

ALSO BY ANNE CARSON

*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*

*The Beauty of the Husband*

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*Autobiography of Red*

*Glass, Irony and God*

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PLAINWATER

ESSAYS AND POETRY

ANNE CARSON

VINTAGE CONTEMPORARIES

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*For Ben Sonnenberg / gentleman of the first water*

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PART II  
SHORT TALKS

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## Introduction

Early one morning words were missing. Before that, words were not. Facts were, faces were. In a good story, Aristotle tells us, everything that happens is pushed by something else. Three old women were bending in the fields. What use is it to question us? they said. Well it shortly became clear that they knew everything there is to know about the snowy fields and the blue-green shoots and the plant called "audacity," which poets mistake for violets. I began to copy out everything that was said. The marks construct an instant of nature gradually, without the boredom of a story. I emphasize this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime. You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough.

### On *Homo Sapiens*

With small cuts Cro-Magnon man recorded the moon's phases on the handles of his tools, thinking about her as he worked. Animals. Horizon. Face in a pan of water. In every story I tell comes a point where I can see no further. I hate that point. It is why they call storytellers blind—a taunt.

### On Chromoluminism

Sunlight slows down Europeans. Look at all those spellbound people in Seurat. Look at monsieur, sitting deeply. Where does a European go when he is "lost in thought"? Seurat—the old dazzler—has painted that place. It lies on the other side of attention, a long lazy boat ride from here. It is a Sunday rather than a Saturday afternoon there. Seurat has made this clear by a special method. *Ma méthode*, he called it, rather testily, when we asked him. He caught us hurrying through the chill green shadows like adulterers. The river was opening and closing its stone lips. The river was pressing Seurat to its lips.

### On Gertrude Stein About 9:30

How curious. I had no idea! Today has ended.

### On Disappointments in Music

Prokofiev was ill and could not attend the performance of his First Piano Sonata played by somebody else. He listened to it on the telephone.

### On Trout

In haiku there are various sorts of expressions about trout—"autumn trout" and "descending trout" and "rusty trout" are some I have heard. Descending trout and rusty trout are trout that have laid their eggs. Worn out, completely exhausted, they are going down to the sea. Of course there were occasionally trout that spent the winter in deep pools. These were called "remaining trout."

## On Ovid

I see him there on a night like this but cool, the moon blowing through black streets. He sups and walks back to his room. The radio is on the floor. Its luminous green dial blares softly. He sits down at the table; people in exile write so many letters. Now Ovid is weeping. Each night about this time he puts on sadness like a garment and goes on writing. In his spare time he is teaching himself the local language (Getic) in order to compose in it an epic poem no one will ever read.

## On Parmenides

We pride ourselves on being civilized people. Yet what if the names for things were utterly different? Italy, for example. I have a friend named Andreas, an Italian. He has lived in Argentina as well as in England, and also Costa Rica for some time. Everywhere he lives, he invites people over for supper. It is a lot of work. Artichoke pasta. Peaches. His deep smile never fades. What if the proper name for Italy turns out to be Brzoy—will Andreas continue to

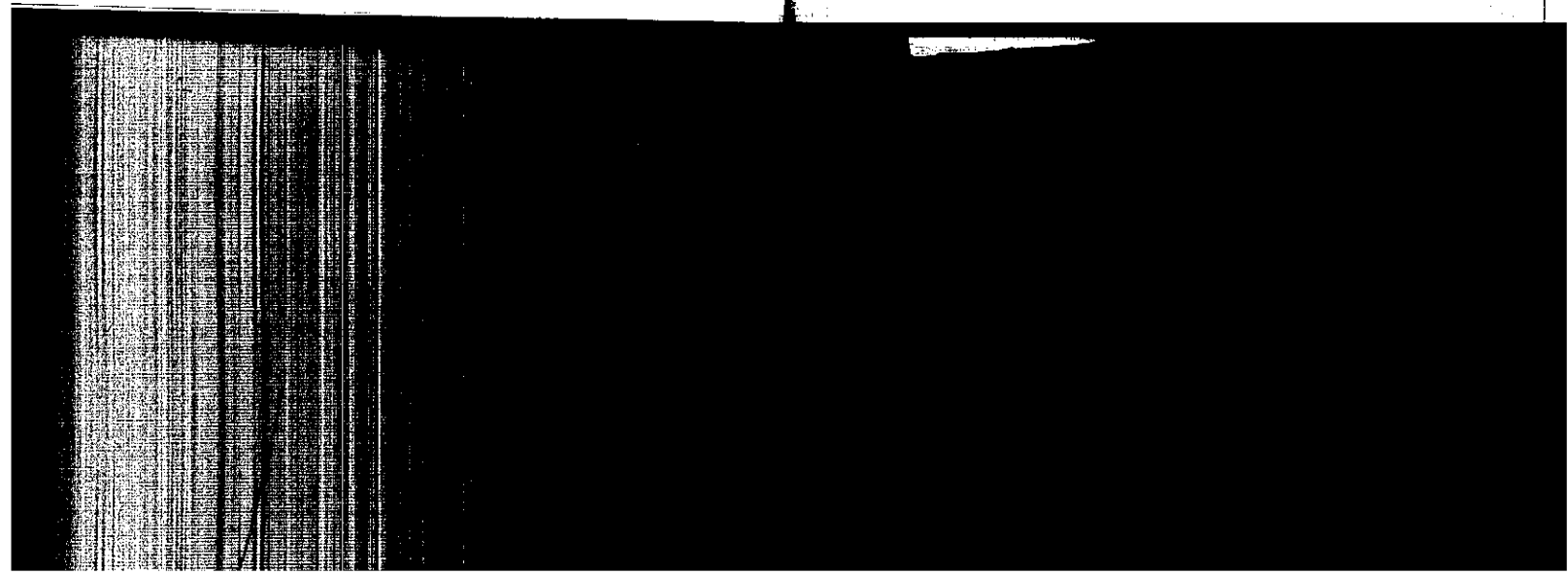
travel the world like the wandering moon with her borrowed light? I fear we failed to understand what he was saying or his reasons. What if every time he said *cities*, he meant *delusion*, for example?

## On Defloration

The actions of life are not so many. To go in, to go, to go in secret, to cross the Bridge of Sighs. And when you dishonored me, I saw that dishonor is an action. It happened in Venice; it causes the vocal cords to swell. I went booming through Venice, under and over the bridges, but you were gone. Later that day I telephoned your brother. What's wrong with your voice? he said.

## On Major and Minor

Major things are wind, evil, a good fighting horse, prepositions, inexhaustible love, the way people choose their king. Minor things include dirt, the names of schools of philosophy, mood



and not having a mood, the correct time. There are more major things than minor things overall, yet there are more minor things than I have written here, but it is disheartening to list them. When I think of you reading this, I do not want you to be taken captive, separated by a wire mesh lined with glass from your life itself, like some Elektra.

### On the Rules of Perspective

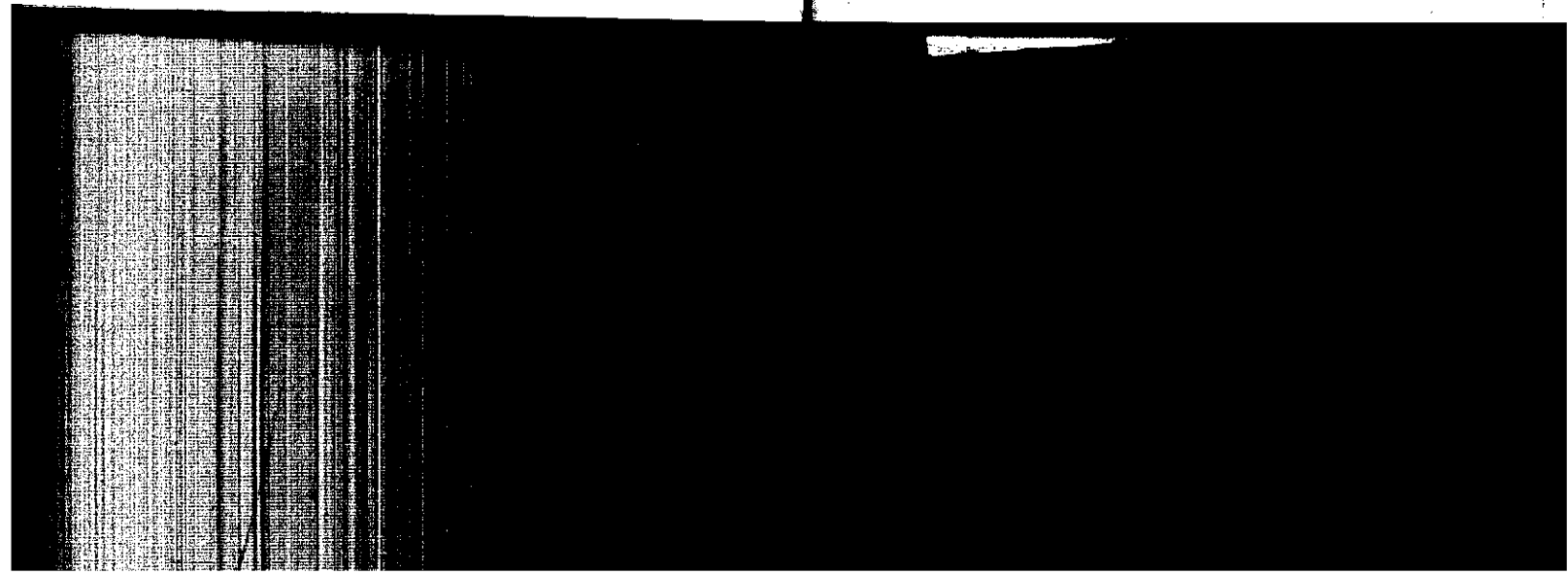
A bad trick. Mistake. Dishonesty. These are the views of Braque. Why? Braque rejected perspective. Why? Someone who spends his life drawing profiles will end up believing that man has one eye, Braque felt. Braque wanted to take full possession of objects. He said as much in published interviews. Watching the small shiny planes of the landscape recede out of his grasp filled Braque with loss so he smashed them. *Nature morte*, said Braque.

### On *Le Bonheur d'Être Bien Aimée*

Day after day I think of you as soon as I wake up. Someone has put cries of birds on the air like jewels.

### On Rectification

Kafka liked to have his watch an hour and a half fast. Felice kept setting it right. Nonetheless for five years they almost married. He made a list of arguments for and against marriage, including inability to bear the assault of his own life (for) and the sight of the nightshirts laid out on his parents' beds at 10:30 (against). Hemorrhage saved him. When advised not to speak by doctors in the sanatorium, he left glass sentences all over the floor. Felice, says one of them, had too much nakedness left in her.



### On Sleep Stones

Camille Claudel lived the last thirty years of her life in an asylum, wondering why, writing letters to her brother the poet, who had signed the papers. Come visit me, she says. Remember, I am living here with madwomen; days are long. She did not smoke or stroll. She refused to sculpt. Although they gave her sleep stones—marble and granite and porphyry—she broke them, then collected the pieces and buried these outside the walls at night. Night was when her hands grew, huger and huger until in the photograph they are like two parts of someone else loaded onto her knees.

### On Walking Backwards

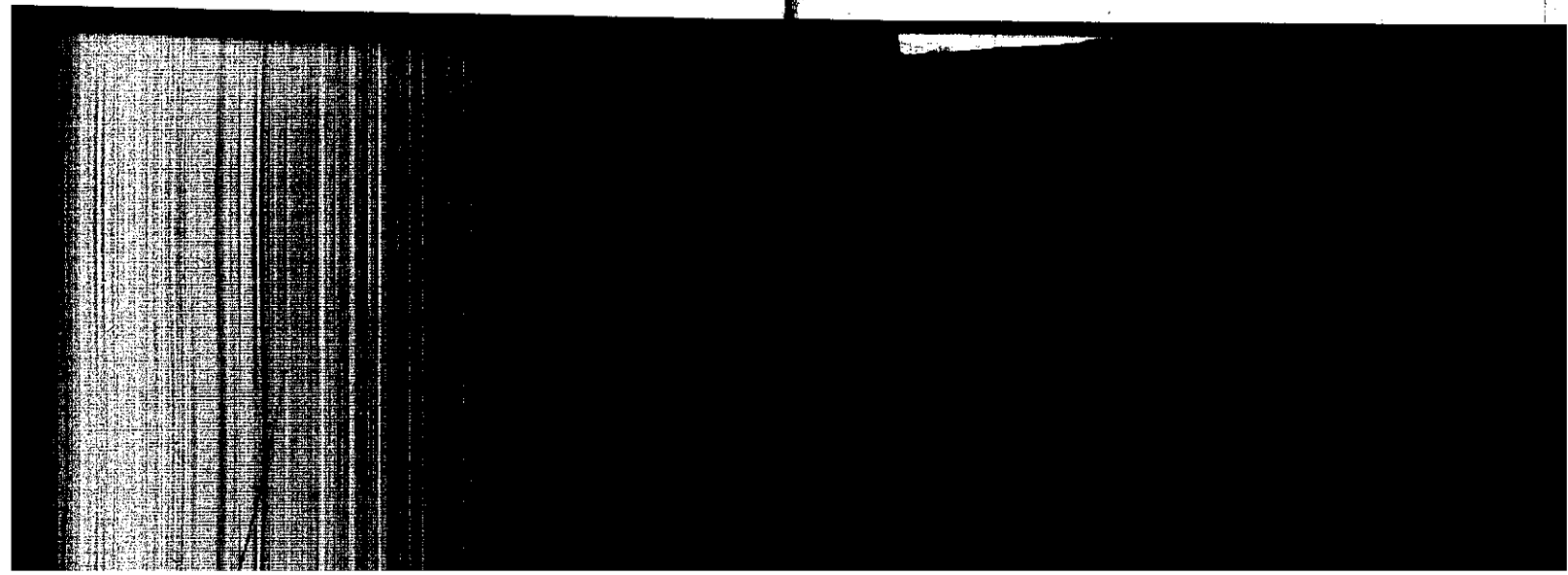
My mother forbid us to walk backwards. That is how the dead walk, she would say. Where did she get this idea? Perhaps from a bad translation. The dead, after all, do not walk backwards but they do walk behind us. They have no lungs and cannot call out but would love for us to turn around. They are victims of love, many of them.

### On the Mona Lisa

Every day he poured his question into her, as you pour water from one vessel into another, and it poured back. Don't tell me he was painting his mother, lust, et cetera. There is a moment when the water is not in one vessel nor in the other—what a thirst it was, and he supposed that when the canvas became completely empty he would stop. But women are strong. She knew vessels, she knew water, she knew mortal thirst.

### On Waterproofing

Franz Kafka was Jewish. He had a sister, Ottla, Jewish. Ottla married a jurist, Josef David, not Jewish. When the Nuremberg Laws were introduced to Bohemia-Moravia in 1942, quiet Ottla suggested to Josef David that they divorce. He at first refused. She spoke about sleep shapes and property and their two daughters and a rational approach. She did not mention, because she did not yet know the word, Auschwitz, where she would die in October 1943. After putting the apartment in order she packed





a rucksack and was given a good shoeshine by Josef David. He applied a coat of grease. Now they are waterproof, he said.

### On the End

What is the difference between light and lighting? There is an etching called *The Three Crosses* by Rembrandt. It is a picture of the earth and the sky and Calvary. A moment rains down on them; the plate grows darker. Darker. Rembrandt wakens you just in time to see matter stumble out of its forms.

### On Sylvia Plath

Did you see her mother on television? She said plain, burned things. She said I thought it an excellent poem but it hurt me. She did not say jungle fear. She did not say jungle hatred wild jungle weeping chop it back chop it. She said self-government she said end of the road. She did not say humming in the middle of the air what you came for chop.

### On Reading

Some fathers hate to read but love to take the family on trips. Some children hate trips but love to read. Funny how often these find themselves passengers in the same automobile. I glimpsed the stupendous clear-cut shoulders of the Rockies from between paragraphs of *Madame Bovary*. Cloud shadows roved languidly across her huge rock throat, traced her fir flanks. Since those days, I do not look at hair on female flesh without thinking, Deciduous?

### On Rain

It was blacker than olives the night I left. As I ran past the palaces, oddly joyful, it began to rain. What a notion it is, after all—these small shapes! I would get lost counting them. Who first thought of it? How did he describe it to the others? Out on the sea it is raining too. It beats on no one.



### On the Total Collection

From childhood he dreamed of being able to keep with him all the objects in the world lined up on his shelves and bookcases. He denied lack, oblivion or even the likelihood of a missing piece. Order streamed from Noah in blue triangles and as the pure fury of his classifications rose around him, engulfing his life, they came to be called waves by others, who drowned, a world of them.

### On Charlotte

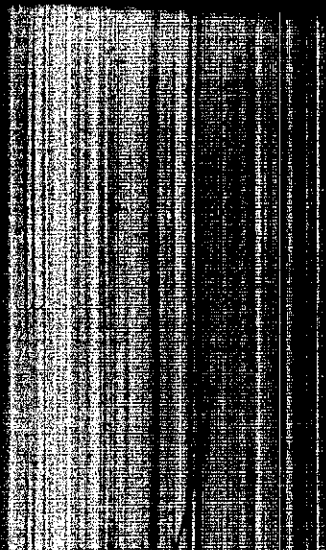
Miss Bronte & Miss Emily & Miss Anne used to put away their sewing after prayers and walk all three, one after the other, around the table in the parlor till nearly eleven o'clock. Miss Emily walked as long as she could, and when she died, Miss Anne & Miss Bronte took it up—and now my heart aches to hear Miss Bronte walking, walking on alone.

### On Sunday Dinner with Father

Are you going to put that chair back where it belongs or just leave it there looking like a uterus? (Our balcony is a breezy June balcony.) Are you going to let your face distorted by warring desires pour down on us all through the meal or tidy yourself so we can at least enjoy our dessert? (We weight down the corners of everything on the table with little solid-silver laws.) Are you going to nick your throat open on those woodpecker scalps as you do every Sunday night or just sit quietly while Laetitia plays her clarinet for us? (My father, who smokes a brand of cigar called *Dimanche Eternel*, uses them as ashtrays.)

### On the Youth at Night

The youth at night would have himself driven around the scream. It lay in the middle of the city gazing back at him with its heat and rose-pools of flesh. Terrific lava shone on his soul. He would ride and stare.



### On *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deyman*

A winter so cold that, walking on the Breestraat and you passed from sun to shadow, you could feel the difference run down your skull like water. It was the hunger winter of 1656 when Black Jan took up with a whore named Elsje Ottje and for a time they prospered. But one icy January day Black Jan was observed robbing a cloth merchant's house. He ran, fell, knifed a man and was hanged on the twenty-seventh of January. How he fared then is no doubt known to you: the cold weather permitted Dr. Deyman to turn the true eye of medicine on Black Jan for three days. One wonders if Elsje ever saw Rembrandt's painting, which shows her love thief in violent frontal foreshortening, so that his pure soles seem almost to touch the chopped-open cerebrum. Cut and cut deep to find the source of the problem, Dr. Deyman is saying as he parts the brain to either side like hair. Sadness comes groping out of it.

### On Orchids

We live by tunneling for we are people buried alive. To me, the tunnels you make will seem strangely aimless, uprooted orchids. But the fragrance is undying. A Little Boy has run away from Amherst a few Days ago, writes Emily Dickinson in a letter of 1883, and when asked where he was going, he replied, Vermont or Asia.

### On Penal Servitude

*Je hais ces brigands!* said an aristocrat named M-ski one day in Omsk as he strode past Dostoevski with flashing eyes. Dostoevski went in and lay down, hands behind his head.

### On Hölderlin's World Night Wound

King Oedipus may have had an eye too many, said Hölderlin and kept climbing. Above the tree line is as blank as the inside of a wrist. Rock stays. Names stay. Names fell on him, hissing.

### On Hedonism

Beauty makes me hopeless. I don't care why anymore I just want to get away. When I look at the city of Paris I long to wrap my legs around it. When I watch you dancing there is a heartless immensity like a sailor in a dead-calm sea. Desires as round as peaches bloom in me all night, I no longer gather what falls.

### On the King and His Courage

He arose laden with doubt as to how he should begin. He looked back at the bed where the grindstone lay. He looked out at the world, the most famous experimental prison of its time. Beyond the torture stakes he could see, nothing. Yet he could see.

### On Shelter

You can write on a wall with a fish heart, it's because of the phosphorus. They eat it. There are shacks like that down along the river. I am writing this to be as wrong as possible to you. Replace the door when you leave, it says. Now you tell me how wrong that is, how long it glows. Tell me.