THE WHIMS OF MEN

a review by Bridget Bell

Hannah Bonner. *Another Woman.* EastOver Press, 2024.

In the same way that people project individual tribulations onto song lyrics, belting Whitney or Dolly or Britney with a fervor that temporarily transforms the lyrics into their reality, it's difficult for me to read poetry without looking at it through the lens of my personal world. So, as I opened Hannah Bonner's debut poetry collection, *Another Woman*, I knew I would apply my own ordeal – a recent divorce and mid-life foray into dating – to its pages. This opportunity for introspection and self-reflection is one of the reasons I think we turn to poetry; it is cathartic to see our experiences – particularly hard, heartbreaking experiences – reflected back to us in lyricism and beauty. Bonner's collection does just that. She takes all the pain, the confusion, and the disillusionment of an ended relationship and crafts those emotions into compact verse, turning tumult into precise poetics.

I saw myself in the speaker's moments of self-doubt and triumph, in the moments of despair akin to "walking inside a nightmare" ("The Ascetic") and the moments of strength derived from "no longer begging" ("Still Life with Citrus in February"). In "In Kind," Bonner writes, "The scream lives in the mirror," and as I peered into the mirror of these poems, I recognized myself in their vulnerability and ache and honesty and bad choices and the ultimate wisdom gained from becoming "Another Woman" (a poem's title, as well as the book's) who "walks out of the space," from which she can declare in "Remember This," "I love myself. / I am the garden of wonder."

The collection opens with an epigraph from Franz Wright: "Rumi says, out beyond ideas / of doing good and evil / there is a field // I'll meet you there." For Bonner's speaker in "Inventory of Shimmers," that field, unburdened by concepts of good and evil, "could be any place: / endless expanses / of grasses amidst the golden rod." This metaphorical field outside of moral or ethical confines is one concept I love about this collection. It argues for a nuanced look at an extramarital affair – not rooting the poems solely in the betrayal normally attached to such relationships, but offering a complete picture, an opportunity for the reader to understand the motivations and humanity of "another woman." This book provides a full arc, opening with "Before the First" in the tense, fraught space before a line has been crossed but when an impending infraction is certain, when the affair will commence "any day now." And after that line is crossed, the poems relish the early moments that make new relationships so alluring, a time when "our hunger is never enough" ("Trance") and the physical connection is so fresh and raw that is feels "honey-streaked" and "foaming" ("Black Mountain, Highway 9"), "erotic as the pulse of skin before skin" ("Fireflies in July").

Ultimately, however, Bonner's speaker is functioning from a space of aftermath and remem-

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brance. From this vantage point where hindsight is 20/20, the reader develops sympathy for the anti-hero speaker, feels the whiplash of this on-again-off-again affair, winces at heartache that exudes from the title "And when he told her it was truly over this time." It feels bizarre to side with the mistress, and yet that is the genius of this collection. We hurt when the mistress hurts in all her waiting, "waiting for the coffee," and "more waiting // for that ache / and after, echo // of the ache." ("Waking Without You"). The expected title of this collection might be "The Other Woman," that idiomatic phrase to describe an illicit female lover, but such a title would be too singular for these poems. "The other woman" implies *one* other woman, but the speaker in Bonner's poem is a multitude of women. She is Lot's Wife. She is Mary. She is Dido. In short, the speaker of these poems refuses to be reduced to a stereotype, to an easy-to-despise caricature, declaring in "Instructions for Finishing," "I won't hate myself more than necessary." She is "Another Woman," as in *any* other woman – she could be you or me.

Form-wise, many of these poems are sparse, mimicking how a relationship's end can whittle the world down to a singular point of ache as in "Sun in January, Three Months Since You've Left," a title with as many words as the poem itself: "I can hear ice / all around me / breathing." Inversely, this tight form is also used to capture moments of beautiful relief when the haze of heartache begins to lift and moving on suddenly seems possible as in the poem "This Morning": "Wind devours me like a whole life / left open. / Space, allowance, stars — everything I'll take."

Readers will also notice a recurring motif throughout these poems: a deer appears repeatedly in the lines, functioning as a residual presence, as "deer print tracking / the perimeter of the house" ("Still Life with Citrus in February) often lingering on the periphery, often appearing in "the middle of the night" ("Night Memory") or in dreams. The deer imagery is concentrated predominantly in the center of the book with the final mention of this symbol occurring in the poem "Untitled" when the speaker says: "I know I am safe / when I sense the deer. // Only I can / startle them." In these two sparse couplets, there is a major tonal pivot. The speaker's attunement with the deer – this ability to sense the deer and therefore to choose to startle or not to startle the deer – represents an empowering, calm control, one we are hopeful has seeped over into the speaker's own life.

As I contemplated poem after poem of this lyrically compact collection, particularly as I progressed towards the book's end, I kept thinking of the Toni Morrison quote: "I only know that I will never again trust my life, my future, to the whims of men."* Morrison's line captures the parting ethos of these poems that declare in "Another Ending for Aphrodite, at the end of the volume, it is "better to be alone . . . than beholden to another" – a hard-won truth. ■

* Qtd. in Elissa Schappell, Claudia Brodsky Lacour, "Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction," *Paris Review* 128 (1993): web.

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