

## On Stanley Plumly's Poems

Maura Stanton

The landscape of Stanley Plumly's poems is the landscape of the body in sleep or at the edge of sleep, which is a kind of death, and of the body at the edge of death, which is a kind of sleep. The word "body" occurs six times in these three poems. The body is something to be escaped from, to be understood, and, perhaps, to be recalled from the dark which has risen around it.

In "Dreamsong," the most explicit escape occurs. (I want to look at the poem without the reference to Berryman.) The speaker says, "I wanted to die." He feels trapped in "the cradle of myself" and cannot do what he wants until the body allows it. "Then I rose and walked the water." The escape from the body is associated with water, with "the dark side rising." These are key elements in Plumly's other poems. As one rises from the body and walks the water in death, so one floats to the water's surface, amid the debris of death, in sleep.

"In Sleep" can be read two ways: as literal death called "sleep" by the terms of the metaphor, which is the less interesting way—or as a dream-sleep that puts one in contact with death. In other words, our imagined death, the fact that we can and do imagine it, is the death that really counts *in* our lives.

The escape here occurs when "you begin to open all your body, bob, and with both hands wipe the water clear." With the body opened at last, "you begin to see what it was." The poem moves from the drowning water toward the clear silence of outer space where the parents and the sister "and one wife, one wife, one wife" drift like birds. The body is still "tied" but in sleep there is escape and illumination.

This illumination is important in "Light" where the laying-on of hands, the touching, lights up the body "as to be understood." Here the poet is being recalled from the darkness to "whatever body is." He has not escaped to the "whatever dark" of his mind or his dreams. The drifting wives of "In Sleep" have managed to pull him back.

The wives, of course, represent the "other," that which is not the body but can affect, or illuminate, the body. They are curious because there seem to be three of them, "one wife, one wife, one wife," the wife from nowhere, the wife at the end of the hallway who says nothing but cries, and "the wife of the doors, the woman of rooms." In "Light," this plurality emphasizes the difficulty in bringing the poet back to his body. It takes three women. The line "She is the third person" may be merely a reference to the number of wives, but it also points to the "other." The poet, first person, speaks to himself in the second person—"you," "your"—while the wives, touching his body, are someone else, in the third person.

"In Sleep" is also a poem where the poet speaks to himself in the second person. Here the repetition of "one wife, one wife, one wife" functions as a piece of language. The sound is slow, chantlike; the image of the wives drifting

past, along with the sister and the parents, is effective and economical. Here again the wives are the "other," that which the poet watches from "the cloud" of his own body.

What does it mean to escape from the body? If it means silence, if it means the drift of the dead and the "absence of earth," it also means the absence of self. In the opening of "In Sleep," the poet has floated to the surface of the water "full of dead fish and the half-moon of a lung." In the last lines, the moon shines "on the waters" of his face. "At last you begin to see what it was . . . the moon on the waters of your face shining back at you." At the end of the poem, at the end, or perhaps the beginning, of the earth, at the end of self, there is only the reflection of the moon on the water. The poet has moved backward to his own primeval beginnings in this water, he has seen what it was.

When the self is absent, when the escape from the body has been effected, what remains is memory. It is more than the touch of a single woman that brings the poet in "Light" back to his body. It is three women, represented by the one whose hands do the actual touching. Or perhaps there *is* no actual touching, perhaps the touch is the memory of touch, the memory of three women who illuminated the poet's darkness or loneliness at one time. What recalls the poet to his body may be just this other recall, this memory of "the small moons of her hands." The only thing left of the poet in "In Sleep," once the body has been opened, is, of course, memory: his parents, his sister "like the past of all flesh" and the wives drifting by, "every one tied to the planet."

The "other" in these poems, then, is more than the "other" of objective reality, more than "that which is *not* me." The "other" of memory is *not* me at the same time that it *is* me. When the mind imagines, or remembers, something objective has arisen which is also subjective. To imagine a chair, for instance, is to imagine something that is perceived as separate from the self, but that is at the same time *part* of the self. That is what makes the escape from the body in these poems so interesting. In "Light," the poet is recalled from his escape by memory. In "In Sleep," the poet succeeds in escaping his body, and is left with memory. Memory is the ghost, the third person internalized, "the dark side rising" and the reflection of the moon on the waters. It is the other woman. "She is also your wife . . . She is like your body repeated."

### Stanley Plumly's Response

*I remember my father used to get so drunk I thought he was going to fall off the planet. He was a bull in his body. He ran into, over things. Once set in motion, his momentum seemed a natural, terrible force. As a child I would lie awake in bed long into the early morning, listening and waiting for him to come home. He was always late and always drunk, but he always came home. And as it was a dark house, he invariably seemed to break into it. My father's house. In those waiting, and wasted, hours I lost the secret of sleep.*

What can I say to Maura Stanton's essay, except to praise its perception. It seems to me to engage my poems at their sources, to expose their needs. Reviewers of my first poems complained that I overused the already overused word *dark*. Stanton notes the word *body* appears six times in the three new poems. I admit to being obsessed with certain images and patterns from my past. I can hardly think of a poem I've written that at some point in its history did not implicate, or figure, my father.

*He sleeps on a door. My father, the good Indian. At night, just thinking of him, the lumber flies at my forehead.*

Stanton speaks of the landscape of my poems as "the landscape of the body in sleep or the edge of sleep, which is a kind of death, and of the body at the edge of death, which is a kind of sleep." Yes. Which accounts too, I suppose, for the austerity, the silence, that surrounds so many of my poems. Somewhere, somehow I got the notion that making a poem is an act of purification; that the language that works best is the language that isn't there; that if the word curses, the word also redeems. There is no language for sleep. The body simply gets lost, and so we dream backwards.

*A man lies down to sleep, to let go of the day, and however he turns, whatever his body believes, he feels the earth fall away and the eye, even in dream, follow the perfect curve . . . Our fathers are all buried. Everything we know and live for is under us. Even in our wives we hug the earth.*