous collection a 'wrong' one? Isn't 'wrong' the wrong word? Indeed *Wrong Norma* sounds a bit like a

scrambled translation of ‘misnomer’ (from the old French verb *mesnommer*, *mes-*, ‘wrongly’, *nommer*, ‘to name’: *Wrong Nommer*). And who is ‘Norma’ and how did she earn such an epithet?

It’s difficult not to think of *Wrong Norma* as a kind of alter-ego. (In a recent interview with the *Paris Review*, Carson suggested the title was a reference to being Canadian: Canadians are ‘polite, but wrong. All the time, polite but wrong’.) Her writing is enlivened by wrongness of various kinds. ‘I am writing this to be as wrong as possible to you’, she announces in an early piece called ‘Short Talk On Shelter’. Carson is an advocate for the experience of confusion and attracted to the things liable to cause it, such as incoherence, contradiction, fragments and riddles. She defines poetry—in a poem confusingly titled ‘Essay on What I Think About Most’—as ‘the willful creation of error’. ‘Not understanding is an interesting state of mind’, she has said: ‘poetry is an instrument of producing this state of mind.’

If *Wrong Norma* is ‘wrong’ because its pieces are ‘not linked’, many of Carson’s books ought to have been called *Wrong*, too. Her last collection, *Float* (2016), was especially wrong because its 22 disparate texts—about Hegel, Godard, her great-uncle Harry and so on—were literally not linked; the ‘book’ is in fact a clear plastic slip case containing paper pamphlets that can be read in any order. But eclecticism has reigned from the outset, as has puzzling and unsettling readers by playing fast and loose with genre. Carson’s collections tend to be assortments containing poetry and essays and things in between. Some of her essays look like poems or read like short stories. One ends with an ode; ‘Variations on the Right to Remain Silent’ offers, in lieu of a conclusion, several translations of an ancient Greek lyric ‘using the wrong words’ (including Brecht’s FBI file and the manual for her new microwave).

Her books do not only feature unusual forms—‘epitaphs’, librettos—but wacky hybrids that arguably don’t exist (‘a fictional essay in 29 tangos’, a ‘lecture’ in ‘the form of 15 sonnets’). ‘Father’s Old Blue Cardigan’—a ‘straightforward poem’, as Charles Simic once described it, which appears in her collection *Men in the Off Hours* (2000)—seems almost an oddity in its motley context. Sometimes Carson encases forms in other forms (‘formal detritus’, in the phrase of one critic). *Autobiography of Red* is prefaced by a translation of the remains of the original Greek lyric and several appendices, and followed by a spoof interview with Stesichoros. A mesmerizing pamphlet in *Float*, ‘Uncle Falling’, consists of a pair of ‘lyric lectures’—a typically ambiguous blend of essay and narrative, scholarship and memoir—written in the form of a play. The dialogue of ‘Lecturer I’ and ‘Lecturer II’ is broken up by interjections—usually baffling, occasionally profound—from a four-person chorus of Gertrude Steins (each holding a Gertrude Stein mask).

Carson's writing is not only unlike anyone else's; it is unlike itself ('No two poems are the same', as Guy Davenport has observed). One continuity, however, is incongruousness. She specializes in conspicuously far-fetched comparisons, often unlikely pairings of classical and modern writers or artists—Thucydides and Virginia Woolf, Joan of Arc and Francis Bacon, Homer and John Ashbery. Almost everything she writes is about several things at once, and ranges associatively across the history of Western thought. An essay about sleep (or as Carson's subtitle has it, 'A Praise of Sleep'), included in her 2005 collection *Decreation*, refers to Aristotle, Kant, Elizabeth Bishop, Lacan, Tom Stoppard, Woolf, Plato and Homer. Even her most single-minded book, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), a scholarly inquiry into ancient Greek conceptions of desire based on her doctoral dissertation, skips, in a mere two pages, from Sappho to Plato to Simone Weil to Emily Dickinson to Petrarch, then to Sartre, de Beauvoir and Lacan, before returning to Sappho.

Carson's work is also 'wrong' in its impropriety—'impertinence', as she says in the preface to *Eros the Bittersweet*: its charismatic transgression of disciplinary boundaries and other kinds of etiquette (she told the *Paris Review* that the title *Wrong Norma* was also a defiant allusion to the competitive scrupulousness demanded by 'academic life'). Despite their erudition, works of criticism like *Eros the Bittersweet* and her comparative study of Simonides and Paul Celan, *Economy of the Unlost* (1999), are too peculiar and elegant to be classed as straightforwardly academic books, besides having an obliquely autobiographical intensity. Her poetry, meanwhile, which often deals with painful personal themes—the break-up of a relationship ('wrong love'), her father's dementia, the sudden death of her estranged brother—is liable to have a literary-critical dimension or draw on her Hellenic scholarship. Her early masterpiece, 'The Glass Essay' (a poem, naturally, though it's almost another 'novel in verse'), is about visiting her parents while grieving the departure of her lover but also a reflection on the life and writing of Emily Brontë (it even includes quotations from critical commentaries); *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001) is a narrative poem about the collapse of a marriage spliced with Keats; her elegy for her brother, *Nox* (2010), is partly about Herodotus and the writing of history.

As though restless, Carson's experimentalism has become bolder over time, or perhaps just more three-dimensional. She has ranged further from the 'book' as a form—into performances of various kinds (dramatic lectures, partly improvised readings, operas), often collaborating with her husband Robert Currie (the 'randomizer') and other artists. Carson draws and paints and the visual presentation of her work has always been important, but recent books demand attention as physical objects. *Nox*, for example, is a box containing an accordion-like booklet, a facsimile of a scrapbook she made as an

elegy—an ‘epitaph’—for her troubled older brother. The verso pages feature pasted-in dictionary entries of every word in an elegy Catullus wrote for his brother; the recto pages are collages of text—vignettes, enigmatic lines of poetry—as well as drawings, paintings and personal memorabilia: scraps of letters, part of the text from the funeral service, cut-up family photos.

Wrong Norma represents a reversion to the bound book but it’s a typically unusual shape—wider than a standard-size paperback—and contains some drawings and paintings alongside the texts, several of which previously appeared in magazines or were commissioned for performance. There are, among other things, poems, short stories (of a kind), a lecture (delivered by the sky), translations, a dialogue (Simon McBurney, Carson’s interlocutor at a recent event, forgivably resorted to calling them ‘bits of writing’). Carson is a fan of gaps, intervals, empty space—‘breaks make a person think’, she observes at one point in *Eros the Bittersweet*—and so the pieces are interspersed with puzzling interludes: pages roughly collaged with snippets of type-written text, some of it faded and barely legible, some of it crossed out or annotated with red pen. It’s a bit as if an absurdist interview is going on in the background as you read: there are several looping questions met with a mixture of non sequiturs, witticisms and unpredictably profound ripostes: Q: ‘do you like jam’, A: ‘it is in my thoughts’, ‘yes when in need’; Q: ‘How do you sustain morale during a long project’, A: ‘be a baby’, ‘Lutheran guilt’, ‘surrender’.

Thanks to Carson’s formal antics—her baroque nomenclature, scrambling of genre and relentless proteanism—it’s notoriously difficult to pin her down as a writer (one recent reviewer opted for ‘poet-translator-scholar-of-ancient-Greek-essayist-visual-artist-playwright-maker-of-performances-and-dances’). The author biographies on her book jackets sidestep the question, tending to a sphinx-like factual minimalism: ‘Anne Carson was born in Canada and teaches ancient Greek for a living’—though newer editions usually specify the prestigious institution (McGill, Michigan and so on) and list a few of her top-tier accolades (MacArthur, Guggenheim etc). She was born in Toronto in 1950 and had an itinerant childhood in small-town Ontario; her father worked at a bank and was posted to a new branch every few years. Her high-school Latin teacher introduced her to ancient Greek, tutoring her during lunch hour. Carson fell instantly and lastingly in love.

Listening to her talk about it will make you wish you’d done so too: ‘When you’re travelling around in Greek words, you have a sense that you’re among the roots of meanings, not up in the branches . . . they’re pure, they’re older, they’re original . . . More reality in the words. They just shine right out at you . . . there’s more life there.’ Then there is ancient Greek literature, ‘simply some of the most thoughtful that anyone’s ever come up with’. She was attracted to its alienness, too: the ‘little latches of similarity,

embedded in unbelievable otherness'. Carson also loves the activity of translation ('that puzzle mode of mind is simply the best thing'). Alongside her increasingly prize-winning poetry she has published idiosyncratic adaptations and translations, notably of Greek tragedies and Sappho lyrics, which survive in exhilaratingly damaged condition. Her Sappho translations, *If Not, Winter* (2002), use brackets to indicate missing matter to reproduce the 'drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes' ('brackets are exciting').

Carson dropped out of her classics degree at Toronto, twice—apparently in part because she had to study English literature, including Milton, whom she disliked, and 'other things that seemed of little importance'. After a hiatus—an 'even more boring' year at 'advertising' art school designing cereal boxes ('it was horrible')—she completed her BA, and then spent a year studying Greek metrics under Kenneth Dover at St Andrew's before returning to Toronto for her PhD. She sought out Dover because he was the 'hardest person in Greek' to study with. Incipient in this independent-minded trajectory, with its mix of truancy and punishing diligence, are some of the contrasts, paradoxes even, that distinguish the spirit of Carson's work—rigour and errancy, devoted focus and ludic adventure—and her style: precise beauty sabotaged with zany incoherence, splatters of paint. Carson combines almost exorbitant close readings of her favourites—extracting maximum meaning from scraps of cryptic Greek (in translating Sappho she 'tried to put down *all that can be read* of each poem')—with a seemingly indiscriminate embrace of whatever crosses her path. She gives the impression of 'burrowing like a mole', as she describes her method in her essay about sleep, but also believes 'you only learn things when you jump'.

'Thinking is what I prefer to be doing. (Writing is the product of thinking)', Carson once said, and in some ways, she seems just as interested in thinking itself as in what she happens to be thinking about or in what form that thinking will take on the page. Specifically, Carson likes feeling her 'mind *move*': finding inventive connections between disparate writers, being suspended in 'the hope of understanding' a puzzling line or in the midst of a translation, 'floating' among the possibilities. This is why she dislikes resolution and cherishes elusiveness: answers and certainty spoil the sense of being '*on the way* to knowing', as she said recently—the immersive delight of 'reaching' toward the unknown. She seems to share Joan of Arc's 'rage against cliché' because it short-circuits this perplexed probing. Implicit in cliché is the question, 'Don't we already know what we think about this?', she says in 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent'. To know what you think, or 'to think only what you already know' as she writes in *Eros the Bittersweet*, is to be going nowhere new. Such stasis is not thinking in Carson's sense at all.

In 'pursuing scholarship', she told the *Paris Review*, 'I never found it possible to think without thinking about myself thinking', so she decided to assume this was 'a casualty of being human' rather than a personal failing and 'just go ahead with the project of thinking of me as if it were a legitimate enterprise'. As a result, her work often has a reflexive quality. See, for example, a piece titled 'Mexico!', in *Wrong Norma*, recalling driving with her mother to visit her father 'in that facility': 'Her up front with the taxi driver, me in back keeping close to the window, watching the landscape, me looking out. Me thinking of myself looking out . . .'. Although its ostensible subject is the geometry of desire, *Eros the Bittersweet* is also a celebration of the experience of thinking. Carson discerns a resemblance between falling in love and 'coming to know', both of which 'make me feel genuinely alive. There is something like an electrification in them . . . How?' The book is studded with those standalone question words ('Why?'): forthright, pure, almost childlike, as though the undiluted sound of inquisitiveness itself. Much of Carson's writing could be considered a 'record of speculation', as she describes her short essay (or short story, or prose poem) 'Merry Christmas from Hegel'. Across forms, her writing is the precipitate of an inquiring mind, its eclecticism a spectacle of curiosity.

Consider the contents page of her early collection *Short Talks* (1992), which begins:

Short Talk On Homo Sapiens
 Short Talk On Hopes
 Short Talk On Chromo-luminarism
 Short Talk On Geisha
 Short Talk On Gertrude Stein About 9.30
 Short Talk On His Draughtsmanship
 Short Talk On Housing
 Short Talk On Disappointments In Music
 Short Talk On Where To Travel
 Short Talk On Why Some People Find Trains Exciting

. . . and goes on for another 35 lines.

There is something exhilarating, as well as humorous, about this list: about its promise of brevity, its sweep and variety—from the general ('hopes') to the esoteric ('chromo-luminarism'), the practical ('on waterproofing') to the impractical ('on walking backwards'), plus the splash of baffling wrongness ('his draughtsmanship?'). It's almost its own poem, or a kind of mission statement: the world is Carson's oyster. It embodies the spirit of her great-uncle Harry, a kind of mythical figure in her family, as she describes him in her pair of lectures 'Uncle Falling': he 'knew a lot of things about a lot of things. He knew about haying and horses and weather but also the history of violins or where to build a canal or volcanoes or Papua New Guinea . . . He

is easily curious'. *Short Talks* is a slim, narrow volume (every piece fits onto a single page), but surreally encyclopaedic: it emits excitement about how much there is to know about.

Yet the pieces don't exactly deliver, nor could they (the last one is titled 'Short Talk On Who You Are'). The 'talks' are more like enigmatic prose poems, often bearing an oblique, sometimes entirely obscure, relation to the stated topic (more misnomers). (Carson has sometimes referred to them as 'short dances', 'pictures of themselves' and, when she performs the especially short ones, '13-second interactive lectures' which produce a 'short meaning'.) In her brief, mysterious introduction—not unlike a prose poem itself—Carson writes: 'I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime', and though the book seems propelled by curiosity, it might also be seen as in flight from boredom. Why, after all, must these talks, on such large topics ('reading', 'rain', 'hedonism'), be so fleeting? Like uncle Harry, this lecturer seems 'easily curious', but also averse to dwelling.

'Wrong Norma', the final piece in Carson's new collection, could be described as a compressed, almost accelerated portrait of boredom, and of struggling to escape it. It was published in the *London Review of Books* in 2016, where it was billed as a poem, though it lacks line breaks:

Wrong night, wrong city, wrong movie, wrong ambulances cater-
wauling past and drowning out wrong dialogue of wrong Norma
Desmond, what could be more wrong she's the same age as me this
tilted wreck with deliquescent chin, I turn it off, eat soup and read
a novel. Thoughts trickle in and out. No one phones. I am safe but
that won't last. I drift to the past . . . To just close the door and think
about one thing, the moon, curbs, Etruria. The self wins away. The
's' in self wins. I used to love making 's' in cursive style on the black-
board at school, it's different every time, every shell on the beach, do
they even have blackboards, teach cursive, anymore? I can't wait for
morning. Sunday morning on West 3rd my favourite time. No cars.
Branches stark. Daybreak greenish and cold and on a rooftop across
from me the legendary water towers of New York City, the giant white
smoke Miltoning to heaven.

Boredom's variegated moods pass through the poem like the shadows of fast-moving clouds on a windy day. The tone is so rapidly changeable that it is almost indeterminate, disconcertingly so, each successive phrase recasting its predecessor: 'No one phones' sounds sullen or bereft, but perhaps the speaker is grateful for the quiet—'I am safe'—except that cosy thought gives way to grim foreboding ('that won't last'). Even the initial burst of negation is more complicated than it looks, since the clanging sequence of 'wrongs' verges on self-cancelling (if the sirens are drowning out the 'wrong dialogue' in the movie, are they wrong or right?) And how can it be the

'wrong' night or the 'wrong' city? (Perhaps a 'wrong' city is what Carson describes in *Eros the Bittersweet* as 'a city without desire', a 'city of no imagination': one where 'people think only what they already know'—a city of cliché.) The word 'wrong' is once again somehow wrong. Yet we know the feeling. The word's very inaccuracy is expressive of boredom's frustration and ambient discontentment.

Is 'Wrong Norma' a story of boredom transcended? 'Mexico!' narrates an ascent from 'bleakness' to elation through free-associating reverie: 'Bleakness seizes me when I think of rounding that corner on a November afternoon . . . me looking out. Me thinking of myself looking out, then of other things, lunch, Christmas, an artwork I heard about once called *Horses Endlessly Running* . . . was it in Mexico?—yes I looked it up, it was Mexico (Gabriel Orozco) and *Mexico!* came to me like an alteration of death to life, just the word, just the thought, the little hooves drumming . . .' The jaded tantrum that opens 'Wrong Norma', by contrast, with its cascade of 'wrongs', slows to a kind of sulk—'I turn it off, eat soup'. It's as though nothing can hold her attention: 'moon, curbs, Etruria'—the free association stalls, can't get going, leads to no epiphany. She tries nostalgia ('I used to love . . .'), but this seems to sour into a failure of wonder: 'every shell on the beach' is somehow abbreviated, a clichéd, half-hearted nod to the world's variousness, as though the speaker is going through the motions, which gives way to another crabby outburst ('do they even have blackboards, teach cursive, anymore?'). The poem then shifts again, on another ambiguous pivot—'I can't wait for morning' (exasperated or excited?)—into anticipation of a rather desolate-sounding dawn. Yet the ending—boredom transmuted into poetry, a wrong righted—may not be as straightforward as it seems. Is there not a hint of irony in the grandiosity of the final sentence—the 'legendary water towers', the sonorous flourish of 'New York City'—and its conspicuous poetisms, the 'Miltoning to heaven'? (We know how Carson feels about Milton.)

How does Carson go about her 'task' of avoiding boredom? The word recurs in the characteristically enigmatic 'Note on Method' that prefaces *Economy of the Unlost*:

Attention is a task we share, you and I. To keep attention strong is to keep it from settling. Partly for this reason I have chosen to talk about two men at once. Moving and not settling . . .

Carson keeps our attention in part by multi-tasking—writing about several things simultaneously—and in part by simply demanding it. 'Think of the beauty of letters, and how it feels to come to know them', she writes in the *Eros the Bittersweet*; 'Let us look closer into the selves of the first writers'. She also tautens our attention through the impeccable, you might almost say drastic, economy of her prose. As she explains in *Economy of the Unlost*,

describing epigraphy, she seeks to ‘construct a moment of attention by cutting away or biting away or eliding away what is irrelevant’. Consider how that book opens: ‘Humans value economy. Why?’ Each word resounds with clarity and gravity. The sentences are terse to the point of eccentricity. It’s as though they were written in essences, in slabs of the world. To skip a single word would be to miss a meaning.

Carson’s prose is often stripped of connective tissue—of inessential grammar like conjunctions, what she calls ‘words that aren’t facts’: ‘It rained during the night. We sit on the hotel terrace drinking coffee. Morning sparkles on us. I watch the dog’, she writes in a long early piece called ‘The Anthropology of Water’ about a pilgrimage to Compostela. As Carson said of Greek, her pared sentences make perfectly selected verbs like ‘sparkle’ ‘just shine right out at you’. Though she claims to hate it, she is a masterful storyteller, condensing the passage of time to mesmeric effect through collaging facts without embellishment. Take these few sentences distilling the decline of her uncle Harry (himself a model of economy: a ‘noble, unique person’, ‘he used five or six sentences in his life’, Carson has said, ‘but he used them well’):

The objects he used had no indolence in them, none of that lazy disregarding storebought glow. They were heavy with work and always clean. Later an era of neglect set in. Harry got old. Nobody spent their vacation at the farm anymore because of dirt and his moods came on sudden. Prince and Florence died. The barn was unsafe. My father went up north in winter and came back angry and sad . . . Finally Harry got gangrene in his leg . . . The gangrene healed but Harry’s dementia impressed the doctor. He was transferred to a psychiatric ward and never went home again.

Carson’s laconic, spare style produces familiar virtues: clarity, elegance, potency, spaciousness. Also poignancy: note how, for example, the first line—the first word even (if not the title itself)—of ‘Father’s Old Blue Cardigan’ tells us her father is gone: ‘Now it hangs on the back of the kitchen chair’. Or consider Carson’s piercing description of the grief of her brother’s widow in *Nox*: ‘From her point of view, all desire left the world.’ Economy is also at the root of more surprising qualities, however. Indeed Carson’s writing shows us that economy itself—although a thoroughly conventional ideal—can, taken to extremes, be deeply strange. Take those authoritative opening sentences: ‘Humans value economy. Why?’ There is something almost un-English, unnatural (paradoxically, un-human) about their radical concision. As Carson says admiringly of Celan, she uses language as if she were translating.

Strangeness—sometimes subtle deviancy, sometimes glaring incoherence—is a hallmark of Carson’s style. You can ‘never use the infinitives and

participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough', she writes in her preface to *Short Talks*, and her writing is distinguished by twists on the expected. She wrings powerful effects from inconspicuous adjustments. In 'The Anthropology of Water', for example, she wants to ask her ailing father what he was 'thinking all those years when we sat at the kitchen table together munching cold bacon', not simply in silence or listening to the silence but 'listening to each other's silence'—a tweak that both arrests and deepens, seeming in an instant to discover a new range of human intimacy, or to plumb it with greater precision. At one point in 'Uncle Falling', Carson writes of her father: 'He liked to use time well'—the omission of 'his' producing a sudden profundity. Or in *Nox*, recalling her meeting with her brother's widow, Carson writes: 'It was a relief not to have him dropping through every conversation like a smell of burning hair'. 'The smell' is a cliché: it assumes we know what burning hair smells like. 'A smell' cracks open a space for the imagination, perhaps suggests burning hair leaves different smells, or that we each smell it differently. These are the kinds of 'good mistakes', as Carson writes in her poem 'Essay on What I Think About Most', that allow us to 'get hold of something new & fresh'. As she says of Francis Bacon's efforts to disrupt boredom in 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent', the subtle wrongness of her writing aims 'to make us see something we don't yet have eyes for, to hear something that was never sounded', to go 'inside clarity to a place of deeper refreshment'.

If Carson's *sui generis*, versatile body of work resists categorization, how to summarize her 'task of a lifetime'? It's an arresting phrase, somewhere between an unending chore and the definition of a vocation. Either way, the task of a lifetime is not one you accomplish. It is something you have to keep doing, perhaps keep re-doing. That avoiding boredom is a life's work suggests we are hounded by it. Just as narrative 'seeks to arise . . . pretty much everywhere', as Carson says in 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent', boredom—or 'bleakness', as 'Mexico!' has it, or plain 'misery' as she said in the *Paris Review*—may be a default state, always encroaching. The corollary of the notion that boredom needs to be perpetually staved off is the idea that we need continual refreshment, that our interest in, perhaps even contact with, the world needs to be replenished, as though the world is not simply there for us, but something we need to be returned to. As Shklovsky argued in his famous 1917 essay 'Art as Device', our perceptions are deadened by habit so we need art in order to 'recover the sensation of life': art 'exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony' ('water has a stoniness', Carson writes in 'I=I', the opening short story in *Wrong Norma*, which begins with a 'lake visit' that gives her a 'bolt of pure aliveness').

In her poem 'Short Talk On My Task', Carson writes: 'My task is to carry secret burdens for the world. People watch curiously.' 'Secret burdens' could

refer to our private griefs and shames, but a secret burden is also one way of describing a gift—something which usually elicits both curiosity and excitement. The excitement Carson's work transmits is partly literary. One of the pleasures of reading her work is the pleasure of reading her reading others. Her texts are environments for looking closely at other, often forbidding texts—elliptical fragments of ancient Greek or modernist poetry—which you approach aided by Carson's erudition and borrowing her focus: the passages she quotes are as though backlit by her enthusiasm. Her writing, with its blend of reading and living, thinking and feeling—heartbreak and Brontë criticism—has been criticized for its intellectualism: 'her dazzling but sometimes tiresome erudition' and 'eggheaded defences', as Daphne Merkin once wrote; the scholarly paraphernalia that Charles Simic deemed 'annoyingly didactic'; her taste for, in Elizabeth Lowry's judgement, 'staggeringly pretentious' prefaces. Yet Carson's work is just as much about how literature can revive and soothe us by recalling us to the wider world ('His mind gave excitement to everything he read', Carson writes of her uncle Harry, 'and it entered into his will to live'). 'Merry Christmas from Hegel' is a kind of parable about the consolation of both nature and puzzling literature. Carson is reading Hegel on Christmas Day, 'wretchedly lonely with all my family dead', and although she is not 'someone who knows a lot of Hegel or understands it', she finds herself 'overjoyed' by an idea she encounters (or imagines she encounters). This puts her in the mood to go outside and stand in the snow ('do some snow standing. Not since childhood!'). Among the snow-laden fir trees she feels a 'ravishing peace . . . the washing-through peace of looking, listening, feeling' and writes her own 'record of speculation' about her afternoon, turning 'the icy horror of holiday into a sort of homecoming'.

Carson is fond of the John Cage saying, 'Looking closely helps', and looking closely at the natural world 'helps', it would seem, in the existential sense of providing succour. 'However bad life is', Carson told the *Paris Review*,

the important thing is to make something interesting out of it. And that has a lot to do with the physical world, with looking at stuff, snow and light and the smell of your screen door and whatever constitutes your phenomenal existence from moment to moment. How consoling—that this stuff goes on and that you can keep thinking about it and making that into something on a page.

The centrepiece of *Wrong Norma*, a 'Lecture on the History of Skywriting', contains a sequence that was published in the *New Yorker* in 2015 as a standalone poem called 'Each Day Unexpected Salvation (John Cage)'. It is a list of different kinds of shade: 'Forest shade, lake shade, poplar shade, highway shade, backyard shade, café shade . . .' Hearing Carson read the piece in her strangle, effortlessly comic lilt—somehow at once monotonal and musical,

arch and natural—I was at first bored, or anyway expecting to be bored (the repetition I suppose). But after a while, although the piece contains no directions—no verbs—I found myself obeying it, taking it as instruction: imagining the shades she was naming. Among the familiar kinds of shade ('dappled shade'), the list includes funny kinds of shade ('cow shade') and beautiful kinds of shade: 'shade along banks of snow'. Some shades you can just about visualize ('shade in books'), some you can only imagine: 'shade at the core of an apple' (a shade, perhaps, we 'don't yet have eyes for'). You find yourself, as Carson says in *Eros the Bittersweet*, reaching 'out from what is present and actual to something else, something glimpsed in the imagination'. It's a reminder of the world's inexhaustible variety, of how much there is to keep looking at. Perhaps her outlandish composite forms—fictional essays in the form of tangos—compose a similar gesture: we haven't exhausted what can be made ('How many natural phenomena are there', the Gertrude Stein chorus asks in 'Uncle Harry').

Carson says she finds 'snow and light and the smell of your screen door' consoling because 'this stuff goes on' and you 'can keep thinking about it'. She seems drawn to strange, elusive, 'wrong' literature for similar reasons. Her earliest memory is of a dream. In it she wakes up and goes downstairs to the living room. Everything is as it should be—the dark green sofa and chairs and the pale green walls—yet something is wrong: it was 'utterly, certainly different. Inside its usual appearance the living room was as changed as if it had gone mad.' She finds this 'entrance into strangeness so supremely consoling'. Like an algae-coated shipwreck on the ocean floor, or like a body of water itself, the living room is 'sunk in its greenness, breathing its own order, answerable to no one . . . in a true sense something *incognito* at the heart of the sleeping house'.

The uncanny vision is consoling perhaps because that which is 'answerable to no one'—an 'entity without response to you', as she describes the lake in 'I=I'—is that which we feel sure goes on: we feel it goes on because we feel it goes on without us (goes on while we are sleeping and when we are dead). It outlasts us because it eludes us, even excludes us (it has a secret life that 'breathes its own order'). As Carson writes of an oracular sentence of Joan of Arc's ('*The light comes in the name of the voice*'): 'it stays foreign, we cannot own it . . . it seems to come from somewhere else and it brings a whiff of immortality with it.' This is what might be described as the benevolent economy of 'wrong' literature—literature that 'stays foreign', that is 'incomplete, perfectly', as Carson once put it, or economical to the point of shimmering strangeness: an infinitely generous form of verbal stinginess, a gift that keeps on giving by never quite giving up its meanings. 'I want to be as wrong as possible', she writes in 'Short Talk On Shelter'. 'Tell me how long it glows'.

A 'true piece of writing', Carson has said, comes from 'looking at what is actually on your screen'. We should all, in other words, be writing our own 'Essay on What I Think About Most', even if it looks like a poem. Carson's unruly writing, conspicuously spun out of whatever is on her mind, suggests that avoiding your own boredom, discovering your own curiosities, is not just about openness to the world but openness to yourself—looking closely not only at Hegel and snow, but at what you see in Hegel and in snow, even if what you see isn't exactly there, or if what you see in Hegel leads you to put down Hegel and go off-piste (tuning into your inner Wrong Norma). In the middle of the woods, Carson writes, 'Outer sounds like traffic and shovelling vanish. Inner sounds become audible': the 'homecoming' at the end seems to be not only about feeling at home in the snowy world or at home in culture (in Hegel!) but at home in our own minds.

Immortality for Carson only comes in 'whiffs', just as boredom can only be fleetingly warded off by 'constructing moments of attention'. 'If prose is a house, poetry is a man on fire running quite fast through it'; an essay, meanwhile, is 'your mind a quiet lake, me jumping into it'. Carson's types of shade flash by too fast for you to grasp them but you come away with what she once called 'the fragrance of understanding' (the smell of smoke left by the man on fire, the ripples from the jump into the lake). Immortality, she said recently, is to make time 'stop' by 'forgetting time' through 'moments of total attention' which 'you can enter, disappear into . . . Enough to take you away from misery'. (Carson once defined art as 'something to occupy your mind while you put up with reality'.) The rest of the time, most of the time—when time 'doesn't stop'—you're in boredom'. But those brief reprieves, when your attention is held and the world seems inexhaustible, are 'completely fun'. Remember: '*Mexico!*'