

12 "The Wife's Went Bazook"

Comedic Feminism in the Poetry of Ruth Stone

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In the tradition of American naturalism, the more recent poems of Ruth Stone's *Second-Hand Coat: Poems New and Selected* (1987) are always sociologically acute and often thin on hope. Stone's darkly feminist work employs humor to render the lives of people pushed to the margins of society by economics and gender bias. Encountering one of the relatives or friends who populate the pages of her poetry can be like encountering one of the squalid, unsheltered human beings who populate the streets of our towns and cities. Admittedly, one of Stone's protagonists is frequently funny while the homeless person rarely is. And we appreciate the wisdom of her loopy creation while we avert our eyes from the deranged stare of the insanitary man or woman. But there is more to the parallel.

On first reading *Second-Hand Coat*, one can mistake Stone's characters for simply being cartoon-daft in the American tradition. It's true that they are usually unequipped to live adequately in the real world. Two or three bubbles off plumb, they unwittingly—and thus comically—demonstrate wisdom from time to time. And while they are, finally, without the kind of psychological strength that affords both poise and flexibility, many manage to form a worldview that enables them to get by. It would thus be a mistake to see all of Stone's characters as cartoon innocents merely happening upon smarts during their helpless travails. Like many of the homeless,

they have been driven to the margins of human existence by an inability to sustain normalcy in an adversarial locale. Most survive; some don't; all suffer.

And yet Stone's characters are not truly homeless; rather they are usually women devising methods for maintaining an eccentric balance within both a world of quotidian domestic chores and a patriarchy devaluing them as people. Some of Stone's most memorable characters are women who have tried to develop a proactive tool for surviving, especially by creating their own oddball universe of perceptions and rules that counter the dominant but equally bizarre network of forces that constitute early- and mid-twentieth-century American civilization. I'm interested primarily in Stone's comic portraiture of relatives and friends—Aunt Maud, Mrs. Dubosky, the Masons, Ida, Absinthe Granny—in which she has forged her own kind of comedic feminism, employing the colloquial, sometimes rural dialects of lower- and middle-class white America to help depict methods for coping.

While we first laugh at these women because we recognize their language, obsessions, and even small successes, each poem's comic calculations are complex because each also carries a kind of compassion for the women—and even for a culture that has rendered such self-defeating dynamics. While theorists are in endless conflict about what triggers human laughter, we probably laugh on reading Stone's portraiture because each poem bears closely upon some fearful fragment of our own experience. In fact, we recognize the very world that conspires against women like Aunt Maud and Absinthe Granny. We come to understand that there's a direct relationship between their behavior and the world, which has itself gone berserk—at least in Stone's eyes. We're surprised that these unstable characters have the capacity for knowing truth, or even for making a reasonably clear utterance, for that matter. We recognize a cartooned form of ourselves in that world, cartoons who really could exist—and do. Some of her characters happen upon transient moments of enlightenment, some tragically regress from a hard-earned entropy to an increasingly dazed neurasthenia, while still others create their own vengeful personalities that leave them dominant but often sadly alone in the micro-universe of their domiciles.

Aunt Maud is perhaps Stone's benchmark character because she maintains a kind of zero-sum game with the relentless demands of housework, clothing, and her husband, who, we can surmise, she perceives as almost alien. Because "How Aunt Maud Took to Being a Woman" is a brief, tightly controlled piece with a punch line, I quote it in its entirety:

A long hill sloped down to Aunt Maud's brick house.
 You could climb an open stairway up the back
 to a plank landing where she kept her crocks of wine.
 I got sick on stolen angelfood cake and green wine
 and slept in her feather bed for a week.
 Nobody said a word. Aunt Maud just shifted
 the bottles. Aunt's closets were all cedar lined.
 She used the same pattern for her house dresses—
 thirty years. Plain ugly, closets full of them,
 you could generally find a new one cut and laid
 out on her sewing machine. She preserved,
 she canned. Her jars climbed the basement walls.
 She was a vengeful housekeeper. She kept the blinds
 pulled down in the parlor. Nobody really walked
 on her hardwood floors. You lived in the kitchen.
 Uncle Cal spent a lot of time on the back porch
 waiting to be let in.

(S-HC 32)

At first, we understand the joke is on poor Uncle Cal, a husband who is in an orbit so distant from Maud's private planet as to be exiled. Maud can be nurturing; as a girl, the narrator is grateful for her aunt's acceptance of her own youthful misfortune. We see Maud's idiosyncracies as comically endearing, but after the first appreciative gloss we take from this poem, we may begin to realize that Maud is also exiled, and not simply from intimacy. In her compulsiveness she may have Uncle Cal's number, but something else is missing. An inveterate organizer and housekeeper as well as a dully practical and redundant seamstress, Maud is effectively cut off from a balanced range of human pleasures. There's no sense of beauty in her life, only a raging contest for order.

Maud doesn't know how to relax because she is fighting the inanity of her gender role as delineated for most American women

previous to the women's revolution. Her eccentric obsession with preparation, conservation, and preservation are indicative of someone who would relax only at risk of losing out to the forces of entropy. Of course, most adults experience similar pressures at different times, but most men could always leave the house, enter the culture, "do" something, and return to the house without knowing the tyranny of demands on the housekeeper. Meanwhile, the relentless forces of dirt and disorder can wear down the housekeeper's psyche. What else begins to emerge but the threat of death? Death from failure as the manager of the home; death from the impossible battles against time, the enemy of all homes; death from strangulation that comes from an inability to catch one's breath, from being smothered by a repetitive work life; and finally, perhaps a deathly fear not only that this life is killing in its endless tasks but also that it is the only life she can possibly have. The irony is that Maud, like many women in her shoes, represses these fears by working even harder.

The poem's punch line supplies a comic victory. Maud's the one who controls the home, and she can't let Uncle Cal in for several reasons: obviously, he is going to consume those canned foods and mess up the house. Not only is he a man, a creature of the off-limits world beyond the home, but he is also a carrier, a symbol of the entropic world in which energy wastes itself into disorder. Maud's act of temporarily exiling him is a kind of futile stay against the next working day, the next sweeping, canning. We know to laugh because old Cal is probably quite useless in Maud's domain, and she'll be damned if she's going to let him muck things up if she doesn't have to.

So Stone's poem is unapologetically feminist in its depiction of the self-defeating, skewed values of a patriarchal society. The title humorously but clearly announces the poem's sociopolitical intent. "How Aunt Maud Took to Being a Woman" is at first funny because Maud's solution to the female problem of gender role and identity is familiar, eccentric, and, to a certain extent, winning. Aunt Maud may be slightly touched, but she manages, and with some degree of power. Maud's the champion of her own domain—a survivor gone a bit bonkers, but a survivor nonetheless. Stone, however,

doesn't let us stay satisfied with Maud's predicament. After the laughter dies down, we realize Maud has sacrificed aesthetics, tranquility, and intimacy to achieve what she's needed. We care deeply about Aunt Maud, but we're left with images of a human being trapped in a manic and incessant perseverance.

Still, several of Stone's subjects don't make out as well as Aunt Maud. In "What Can You Do?," Mrs. Dubosky has developed her own methods for dealing with a battering husband, an ungrateful son, two ungrateful daughters-in-law, mortgage payments, and the trauma known as marriage. Like Maud, she is careful and persevering: she loves her grandchildren, always carries sharpened pencils in her apron for them, and constantly searches out wastebaskets for stamps, which she steams off envelopes for the boys' collection. Buoying her perseverance, however, isn't so much optimism as a kind of fatalism:

Mrs. Dubosky is paying on a trailer.
She can't retire until she's paid off the seven thousand.
She's sixty-two.
Mrs. Dubosky says, "We'll see."

(*S-HC* 7)

Mrs. Dubosky knows not to expect too much; like Maud, her life is circumscribed by the culture's limiting set of presumptions. Her new daughter-in-law lives with her in the trailer while her son drives his semi cross-country. The old daughter-in-law managed to get the old house. Mrs. Dubosky makes it clear she has to make exceptions for the marital failures of her son, from whom not much can be expected. She would, of course, never think to question her devotion to family. In loving them, she simply knows she must succumb to their inevitably troubled goings-on.

Stone's language mimics Mrs. Dubosky's fatalism. The narrator's tale is interspersed with quotations from Mrs. Dubosky, both speakers rendered in a series of declarative sentences piling one upon another without a stanza break for fifty-eight lines. The poem almost reads like an absurdist interview or feature article, its humor arising from the fact that its subject is not exciting or typically distinctive enough to warrant such journalistic focus. And we also laugh at

the burlesque of this record, that is, the sheer unstoppable onslaught of bad news, the ongoing material banality, and the inference that it's all inevitable because it is inherited:

Mrs. Dubosky wears other people's old tennis shoes.
Chemicals in the cleaning water eat right through them.
She's got a bad leg.
Her mother's legs were bad. They had to be amputated.
While her mother was in the hospital,
her father's colostomy quit working and he got a blockage.
(S-HC 7-8)

All of this is told directly, in even tones, as if all were to be expected, as if nothing could surprise Mrs. Dubosky. Surely, more bad news is just around the corner. And, in order to depict faithfully her subject's resignation, the narrator employs a white, lower-middle-class dialect ("he got a blockage") intended to mimic Mrs. Dubosky's way of speaking.

But nothing in the poem is as sadly comic as the last nineteen lines, almost all spoken by Mrs. Dubosky and all devoted to the subject of marriage, which is clearly the primary source of her problems. Reminiscent of the pub scene in "The Waste Land," this passage is a sharply synthesized moment of colloquial speech, storytelling, and wish projection, designed to give us a glimpse of the small happiness Mrs. Dubosky dreams after:

"Marriage," says Mrs. Dubosky. "You know how it is.
I had just had the baby.
My husband was after me all the time.
You know, physical.
Oh, he slapped me but that's not what I mean.
My mother came over and she said,
'What's the matter with you?'
You know, the eyebags was down on the cheeks.
I says, 'He's always after me,'
and she says, 'You're gonna come home.'
The judge said he'd never seen a case that bad.
You know what he called him? He said,
'You're nothing but a beast.'"
Mrs. Dubosky isn't sure. She says,
"What can you do?"

When she retires, she tells me,
 she's going to get a dog. One of those nice little ones.
 "When you rub them on the belly
 they lie back limp," she says, "and just let you."

(S-HC 8)

Where Maud took control of her life in her own idiosyncratic manner, Mrs. Dubosky—always plaintive, tentative, and fundamentally kind—finds lasting happiness beyond her grasp, in an imagined future, in the form of a grateful and obedient dog. She figures her husband may or may not have been "a beast," but now she'd clearly replace him with a different companion, one who isn't dangerous, merely malleable. Unwilling to condemn anyone, even an abusive husband, Mrs. Dubosky temporarily sequesters herself from the belligerent forces of love in a man's world by retiring temporarily to her imagination.

Thus, like Aunt Maud, Mrs. Dubosky does retain her mental health. But in several of Stone's poems from *Second-Hand Coat*, the sanity of the central characters is in greater danger. In "Sunday," the Masons are thrilled by death; though Stone's focus here isn't exclusively upon a woman, many of the cultural problems she identifies still adhere. The fear of a paralyzing life, of a deathly stasis, of time spent doing little meaningful work, of a retirement spent waiting for demise, all this sends the Masons out to their weekly hospital visit as if to church:

Long antiseptic Sundays, tubes of interstitial fluids,
 bed pans, strangers lying in metal beds.
 They got off on face masks.
 They liked to press their thumbs on your wrist
 and feel your pulse.

(S-HC 26)

The death-in-life syndrome exhibited by Maud emerges here, too. Rather than defer their fears by losing themselves in work, though, the Masons give themselves over to the failing flesh of others. The subconscious fear of the boring, deadly life is circumvented by a fascination with the actual physical dying of others. And Stone ups the ironic ante by placing all the action in the past tense, allowing

for the clear possibility that the Masons themselves may eventually have become the very people they came to see.

"Sunday" is dark comedy, for sure, but darker still is "The Latest Hotel Guest Walks over Particles That Revolve in Seven Other Dimensions Controlling Latticed Space" in which a woman stays in a hotel room for two mentally degenerating weeks. Here she imagines the micrometric elements of public and private horrors, including

. . . Vietnam,
the Cuban crisis, little difficulties
with the Shah . . .

as well as "room 404" that

probably now contains the escaped molecules,
radiation photons and particulate particles
of the hair and skin of all its former guests.

(S-HC 40)

The poem is no knee-slapper, but it is comic in its deft play on popular physics. The guest has become obsessed with the science of entropy in which energy spins destructively into disorder. She is a woman whose imagination is passing from a sensitized state of empathy to an increasingly chaotic neurosis. She imagines all the smallest particles of all the former guests of her room forming an android, which she can hear

. . . among her blouses and slacks
and she knows at this moment it is, at last,
counting from ten to zero.

(S-HC 41)

If "zero" is the point at which the last strings of the balanced life give way, the hotel guest may in fact also be the subject of "Being a Woman," a tautly comic poem about why a woman may talk to herself: "After all, you were the only one who ever heard / What you were saying" (S-HC 75). Once again, the title announces the poem's sociopolitical intent unequivocally. Stone's genius here is in capturing the bizarre and contradictory but perhaps too common state of mind that can come of being stuck in a woman's gender

role. On one hand, there are freedoms in not being taken seriously. Unfortunately, because some women internalize the attendant idea that they are not *worth* being taken seriously, it is difficult for them to exploit the small freedom to act as if their behavior doesn't matter. Walking her dog in the suburbs, this protagonist doesn't begin to identify with the atomized visitors of a hotel room but rather with all the dogs in the neighborhood. As the woman's dog marks its territory, Stone's language is neither colloquial nor scientific; each line is almost formal in its strange invocation:

The disengaged ego making its own patterns.
 The voice of the urine saying this has washed away my salt,
 My minerals. My kidneys bless you, defy you, invite you
 To come out and yip with me in the schizophrenic night.
(S-HC 75)

Identifying with the voice of the yipping dog, the woman invites company. But who does she intend? Perhaps the other women who have been unheard all their lives? Or perhaps the men who haven't heard the women speaking? Either way, the poem suggests the human yip is futile and the only result is a state of schizophrenia in which the mind is split between a freedom and an irrelevancy.

"Bazook" is more conventionally funny than "The Latest Hotel Guest" and "Being a Woman," but the poem's protagonist, Ida, actually does go completely out of her mind and must be institutionalized. Poor Ida's "went bazook" because the old house she willfully leaves for a new Florida home was as psychological an edifice as it was physical. If Aunt Maud's house was a prison of sorts, at least it was her prison, controlled and run by Maud. And as we know by virtue of Uncle Cal's residency on the back porch, Maud's home kept out forces that weren't especially benevolent. Apparently, the same could be said for Ida's longtime domicile. Ida's tragic mistake lies in her ignorance of the value of the old place:

Fred and Ida.
 They had a lovely little house.
 For two years all that two talked
 Was, wait till we get to Florida,
 Wait till we get to Florida.
 It's going to be this and that.

Then finally they sold
And moved to Clearwater, Fla.
And built this place.
And the next thing we hear,
The wife's went bazook!

(S-HC 84)

Ida loses her mind because she's left the old house; that is, she's given up perhaps the most important check against the forces of lunacy. Though she moves into a brand new home, she has effectively become homeless. Her new environment can never replace the deeply familiar walls and reassuring artifacts of the old. Like so many of Stone's protagonists who are isolated and displaced, Ida waged a contest for normalcy. It is a difficult contest to win, though, because the culture's parameters of normalcy are rigid, restrictive, and usually male-defined. There's very little room for idiosyncrasy.

We laugh at this tragic tale because it's told in the astonished voice of a neighbor who can't figure out what went wrong. We laugh because *we* know what went wrong. To a greater or lesser extent, we've been there. We're there now. We all camouflage our freakishness, and we all learn how to defend against the constricting idiosyncracies of civilization. And one of our proactive defenses is the same one employed by this neighbor or the Masons or Mrs. Dubosky: a capacity for astonishment. Transcendence sometimes comes at the expense of others, and often we are lifted out of our own problems—or ennui—by the seemingly fresh and amazing difficulties of others. Such a stance is proactive because it is as offensive as it is defensive; it requires that we first see these characters as inferior. In "How Aunt Maud Took to Being a Woman," we initially laugh at Uncle Cal's impotence. Even Aunt Maud sees him as unworthy of entry, beneath the distaff standards of the home. But then we begin to see Aunt Maud for what she is—sadly eccentric. And finally, upon further contemplation, we can begin to see that we, too, are eccentric, perhaps secretly so, but also perhaps not that far from Maud in our peculiarities. After all, how would we behave if we had been put in Maud's worn shoes?

Stone is clearly ironic in her use of humor because, while she

suggests we laugh at others, she does so with didactic intent. She knows that we will realize a single hard fact: that we could just as easily be the subjects of someone else's laughter. (If she were Irish, she might have each of us saying, "There but for the grace of God go I.") As we read and laugh we forget ourselves momentarily, only to return to Stone's underlying premise: that domestic life in a patriarchal civilization can be pulverizing, that this civilization entraps us as well. Serious consideration of Stone's poetry can lead to a healthy dose of humility.

And unlike the fathers of American naturalism—Norris, Dreiser, Crane—Ruth Stone is not completely beholden to the doctrines of fatalism. She is nearly unrivaled in her humanitarian insistence; her sense of humor is founded on the notion that we are all both absurd and worthy of love, and she wields her humor against a life that can be crushing in its redundancy and a culture that can be crushing in its rigidity. Stone's humor is the one romantic strand in her work. Laughing is the last redemption, and while we may laugh in amazement at the trials of others, her comic focus ultimately points to ourselves. Stone's poetry is prescriptive in its suggestion that we maintain at least as comic a perception of ourselves as we do of anything else in life while we simultaneously sustain an awareness of the forces that destroy the human spirit. And no poem better reflects this humanitarian notion than the uniquely romantic rhyme "The Song of Absinthe Granny."

Absinthe Granny is nobody's fool: she knows she's crazy and she may hit the bottle, yet she's hung on, not simply for the sake of her kids, but because for her—unlike Ida—the alternative is unacceptable. She's the archetypal female survivor: Ruth Stone's version of an ideal Everywoman straight from Maud's rural neck of the woods. She tells her life story in an unbroken eighty-three-line column, using a velocitous nursery rhyme to comic effect. In this poem, in fact, Stone's language draws not only on children's rhythm and rhyme but also on the crazy and quick associative turns of some children's tales, thereby mimicking Granny's nuttiness.

Unlike Aunt Maud, Absinthe Granny is aware of her own mental problems, admitting at one point, "I couldn't see for my head was thatched" (*S-HC* 87). She is also aware of two salient truths: that

the cause of her troubles is in part connected to the demands of motherhood, housekeeping, and husband, and that the path to survival involves making the best of what she's been given, including mental illness. With the house a mess from "Diapers and panty-shirts and yolk of eggs" (86), Granny's frantic regimen leads to hallucinations—but she simply makes them work for her:

One day in the mirror I saw my stringy legs
And I looked around
And saw string on the floor,
And string on the chair
And heads like wasps' nest
Full of stringy hair.
"Well," I said, "if you have string, knit.
Knit something, don't just sit."

(S-HC 86)

Eventually her husband—inert and as dimly informed of his wife's inner world as Uncle Cal was of Maud's—tells her how good their life is. Granny has an understandably murderous fantasy but keeps on "knitting" through the chaos:

So I got the rifle out
To shoot him through the head.
But he went on smiling and sitting
And I looked around for a piece of string
To do some knitting.
Then I picked at the tiling
and the house fell down.

The last two lines of this passage borrow, of course, from "The Yellow Wallpaper," but unlike the protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story, Granny doesn't dissolve.

With Maud's type of perseverance and her own unique and steady optimism, Granny sees herself through the time of motherhood—and, significantly, with the passing of motherhood and the death of her husband, Granny is no longer subject to hallucinations:

Well, all that's finished,
It's all been done.
Those were high kick summers,
It was bald galled fun.

Now the daft time's over
And the string is spun.

(S-HC 87)

She has no regrets. As she makes clear in the last lines of the poem, she still takes her absinthe, and despite her age, she's not likely to give in to melancholy or despair:

Those were long hot summers,
Now the sun won't tarry.
My birds have flocked,
And I'm old and wary.
I'm old and worn and a cunning sipper,
And I'll outlive every little nipper.
And with what's left I'm chary,
And with what's left I'm chary.

(S-HC 88)

Despite Absinthe Granny's drive and upbeat voice, the last word of the poem, repeated for effect, makes it clear that even in her most positivist work, Stone is not a believer in a sentimental and sweeping victory of good over evil. "The Song of Absinthe Granny" is obviously parodic, made clear by the compelling first two lines: "Among some hills there dwelt in parody / A young woman; me." Even in a parody, Stone is not going to give in to the unrealistic hope of a markedly better world. Granny is a drinker, she's been crazy, she survived, and she knows not to trust life as a gracious provider. She may have the capacity for enjoyment, but while the archaic connotations of the term "chary" suggest Granny is dear unto herself, the word also carries a much less optimistic connotation: that she knows to be cautious and watchful in a world that can collapse around her.

Melding comedy and catastrophe is risky business, and it is not difficult to imagine that the world has once or twice collapsed around Stone herself. Rendering the quirks of aunts and friends isn't the only comic risk Stone takes, nor is it the most startling. No other poet I can think of has succeeded in using the comic voice while writing about the death by suicide of her own husband, yet Stone does so in one in five of the newer poems in *Second-Hand*

Coat. This topic is difficult enough to write about, but in one extraordinary poem, Stone is actually funny about it.

The comedy of "Curtains" is, of course, pointed, dark, even an exposition of anger. (And like Plath, she's quite cognizant of her black-comedic method: "Every day I dig you up," she says in "Habit," "You are my joke, / My poem" [*S-HC* 63].) But "Curtains" is closely related to all of her other comedic poems in its defense of idiosyncratic behavior, which here is actually cited as a reason for living. The narrator, aching for her dead husband, declares, "I become my Aunt Virginia / proud but weak in the head" (*S-HC* 15). And while she's not as unsettled as Absinthe Granny, the narrator tells two stories of her own unusual behavior. In the first, she has a wild, hysterical exchange with her screaming landlord, "Mr. Tempesta," who refuses to let her keep her new cats. Of course, his nerves are shot, too; after she shouts and throws books, he relents and they cry together. The second story follows in the last five lines of the poem. Addressing her husband, the narrator delivers this rising comic anecdote and, then, abrupt comic reversal:

I want to dig you up and say, look,
it's like the time, remember,
when I ran into our living room naked
to get rid of that fire inspector.

See what you miss by being dead?

(*S-HC* 15)

It's as if the narrator says, this is who I am: I may be a bit unusual but I'm damned smart, too. I know what I'm doing. Weren't the incongruities of my personality, the whimsy, the foibles, the fantasia—weren't they rich enough for you? We may laugh at the last line not simply because it's ridiculous to tell the dead what they're missing, but also because we see, behind the transparent mask of humor, the face of a justifiably resentful woman—and we react to the stunning synthesis: in a courageous turn, Stone has made herself one of her own idiosyncratic creations. "Curtains" makes it easier for us to understand the driving empathy that infuses her comic voice.

I once heard the poet Brenda Hillman say that the most effective

writing teacher helps the student to recognize and exploit what is idiosyncratically best in the student's poetic voice. Hillman's assumption is that the most effective voice of the writer emanates from that part of the imagination usually kept under wraps for the sake of good form. Certainly, some of the best poets of our recent past—Lowell, Ginsberg, Plath—*have* unmasked themselves, have revealed the inner fusion of oddness and insight that comprises their genius. They have turned inward to the idiosyncratic quick, which is most honestly self-identifying. And yet even these poets are only rarely funny.

While any romantic tone of Stone's poetry is clearly muted by her lowered expectations of the world, she is in the end a comedic advocate of sorts. Stone's sense of comic portraiture helps to make a case for the oddball, especially for wounded and eccentric women. Such an advocate role can be a dangerous business for the poet because, in this case, she takes the risk that her audience will recognize their own secret abnormalities and, thus, turn away from the poem. But Ruth Stone is an example of the rarest poet who intuitively grasps that the most idiosyncratically resonant aspects of her own voice are her own empowering refusal to adopt the conventions of others, which she knows can lead to a fast death, and her uncanny ability to see and depict the domestic foibles of women. She is riled by the quotidian pursuit of normalcy in a world that is cold and oppressive as well as downright weird itself, and she reacts by burlesquing its victims in order to highlight not only its grinding routine but its callous demands that we ascribe to social roles that threaten our soundness of mind.