

Review Essay: Five books of poetry by Connie Voisine

The Bower (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 71 p., ISBN 9780226613789; *And God Created Women* (Durham, NC: Bull City Press, 2018) 33 p., ISBN 9781495178818; *Calle Florista* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015) 64 p., ISBN 9780226295329; *Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 59 p., ISBN 9780226863528; *Cathedral of the North* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 67 p., ISBN 9780822957379.

It is no mistake that Connie Voisine's latest poetry collection, *The Bower*, consists of a single, book-length poem. In it, a visitor to Northern Ireland documents her travels while contemplating that country's history of sectarian violence. There may be no better way to contemplate the volatility of borders than to remove them, creating a book that embodies the idea that the divisions we create — between poems, as well as neighborhoods, religions, peoples — are both rhetorical and real, realities we create through rhetoric. Within a poetry book, the effect is meaningful. While there are sometimes page breaks between stanzas in *The Bower*, suggesting major caesuras between thoughts, these shifts are not great enough to demand a change in diction or form. The whole book is arranged in free verse couplets, in the voice of a single speaker. It hangs together as a single train of thought and feels fresh in its patient unfolding.

Voisine's American visitor to Belfast sees Northern Ireland as a country populated by ghosts and survivors, haunted by its recent and distant pasts. Tracing the very local and specific dynamics of The Troubles and their legacy, she also reveals the startlingly personal implications of the human tendency to divide self from other, us from them. *The Bower* explores relationships between neighbors, how pedestrian hate can be, and how hate, like love, is a kind of bond.

The poem's protagonist travels with her small child, to whom she must explain everything they encounter: police tape, schoolyard questions about religious affiliation, casual references to violence and bereavement. The child, "D," is a useful foil, asking the right naïve questions. At bedtime, she and her mother read a book of Irish legends, where a king's children are stolen from him and turned into swans by their jealous stepmother:

[...] Before drifting off
D performs the tasks for safe passage—kiss the bear, flip the pillow,
turn on the night-light teacher gave for being good—then asks me,
When did this story happen? The books say it's one of the three

great tragedy narratives from before St. Patrick and in those days
sorrow was not known in Ireland. I tell her, *Before everything*. (12-13)

The daughter's presence heightens the mother's vulnerability, and her innocent exertions to make sense of what she sees heightens the apparent senselessness of The Troubles. In one instance, after they visit a museum, the mother asks the child what she thought of a display they saw of portraits of survivors. The child's answer:

... *It might help*

*to have sounds and things you can touch. What kinds of things?
I don't know, her hair, some clothes, the bomb? (9)*

The parent-child relationship is essential to how Voisine explores the themes of violence and clannishness here. In trying to apply order and meaning to a history of murder and mayhem, the mother continually rediscovers how profoundly chaotic the world is — the world into which she has brought this child. What other love reduces us to our most animal?

What were you thinking, bringing a child into this knowing
called the world? What could she learn from you, one
who deep inside your murky soul agrees it matters
who was shot, that you'd do awful things to save her. (50)

The mother's conflict, between her desire to protect her daughter from the harsh realities of the world and the inevitable obligation to initiate her into them, personalizes the tensions that surround the visitors. Yet it is the family's position of remove, of which the poem's speaker is ever conscious, that really animates the narrative. This distance, from her position as "the uninformed / American so clearly without a dog in the fight" (43), makes it possible for the speaker to move and empathize across sectarian lines. Indeed, empathy is the axis upon which the poem/book turns, as its protagonist struggles to understand other people's loves and hatreds, how strange they seem, even as she feels her own so viscerally. "I want to know more, what is this kind of remembering?" she says of a young man's promise to never forget the sacrifices his forefathers made for a united Ireland. But she also admits, "I know this fever, intractable" (18).

The Bower appears at a moment when sectarianism is a drug of choice around the world, Brexit and its ominous Irish backstop the relevant examples here. This lends the book a certain urgency, but one that Voisine doesn't exploit so much as abstracts. She is interested in the contested Irish border as the site of particular events, but also as a metaphor for many other

sites of conflict, for places where subjectivities fail to overlap and where truth fragments into differing perspectives. One of the most lyrically exciting passages of the poem begins:

The epistemology of, nature and scope, the hedge
the boundary of garden, bog field, the high field,
and the paddock field. Won't you dissect the field
of knowledge of the Modern Mistress stove, the wee tap
on the side, granny had on in the very spot closest
to Scotland (eighteen miles) in all the North... (54)

Where does one field become another? How do we tell where one thing ends and another begins? The diction here mimics this confusion. As sentences split and interrupt each other, the speaker reaches for narrative order through an uncertainty about what is real and true, until finally settling on a kind of half-explanation:

...according to evidentialism, there is
materialist proof of all the Belfasts and their existence,
the existence of her French doll, wooden and hollow
as a spool, the crown of nails for knitting. Luminosity
of cognition is this antler pocketknife purchased with leftover
wedding money whilst on a honeymoon on the Golden Mile,
and let's just call this noble photo of her father in his brass-button
uniform true, if only by accident or testimony or love. (54-55)

Truth is a product of "accident or testimony or love," which makes it as changeable as any of those. Voisine strives to make visible "all the Belfasts," a prismatic picture of a place divided as much by conceptual and experiential borders as by physical ones.

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This interest in the boundary between self and other, between your truth and mine, has threaded through all five of the poetry collections Voisine has produced in the past twenty years. She often plays in the balance between identification and alienation, searching for the place where subjectivities overlap. Her poetry is often written from a fish-out-of-water perspective, in the voices of travelers and visitors, strangers in strange lands. Her speakers' position as outsiders often lends them a startled self-awareness and a clarity of vision.

2015's *Calle Florista* focused on another contested border, the one between the southern United States and northern Mexico. (Voisine teaches at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces.) It's a long way from Ireland, but there are striking similarities: the violence used

to enforce the border; the influence of Catholic ritual and iconography; questions about the translatability of language and experience; and speakers who, finding themselves away from home, experience their surroundings through the lens of isolation. "After the First Road" interrogates wanderlust:

...Surely I must know grief flocks
to any surface, those in motion as well:

the slipper of wind, electric lines driving and
rising, the smooth pates of fields,
and the moon punctuating, *Oh*.

After the first road, I admit I'm no longer
going home. To keep from the next,
from the rapt syntax of go, to stop

gorging on the gorgeous, royal unknown,
quit the addiction of the clean slate,
I must try harder. (31)

The speaker has left home, and even while her griefs have followed, newness has an enduring, addictive appeal. But there are dangerous, even violent, implications to seeing an unfamiliar place as "a clean slate." The visitor should beware of the path she cuts through unfamiliar territory, as the poet acknowledges in "New World":

I knew a lot, once.
Wasn't Naturalism about to happen?
And really, the French and the English,
why should they quit—a battle here, one there,
and their navies refulgent?
And that man, saying such things:
"the night is the very experience of *there is*."
Once I knew
that pastries could have a thousand leaves.
The bishop wore a fabulous hat,
and forks and knives
were polished monthly to meditate
in their velvet boxes.

Here the sky represents nothing
but blue, and we go along
inventing new ways of dying:
by the cutting off of hands,
of hair, death by one dirty blanket, and
death by walking.
Death by six pine nuts, by bloody
sunset, by obscure mirage. (15-16)

Here, as above, the speaker slips free of what she used to know — signifiers of wealth, culture, and status — and discovers a world without established metaphors. “Here the sky represents nothing,” but that blank slate is vulnerable to the inventions of a “we” that has abandoned all it once knew. With this gesture, shifting from the singular to the plural, Voisine links the individual’s hunt for novel experience with the violent history of colonialism.

Voisine’s strongest poems rack focus this way, expanding from the internal to a very broad view, locating the lyric in a narrative context. While her work is often narrative, it plays less with the sequential, ordering work of narrative — what Tony Hoagland has called “the grammar of the experience” (184) — and more with its perspectival distance, how we look at our surroundings and how they change our self-perception. Voisine’s poems don’t tell stories as much as they investigate the storytelling process, revealing where the speaker is positioned within the narrative and how the story is changed by her presence. She balances in the space between self and other to see whether that distance can be bridged or, at least, made visible.

In her 2001 debut, *Cathedral of the North*, it was the distance of memory that she sought to traverse. This book, too, was located on a border, at the rural, working class, French-speaking margins of American culture where the poet grew up, in a Franco-American family in northern Maine. “How do I / close that household we keep inside my brain?” (60) asks the bereaved speaker of “Grandfather.” The household Voisine evokes here is that of childhood, ancestry, and origins, where we often find ourselves inside our brains, even when we think we have moved to somewhere else entirely.

These poems are populated by images of the poverty and rugged natural beauty of northern New England: children undressing by a wood stove, stars on a clear winter night, boiled potatoes with sugar, calloused hands, and government cheese. They are haunted, spoken in the voice of someone who has left a place and looks back at it from a distance that is unbridgeable. “My memories are the kind janitors / sweep up from cutting room floors, scraps,” begins “What Was So Beautiful About the Father,” “the before and after, but not the moment itself” (31). This long poem at the center of the book catalogues the injuries suffered by a parent who supports his family through logging and other physical labor. It alternates between verse and prose, as if searching for a form capable of capturing things as they really were. Narrative passages about the father’s life and injuries are contrasted with more lyrical ones that depict him from his child’s point of view:

In my small scrap of world, my father is
fragile as those bubbles and cannot withstand
fate and evil, equivalents.
Being poor is my father.

A Russian doll series, the largest
is this Evil, and it encloses the doll of Poor.
My father is the next doll, he
disappears into Poor while completely containing
me. I am lucky, the smallest doll
whose features are plain, barely articulated
by the brush, the one whose body won't
open. Who can't bear that she is the reason
the others' sturdy, wood torsos have split. (36-37)

This wounded and fragile father is Christlike, but in his remoteness rather than his virtue. He is contrasted with a middle-class father on television, "mowing the lawn, polishing his car, whatever luxurious task — I had no real idea what that kind of father would do on a Saturday" (39). It is the child's responsibility to protect him from his own sense of failure, his awareness that "he was not providing well" (39). The pains of poverty are drawn with exacting specificity here, and Voisine articulates the knowledge accumulated by living amid deprivation:

Many people know you can live, and even work off and on, with a broken back.
Many know what it means to a family when its spine has been broken.
Many know the exhaustion of public assistance.
How fear can pretend it is pride.
How deeply unreasonable the notion of an omnipotent god seems at these times.
(34-35)

"Many" here gestures toward a gap in knowledge between some readers and others, softly indicating a breach between a knowing "us" and an uninitiated "them." A question about empathy hovers here, about what the speaker can communicate and what the reader can understand, between what is lived and what can be told. Lived experience is similarly untranslatable in the poem, "In English," where the speaker struggles to render in English memories that exist in another tongue:

Did you speak English then?

No.

When did you learn how?

I didn't *learn* anything. As a child I
felt things
in my body.

The shock came later, from the brain,
the naming. (16)

Queries such as “*What is it?*” and “*How is it wounded?*” are answered with “I don’t know in English” (16-17). Memories are fragmented and shape-shifting. From her position in the present, the speaker cannot answer the question “*What exactly happened?*” with any certainty (17). The original “language” of these experiences was that of the body, and it cannot be translated into some other form of knowing.



The relationship between embodied experience and subjectivity occupies Voisine’s other two poetry collections: her 2008 book, *Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream*, and her recent chapbook, *And God Created Women*. Neither is set in a particular geographic location, but in both the female body is a place from which the poet observes the world and through which experience is filtered.

Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream appeared several years after *Cathedral of the North*, and it feels like a calculated departure from that earlier outing, as though a young Voisine is purposefully experimenting with new forms and themes. Many of the poems are more formally inventive, with longer, fuller lines, sometimes scattered across the page rather than gathered into stanzas. No longer oriented toward the past, the female speakers of these poems are rootless, engaging with literature, ideas, and places that are excitingly, and sometimes dangerously, unfamiliar. The poems’ broad outward reach suggests selves struggling for purchase in a too-wide world, veering between freedom and flotsam, constructing their identities through a process of elimination. “First Taste” recounts in second-person a young woman’s first years of independence in New York City:

...You are beginning to learn you had a different
kind of childhood, and the shock is only starting to sink in

so you see suffering everywhere. People
you don’t even know tell you their troubles; each woman
at your school has her own well of sorrow. One has a child

who will eat \$200 of groceries a night so she can throw it up.
One has breast cancer, another has a severely disabled
adult child. The subway is a study hall of suffering.

You watch and intuit, read faces, bodies with your high-
powered lens of pain. [...] (28-29)

The young speaker projects herself into the people she observes through her “lens of pain.” She is “bingeing on feeling,” but also searching for a “we,” discovering that the suffering of others is

both the same as and different from her own. Over time her skin thickens somewhat to loneliness, grief, and suffering (“You stop worrying / so much about where the homeless can sleep” [33]), but the pain of others remains a kind of touchstone. Her daily, urban encounters with strangers and the mostly short-lived friendships she makes serve to shape and narrow down her sense of self. In the final section of the poem, set years later, the speaker finds photographs she took “of people without asking,” of “shadows, piles of sticks, graffiti,” and is surprised:

...Now you wonder,
what are these images of? These photographs, once perfect expressions
seem boring. Your physical distance from your living
subjects indicated how scared you were, that’s what they document,
when you now wish for an image of the kids at school,
naptime, or the igloo city you helped them build
after a snowstorm trapped you all at school. That distance you stood
in your photographs in inverse proportion to the power
this world had to wreck you... (35-36)

The stanza break between “living” and “subjects” is particularly powerful, suggesting that the distance between the observer and the observed is no less great than that between the observer and her own lived experience. The photos, intended to document the world around her, instead capture her separation from and vulnerability to it.

Such vulnerability is a prominent feature of life in a female body. “Dangerous for Girls” describes how the potential for violence stalks young women:

...there were many anonymous girls that summer,
there always are, who lower their necks to the stone
and pray, not to God but to the Virgin, herself once
a young girl, chosen in her room by an archangel.
Instead of praying that summer I watched television, reruns of
a UFO series featuring a melancholic woman detective
who had gotten cancer and was made sterile by aliens. I watched
infomercials: exercise machines, pasta makers,
and a product called Nails Again With Henna,
ladies, make your nails steely strong, naturally,
and then the photograph of Chandra Levy
would appear again, below a bright red number
such as 81, to indicate the days she was missing. (19-20)

Voisine's ability to leap so adeptly — from the internal world, to Christian imagery, to science fiction, infomercials, and the nightly news — gives the collection an omnivorous, searching, and youthful energy. She seems to be mapping the process by which lived, embodied experience — riding the subway, praying, watching television — accumulates into knowledge, an embodied understanding of life's stakes.

Those stakes are palpable ten years later, in her 2018 chapbook, *And God Created Women*, which contains thirteen poems written from within the contested territory of the female body. These poems are more playful than much of Voisine's work; the youthful searching energy is burned away, leaving behind a seasoned depth of vision. Short lines without stanza breaks give many of them a breathless, urgent quality. In her version of the creation story, God gives Eve "some great hair, / full of body and a lovely reddish-blond," and "great tits— / large and ebullient" (15), but Eve's less well-endowed progeny sneak Cheetohs under a stairwell. "Shameful" begins with an apology for having "fucked up / your day by my body in / those old pink sweatpants / that don't fit and are stained / from a cooking accident" (4). The speaker's frumpy middle-aged body may be a kind of transgression, but she soon admits, "I am only ashamed / in some distant, uninvolved way" (4), and concludes the poem with an invitation to hold hands on public transport, with its cast of sympathetic characters:

beside the woman who smelled
different from any of my people,
the man who said mother-
fucker many times in various
places in one long sentence
into a phone beside a strollered
and beribboned baby (pierced ears)
who twitched in her guileless
sleep, and then if you could say
I am hateful and despairing,
I'd console, *we all are too.* (5)

Again here, a "we" appears, to shift the individual out of a mode of body-related shame and into one of communion ("we all are"), which the judgmental "you" is invited to join.

In "Self-Portrait as Medic," "Self-Portrait as Sphinx," and "Self-Portrait as Cop," Voisine employs *dramatis personae* to imagine other points of view, other poetic dictions. Her "cold-blooded" cop swaggers around a crime scene, trying "to be someone who fixes things, people" (30). Her Sphinx speaks in riddles, and her medic admits to her charges, "I love // your wounds more than my own" (8). These characters have a freedom that most of the other poems' speakers cannot enjoy. The position of the female body is one in which even acts of generosity and empathy imply risk. In "Neighborhood," a woman opens her front door expecting a friend

but finds there an angry young stranger, “thin and sewed with ink, shapes / askew up his neck” (21). The threat is implied but obvious: the woman and her baby alone in the apartment, the angry stranger at the open door. The poem chronicles a few seconds of terrified thought, the memories and fears that might occur to you in “the moments / of belief, trust / when you open / your face / to a stranger” (18), moments filled with terrible vulnerability.

In a 2016 interview, Voisine acknowledged a shift in her thinking about “place” in her work. “I keep thinking about my speaker’s location in her body as more important than anything else,” she said, “which seems a significant change from my usual practice. The environment of the female body, as I approach my middle ages, is THE formative experience from which I write.”

For the reader, however, this “significant change” feels more like a pivot. In one passage of *The Bower*, the speaker and her daughter duck out of a museum exhibit early:

On the way out, a woman in a photo, strange dress and shoes,
watches workers on break. I study her empty buckets
and wonder about her days, tasks, pains. What did she bring?
Some kind of lunch for her workers? Water? A boy
shirtless and shoeless is about the toss a stone at a horse.
Today, I am the boy... (38)

Projecting herself into the picture, the speaker projects herself into the bodies of the woman with her buckets, the boy about to throw a stone. This effort is repeated throughout the book, with the child, the husband, the taxi driver, the homeless man, the next-door neighbor, the police officer, the veteran, as the speaker struggles to understand what drives regular, reasonable people to hatred and violence.

Susan Sontag warned that, “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (8), and Voisine’s art seems to reside inside that warning: How can “we,” rather than be taken for granted, instead be described, felt, or experienced? How do I know when I belong? How is belonging known or felt? Where is the border between self and other? What are the limits of our ability to identify and empathize with one another? Can I know what is it like to live in your body? *The Bower* is presumably a book primarily about place, but like much of Voisine’s work, it asks fundamental questions about empathy, which are also questions about embodiment.

There are several threads that weave through Connie Voisine's oeuvre: a bracing sensitivity to socio-economic class; an awareness of political and sectarian borders; a symbolic vocabulary clearly influenced by Catholicism; and a peripatetic quality, perhaps the influence of her own wide travels. But moments of encounter, where one opens one's face to a stranger, are perhaps her work's most notable refrain and the one with the greatest relevance to our current historical moment.

Perhaps empathy is just hatred's other, braver, face. Both are responses to the pain and shock of vulnerability. Empathy is easy before we fully understand just how fundamentally we can damage one another. The child's presence in *The Bower* illustrates this. She is the "before" picture, capturing butterflies in her gentle hands the summer before her trip to Belfast, where she will see literal blood in the streets. The "after" picture is everyone else, those whom the family encounters in Northern Ireland, as well as the child's mother, who despite her remove from that particular conflict, understands sectarian passion well enough.

At one point, later in *The Bower*, late-night internet surfing brings the protagonist to an article about her own home town "in a remote wooded state." The article's Black author is offended by the ignorance of locals who ask to touch her daughter's hair and "can't imagine / what it's like to live in houses that are so cheap, the houses in which I [Voisine's speaker] grew up." The speaker reels, "I am pierced—is this shame, anger, both? I mumble all / the rest of the day about houses, what makes them cheap" (47). Empathy drains away in the rising tide of her bitterness toward the unknown author:

Not hard to see how even strangers could become so fiercely
and not at all abstractedly estranged, harder to imagine speaking
across years, birth, and fear. Batten, button, zip right up. Meanwhile,
here in the paper, an anniversary: "We in the Easter Rising Committee
would like to make it clear that we are unrepentant Irish republicans
who uphold the right of those who took on the might
of the British Empire to do so by force of arms. We make
no apologies for that. We will not be inviting unionist, loyalists
or any manifestation of the British state to our commemorations."
The unionists had already turned the invitation down. (48)

The speaker's affront and her impulse to "batten, button, zip right up" in self-protection, is juxtaposed with the stubborn, sprawling legacy of sectarian hatred in Northern Ireland. This recalls the moment from *Calle Florista*, discussed earlier, where the mindset of the individual contemporary traveler subtly echoes that of the colonial settler. This echo is a call to attention, a

reminder that violent histories are made up of individual grievances and the choices that grow out of them. All of us, if we are honest, can relate to hatred; we all have the instinct for it. Voisine shows how easily we slide into it.

Voisine has said that she comes from “an insular, very specific culture.” It is tempting to conjecture that her background, along the remote border between the U.S. and Canada in northern Maine, informs her interest in borderlands and her awareness that divisions between “us” and “them” can be both provisional and as unanswerable as gospel. Those origins certainly seem to temper her sense of entitlement about the people and places she depicts in her work. Her desire to make visible her own position within her narratives, to complicate acts of seeing and telling and knowing what the truth is, is a refreshing interrogation of confessional poetry itself. In her poems, the benevolence, innocence, or omnipotence of the poetic speaker is never assured. Voisine maintains a penchant for self-revelation, while also practicing careful skepticism toward her own subjectivity. If her readers pity her (as she hopes in *The Bower* that they may), it is because her blindresses and biases as our storyteller are made plain. At times, we feel we might belong to some collective that, by a poetic slight-of-hand, she creates through her self-revelation — the “we” that exists between the poet and her reader.

Voisine’s having left a specific, regional culture and lived outside of it for a long time may account for the sense of displacement, longing, and ambivalence in many of these poems. But there is also a sense of celebration and adventure here that is very much located in the experience in female liberation. Women’s fairly recent freedom to cross the border of the front doorstep and face the risks and vulnerabilities that lay beyond, makes Voisine’s work feel gently new. “*Where am I?*” the speaker of “This is for the silver of highway” asks repeatedly. This poem is an ode to the open road, or perhaps more specifically to the vulnerable territory that lies in the borderland between here and there. It ends with a sort of toast:

...Here’s to
not where I’m coming from and not where I’m going.
Here’s to gypsy movement (as my grandmother
calls it), the infinity of living between. (57)

This, the closing poem of *Rare High Meadow of Which I Might Dream*, was published in 2008. More than a decade later, the question, *Where am I?*, still animates Connie Voisine’s poetry. She occupies a fertile, liminal poetic space, between lyric and narrative, both inside and outside of the scenes and images she creates. The ability to tolerate the discomfort of such infinite in-between places is an enviable skill in our troubled times.

-Abby Paige

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