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ULTRAMARINE: POEMS THAT ALMOST STOP THE HEART

Ultramarine. By Raymond Carver. New York: Random House, 1986. Pp. 140. $13.95 hb; $6.95 pb.

Now and then a writer comes along whose work is so transparent it is seemingly formless, without design or designs, whose words are not some play or game with rules to violate or honor but experience delivered smoldering like new-born calves, a writer who though he has antecedents, literary kith and kin, yet seems genetically singular, unique, a one-of-a-kind blending of instinct and dilemma, possessing the urgency of a life as shabby as our own, and yet the courage of that life, a courage sufficient to it, and an eloquence out of its drear and dazzle. Raymond Carver is such a writer, speaking in these poems, or stories, whatever they are, in a voice unassuming and yet so empowered that one comes to look at it, to listen in it, for how close it can come to the truth without shaking or breaking. It does come close, indeed very, so that almost the heart is stopped, the hair stood on end. Again and again in *Ultramarine* Carver produces poems both heavy with consequence, things taken head-on at full-force, and yet fragile, light, gentle in their modesty, their refusal to pretend or puff up or become self-important. It is as if he can be knowing and innocent at once—to have lived as he has with honors and prizes and leisure, and yet not to have shrunk down to the size they impose, but to remain wayward, perplexed, perpetually vulnerable.

To sing his praises is ironic work. There seems no language that does not betray his gift, does not exceed it toward cheapening it, just as Carver himself and his many alter-voices struggle in poem after poem to find precisely the right words, beyond paraphrase. It helps, I suppose,