

J. Robert Baker

Confrontations With Virtue

Michael W. Cox. *Against the Hidden River*. Dubois, PA: Mammoth Books, 2013.

With the title of his new collection of stories, *Against the Hidden River*, Michael W. Cox invokes Cato's challenge to Dante and Virgil in the first canto of the *Purgatorio*. The two poets, following the river Lethe out of hell, encounter Cato who guards the entrance to Mount Purgatory on which love is corrected and perfected. Cato, a Stoic, was for Dante an image of natural moral virtue. His challenge resonates through Cox's new collection. Here, a stunning group of first-person narrators tell stories of the anguish of human difficulties in love and of unanticipated, bewildering desires. They emerge from a partial understanding of life and its sufferings into a larger awareness of themselves or an appreciation for the distress of others. Truly written against the hidden river, Cox's stories show us moral virtue that, though small, is valiant.

The world of Cox's stories is at once the ordinary world with well-known topographies and a world of unmanageable contingencies, startling disturbance, and deep confusion. It is the world of Chicago's suburbs, Pittsburgh's neighborhoods, and Morgantown's roads. Its people work in universities and factories, and some of them appear in more than one story. The familiar urban landscape and types, however, are shot through with sexual unruliness, inchoate desire, and retributive violence to make the world of these stories often desperate. In "Oak Park, Illinois," the narrator is a male hustler caught *in flagrante*, "right in the middle" (17), by his john's six- or seven-year-old son. The client is so undone by his son's finding him in bed with another man that he falls to arguing with his son as if they were both boys and then attempts to silence the boy by holding a pillow over his mouth. In this world of garages and all the other accoutrements of suburban life and middle-class childhood, the hustler must calm the boy whom his father thinks he has killed, but when the wife returns home, it is a world from which he is banished. As the wife enters the house, he exits it, saying, "I keep moving, round the side of Baldwin's garage and out onto the shoveled suburban sidewalk, the rush of Chicago-bound traffic coming from the thoroughfare at the end of the street" (27). The unexpected and the unruly bar him from the ordinary, familiar world.

Many of Cox's characters suffer profound confusion about the

true nature of their difficulties. In “Send Off,” Sunil recognizes only as he is leaving Chicago, the city in which he has struggled with loneliness and never felt truly at home, that the Indian woman who has lived below him is in love with him. In “Grove,” the thirty-five-year-old narrator thinks that he is protecting his eighteen-year-old nephew Paul against self-destructive behavior. He resists the challenges of Paul and his best friend Vance to consider his own homoerotic longings only to find himself picking up a very young male hustler on State Street and discovering, “Deep down it’s like I’ve been here before, sometime, somewhere” (128).

Cox’s world is also one of shocking cruelty and unforeseen tenderness. The narrator of “Away from Home,” escapes from men her husband Fred has hired to kill her when she becomes pregnant. Her brother gets Fred drunk at night and rows him onto a lake where he leaves him. Then the brother shoots the glass animals that Fred has made for the narrator while she and her mother look on. “They were so thin, they blew right apart with hardly a sound” (115). “Unfinished Business” begins with the burial of the narrator’s father whose physical abuse ended only when the narrator punched him. Feeling keenly the minister’s reproach that he is to blame for all of the family’s ills, the narrator offends his best friend and his girlfriend, and yet late at night, he goes quietly downstairs to draw a comforter around his mother who, drunk, lies passed out before the television that is playing a test pattern. Turning off the television, he tries to make his way back to his room without waking his mother.

The characters in *Against the Hidden River* may not come to the redemptive epiphanies that Flannery O’Connor’s do, but they are often shocked into confronting themselves as their understandings of themselves and their imaginative sympathy for others is purged of self-absorption. Cox treats them with the restraint and kindness of Chekhov, which makes *Against the Hidden River* itself an act of moral virtue.

