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Boats for Women

David Gilson

Boats for Women

by Sandra Yannone

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"They were so hard to find," Sandra Yannone mourns in her poem "A Night to Remember Your Beautiful Gone," continuing, "The statistics suggest / casualty—not to mention / the chance to be better / but not perfect." Because life on the sea, the heart of this impeccable new collection, offers the chance for one, and for women especially, "to be better," if "not perfect."

Perfection, we know, is not and cannot be the goal of the artist. Perhaps only nature is capable of such exacting accomplishment, a thesis Yannone proves for us in these poems time and again. In this way, she follows a lineage including, perhaps obviously, Elizabeth Bishop, who only finds perfection (as opposed to disaster) when she personifies the organic form of a giant snail: "My sides move in rhythmic waves, just off the ground . . . Ah, but I know my shell is beautiful, and high, and glazed, and shining. I know it well, although I have not seen it . . . . Inside, it is as smooth as silk, and I, I fill it to perfection." That desire for perfection filled is a visceral desire in both poets, Bishop and Yannone, the latter of whom writes similarly of a relationship with Bess Houdini:

> When she turned
>
> to look in the mirror, I saw her face
> was the reflection of want,
>
> so I backed against the wall
> to let her fill the room,
>
> shut my eyes and waited for her
> to unlock me.

This poem is telling because, though the poems of *Boats for Women* move across time, from the early twentieth century, the days of grand ships like the *Titanic* and *Mackay-Bennett,* to the present, what they share is a visceral "reflection of want" that backs us, as readers, against the wall, waiting for Yannone's deft handling of line and image and intelligence to unlock us.

If a full display of one's own neurosis (what I argue is the worst of contemporary poetry's descendants of confessionalism) is what you crave, Yannone's *Boats for Women* is not for you; though, I would argue, we are better, smarter readers for her constant measure of line and image, as aforementioned, and of restraint, of what is revealed and what is not. This restraint is a surprise I have grown to love more and more with each reading of the collection. Not that we should ever think of sex, and especially queer sex, as gratuitous (I'm a queer writer myself, after all, and that would be hypocritical of me to claim), but how surprisingly taken I am by the litany of lovers offered in "Thin Objects":

> You can admit
> the women
> who induced
>
> your dizziness,
> your shortness
> of breath
>
> are now small
> trinkets you no longer
> deny you collect.

What wonder in those short lines! What coy implication found in such restraint to produce a type of dizziness and shortness of breath not only for the poet remembering her own beloveds, but for us now, too, remembering ours. How superlatively shaken we are, for the better, by being told it is okay for us to think of them now as "small / trinkets you no

longer / deny you collect." Queer poetry needs more poetry like this: poetry that does not offer everything on the surface, but that makes you dig to find the collection you will subsequently not want to deny. Muriel Rukeyser, Elizabeth Bishop, D. A. Powell, Sandra Yannone: these are poets who do this extremely well.

The seas of *Boats for Women* are not all literal oceans, though all these bodies move between danger and possibility. They are the minefield of a simple kitchen à la Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*: "You imagine everything in the kitchen / Rigged with an everyday suburban bomb." They are the possibilities of spring: "So I know / about desiring spring, how slowly // winter evaporates. I use the taste / it leaves on my tongue to teach / other mouths to taste." Of course, danger and possibility are not always opposite, as Yannone explains in "The Betrayer's Reply," because "it's the skin that produces / the scar, not the original bite," and we're left, thankfully unknowing if the scar is an object we should desire or repel. And perhaps this inbetweenness—of danger and possibility—is what the best of queer poetics can give us. A "sinking, sinking, sinking // away from view," Yannone offers of the 1956 tragedy of the Stockholm, but perhaps an *ars poetica,* too, where we can sink and take "everything shining and gleaming and beautiful" with us.

The navigation of gender is perhaps *Boats for Women*'s most poignant and necessary contribution to contemporary letters. In the title poem, Yannone moves swiftly between the sinking Titanic—"Yes, the boat sank . . . Yes is the way the years oxidize the steel, and yes wipes the name *Titanic* off the bow"—and sinking into the comfort of a relationship: "Sometimes when I kiss her, I am leaving a yes on her lips to remind her that I will go down with the ship. Sometimes when she whispers yes, she is staying on board. But there is always room in the lifeboats for two more women. Yes is the fact that if we were alive on that night, we would have lived." In this way, gender becomes imaginatively performed (à la Judith Butler) and generatively reformed (à la Michel Foucault). Because when it comes to gender, Yannone wonders

from the collection's beginning, "Who decided that // We had to choose which cells / To hide behind and enter?" *Boats for Women* is a sturdy raft on which to spend days navigating the messy but wonderful waters of gender and disaster, craft and progress. And Yannone is a more-than-capable captain for the journey.

—D. Gilson