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Leslie Ullman, *Natural Histories*

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REVIEWS

Natural Histories

Leslie Ullman

Yale University Press

New Haven and London

\$8.95, cloth; \$3.95, paper

In some other life she traveled light.
In some other life she slipped away at dawn
scarcely disturbing the thick branches.

("The Woman at the Desk")

In museums of Natural History, extinct animals are frequently presented against a flat painted backdrop simulating the subject's characteristic environment. If the visitor shares the capacity of some visual artists to attend to the ground without loss of figure perception, an effect follows, not unlike that achieved by gazing fixedly at certain diagrams in psychology textbooks. Thus, the viewer learns to reverse figure and ground to a degree not easily achieved by the casual eye.

The comparison seems an apt one for the inner dynamic of Leslie Ullman's poems. The freedom with which she moves from foreground to background, whether the latter be inner landscape, history or prophecy, may present a difficulty for the inexperienced reader, who readily understands the words and the sentences but is mystified by their combinations. At the same time, it is this freewheeling movement through space and time that gives the poems richness and depth, and I believe that those of us who have trouble will simply have to improve our vision.

When Ullman speaks of her life as "ferociously normal," the reader is reminded of the woman in "Midwife" who

. . . smells blood in her hair
and dreams of crouching at the limits
of her skin.

Such “new mothers sleep like men/ in the scant of what they are.” Their normal lives and natural histories issue in a veritable menagerie of offspring, and we are lucky that the home, most often the natural habitat of the species, does not prevent the travelling heroinism Ellen Moers identifies in *Literary Women*. Wives are expert at such travel, having trained their hands to go on “folding the loose garments/ fingering the sheets on the thin bed . . .” while memory and imagination join “The Voyeurs” in “passing a night/ remote and inevitable as the history/ of our ancestors/ who avoided all reference to the body.” Unlike them, the persona in “The Friends I Had as a Child” can be direct and explicit:

I swallow coffee and remember semen
in my mouth. How I cupped my hands.

The woman in these poems is simultaneously tough and susceptible, a tender realist, and it is as a woman that her most astute readers will identify with her. The tone is never strident, never confuses art with politics, but neither does it repeat mindless phrases meant to perpetuate the status quo. It seeks to escape its conditioning, pushes at the outer limits of the self. While the mother/daughter stares at children whose “deaths seem to rise inside them,” the husband of “In Barcelona You Tried to Scream” wants nothing to interfere with the itinerary. When he tells the wife JUST DRIVE, she holds “the wheel like a pair of shoulders.” Even so, she is conscious of that small gesture towards shelter and dependence, as she is of the later parallel between people “lighting lamps for their frightened children” and the “husband [who] offers [her] a light.”

Unwilling to settle for remaining a child, Ullman explores the past with all its familial and cultural influences as well as the alternate selves that appear to any woman schooled in introspection. It is this courageous testing of other lives that gives her poems, unassuming as they often appear on the surface, a quality of fierce integrity. Unconfined by time and space, precisely because of the intensity of her inner life, Ullman gives us poems simple in diction and syntax, accurate in their uncluttered imagery, often with a narrative or dramatic component. In fact, one of the most striking features of these poems is the absence of the descriptive mode, the insistence on

action as a gauge of emotional temperature. This quality is entirely appropriate to the interrelationships among all living things, and between them and their environment—relations which constitute the domain of natural history. *Histories*, rather, because each story is individually observed and recorded in the patient manner of the inductive scientist.

To relinquish childhood is to let go of both innocence and security, and again, the woman of these poems is equal to the responsibility. Unlike the nuns in “Shade,” who “knelt and rose/ as though made of air” . . . “as though they were leaving their bodies,” the speaker in this poem

. . . must think before rising:
*I went to him without
thinking. I touched him everywhere.*

If *My Mother/ My Self* is at all accurate, most women readers will commiserate with the persona in her guilt, but the poets will have to call it a *felix culpa* when it produces lines like these:

Already the sun grows
and you rise, porous
with sleep, and sweating.
He makes room as you pass.
You remember how the leaves in midsummer
clouded the stained glass,
and the litanies—
the murmuring of their voices
like insects moving into the shade.

From the very first, the women in these poems know and rehearse the shape of loss. In “Last Night They Heard the Woman Upstairs,” the wife pictures the husband with whom she is lying

not in the bed, not alive
and a scream cracking

like some withered thing from her lips.

The husband, on the other hand, has already gone where the real action is: he says

*She must make love slowly, the way
she climbs the stairs.*

In "Plumage," the woman's hands tell

... of a room
she once knew. The curve
of the bowl on the table

and his, telling her "she is the last of a kind," search all the while

as though a door might open the way
to the stranger inside him.

The distinction persists, as in the final poem, "Dancing," the woman
driven deeper into herself

... can take the trembling,
when it begins, deep inside

like a gypsy swallowing flame.

She has

... heard that men
are frightened of [her] body,

that they conjure it in the dark
over women they've made into wives

and there is little in that rumor to reassure her. "My last lover never
closed his eyes," she says, and goes on to give us a devastating sketch
of his self-absorption

Magnificent, he said carefully
as though I were water

and he a swan poised
over a swan's image.

With that line, we are transported straight back to Yeats's Leda and
the indifferent beak, another choice bit of natural history, presented
with the wry detachment of the trained observer, for there is no self-
pity in these poems, no whining, only the honest intelligence of a