

Liane Ellison Norman

A Generous Voyage

Susan Shaw Sailer. *Ship of Light*. Shellsburg, IA: Port Yonder Books, 2013.

Susan Sailer's *Ship of Light* is a gift of energy, tenderness and courage to a reader grateful for experience so generously shared. A woman of impressive scholarly credentials, Sailer here opens up her heart and lets us in.

The speaker of the first poem, "When I was ten I walked on downed trees," expresses the courage of a child adventuring along the Nisqually River in the Pacific northwest. "I mounted the root end, / stepped goat-foot along the trunk / to midpoint where the Nisqually / raced below in glacial melt." "Queen of logs," she "surveyed / the river as it tore downstream." Nearing the end of the book, she mourns "Leaving Rock Lake," a beloved West Virginia home place. "Next fall I won't be at Rock Lake / to see 200 trees—oaks, maples, / black walnuts, poplars—turn magenta- / gold-copper-bronze. // What will become / of the young red dogwood / we protected from deer / with rebar and chicken wire?"

In the final poem, the speaker walks her dog, Loki, for the last time at Rock Lake. "I am content to be. / For now I do not need to see. If God / shares this dark, good. If not, good. / I twist the flashlight on, walk up / the drive toward home. Loki stops / once more. We enter light."

In between the child's courageous adventuring on downed trees at river's edge and the older woman's walking her dog in the dark, Sailer gives the reader various and recurrent themes. In "I've Been Feeling Very Darwin Lately," she begins, "My big toe feels a sudden urge to fly," and a little later tells how "My Granddaughter, 13, Paints my Toenails" a color called "Pearly Purple." ". . . After six weeks / the polish on my left big toenail and / right fourth toenail cracks, begins to peel, / the other eight the toes of a goddess."

Sailer recounts how the aging body's demands supplant "Hope that love could end war" with "hope I can pay bills on time, schedule / an appointment with the doctor. Will two / friends diagnosed with cancer survive?" Her appetite is now closer to home: "I adore the kohls-mudged / throats of tulips, the bite of endive, / fris e, French sorrel."

But the fierce appetite for life sings in "To My Vulva": "How

could you wilt, withered, / a six-day bud gone bad? / You used to throb at touch. / Now you might as well be anybody's elbow. / Old girl, you let me down . . . Let me come until I'm sated, / more plant than animal, a purring daffodil."

The title poem, "Ship of Light," derives from an Art Deco panel rescued from the French luxury liner, *Normandie*, permanently exhibited at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art.

The lavishly appointed ship carried, among others, Gary Cooper and his girlfriend, whose shipboard high life contrasts with news clips documenting labor strikes, political assassinations, evidence of anti-Semitism. A section in the voice of the ship's designer follows its seizure by the United States, its repurposing as a troop ship for World War II, its burning from a welding torch accident, scrap sold for \$3.80 a ton. The book's other long poem, "Seedcorn Must Not Be Ground," observes the impact of war on those who fight and those who love those who fight. It juxtaposes soldiers' injuries—" . . . Most nights Lopez / blows up again before his eyes, one boot up / to the bloody knee standing in a ditch. / Harley can't stop crying"—with West Virginia's National Cemetery which "looks / too full though it has plots for thousands more."

The poems in *Ship of Light* exhibit range and complexity with precise detail. It's as if what takes a novelist 390 pages, Sailer can accomplish in thirty-nine poems. Here is a woman's life in all its variety, inviting readers to think about their own complex lives. There's this voice: "At the dinner party, Darwin says to Noah: / 'What about that pterodactyl?' / Noah says, 'Just ran out of time.'" And this one: "that we found each other, perfect in our imperfections honed / then jailed by intellect // that flesh be warm, my pelvis against you, breasts cushioning / the space below your shoulder blades."

While trying to represent the range and tenderness of this entirely satisfying volume, I find I want to quote each poem in its entirety because it's hard to represent such richness in a few lines from here, from there. Each time I read *Ship of Light*, I find new resonance, re-discover a speaker who unites precision with tenderness, courage with vulnerability.

Susan Shaw Sailer's poems appeared in *Kestrel* 24.



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 son'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.

