

ZACH SAVICH

On Carrie Olivia Adams's
Intervening Absence

Intervening Absence, by Carrie Olivia Adams. Boise, ID: Ahsakta Press, 2009.

The poetry in Carrie Olivia Adams's first book uses doubt to enhance its vision; uncertainty, treated with precision, clarifies her subjects. "A chin rests in the palm angled towards it / Or a window," Adams writes in the first of four "Intervening Absence" poems that appear throughout the book. Here, as elsewhere in the volume, the point is not just the clever linguistic shift—that the final phrase modifies both what the chin is angled toward and where it is resting—but that such subtle, surprising moments turn indeterminacy into distinct perspectival complexity. Often, these moments shuttle a reader swiftly between the observer and the observed: in a way that is multiple, not muddled, you see a chin and hand that are contained, alone, and you also see them resting near the larger frame of a window.

In activating such layered frames, turning moods of uncertainty into modes of discovery, Adams shows that expectancy is not passive but a heightened experience of time. In the sequence "Notes toward a Short Film," Adams interrupts an atmospheric description of a balcony conversation (in which "We are not watching faces, but his shirt flaps blowing") with a query that, by lingering in its uncertainties, moves from conjecture ("But maybe") to realized action:

But maybe this is a silent film.

And all that could be told will be spoken
by her hand as it repetively traces the inside
of her forearm. Maybe we see
only her fingers.

The hand's motion, like a phonograph needle, marks both time's steady continuance and a kind of eddy or pause; as in cinema (Adams has produced celebrated poem-movies), a still moment is still an ongo-

ing moment, made more tense the longer it is held. In "Notes toward a Short Film," held moments flicker between imagistic and expository figures, showing that, in poetry, thought itself can unfold like a dolly shot, like an image. "Her hair blows across the lens // Even the accidentals will remain // This itself was unexpected," Adams writes in a three-line section. The lines' rhetoric develops their image further—we realize the hair across the lens was unexpected and lasting—even as it moves into reported thought, toward the conceptual. The last line, though summative and expository, causes us to look back on the image from a new vantage: the experience of finding the accidental lasting, extant, will also remain.

These lines, like those quoted above and many others in the book, seem spoken by a character who is taking notes about a film while she is living it. Her notes suggest a larger surrounding script, often evoking an observation's importance but not its exact meaning: "I believe he is stuffing his pockets with bones"; "For now, suspension"; "I do not know how to find the grave, or if I will be able to read it"; "Should he answer? // And if he were to answer, / should he too, put his lips to the water?"; "Today, you are not whispering / me, not whispered."

More radically, such notations become part of the script itself; once treated as real, they are reacted to, as though the film changes around its characters' perceptions, doubts, and imaginations. Here, Adams moves from explicitly cinematic elements (e.g., description of light and music) to gentle speculation ("perhaps," "some days," the "or" that drives the juxtaposition of scissors and warmth) to make the descriptive lines dynamically lived:

Outside: gauze and blue light,
glass breaks in the snowy courtyard. Music
indistinguishable from the sound
of breakage. Perhaps it would be
if you were listening—

Instead, you want to watch me. Some days.
I want you to. Watch me.

Tiny scissors.
Or the smallest moment of warmth.
Standing above you.
Strung. Grabbing.
& Lost.

—outside the door, the lesser town. Contorted
faces of wooden puppets mid moan.

("Pockets")

This situational uncertainty—who is watching? what does language cause and what does it respond to?—differs from Adams's moments of productive, linguistic uncertainty, yet benefits, similarly, from the clarity of her focus. This clarity aligns us with Adams's unknowing, so that we depend on her confident guidance when further surprises crop up; the clarity of her doubt makes her trustworthy. In the gorgeous ending to "A History of Drowning," the speaker cannot tell if an item is "a rope or a scarf you're holding" and then, like someone living real emotions on a stage set, asserts "That lake may be real or imagined. / The hands are not." The hands, thus, become real in contrast to the lake's "may be" state; that is, the hands are real, in this situation, because the poem says so. Because we depend on the sequence's voice for such information, the casually causal link that follows seems to follow logically: "Because of this, you are collecting gravel from the driveway / to keep in a small tin box by the bed. / Imagining the sound keeps you awake at night."

In my favorite moments, this type of passionate insistence makes "curves demand to be letters" with an actuality that I miss in more flatly ponderous lines ("awake in the middle / of a dream / dreaming"; "Now the bridge bridges nothing"). Particularly in "Vermillion," an air of inflamed desperation ("taking / my hands to the butcher / to punish them for looking at you") causes Adams's speaker to grasp at a compelling array of stuff (couch cushions, radiators, a burning coat, "blinds at the graphite seams of a front") and, in counterpoint with such precise variety, to speak with a bluntness that differs from the nuanced ambiguity of other sequences. Reminding me of Sarah Manguso's work, these confident, blunt lines convey awestruck hugeness: "She swells to unavoidable whiteness"; "When I met you I began it"; "And windows / All prodding at the pulsing nothing."

"The commonplace might be miraculous // and never enough," Adams writes, showing her book's characteristic, generative doubt in that "might," and then responding with the more devastating certainty of a "never." With prodding lines that make moments of "nothing" pulse, Adams proves that an "intervening absence" is not an oxymoronic convolution, but a unique phenomenon of presence.