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Posted on 04 March 2019 By Raymond Carver

Hummingbird Suppose I say summer, write the word hummingbird, put it in an envelope, take it down the hill to the box. When you open my letter you will recall those days and how much, just how much, I love you. Capturing bliss in one word, crystallising tenderness and love at once into a precious gift and a delicate act of remembrance, Hummingbird, the affectionate poem closing this collection, charmed me in its endearing simplicity and ended up as my favourite reading this short poem magically transporting to the moment of receiving and later cherishing of a letter or a postcard dear, the one you keep close to you and take with you until it is ragged, almost perished, the words barely discernible any, a four leaf clover in your heart for the rest of your days. Before fortuitously coming across this bilingual chrestomathy of 17 poems in the local library a selection from Carver's All of Us The Collected Poems, which is a compilation of his 5 poetry collections I only knew and read Raymond Carver as a short story writer. A few of these poems strike as miniature stories, vernacular in tone, narrative and direct in style, the nightly atmosphere and a certain rawness at times reminding me of some of the songs by Tom Waits, hanging out in a bar like in the long opening poem You Don't Know What Love Is an evening with Charles Bukowski, or at the ramshackle party of booze and despair in Union Street San Francisco, Summer 1975. All poems are love poems, Carver's narrator observes in his poem For Semra, With

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Martial Vigor and obviously not all but most poems in this collection consider love The simple pleasures of love The sweet comfort of holding hands giving strength to endure time consuming us Through the Boughs The delight of watching the beloved dancing a minuet The Minuet , or the reminiscence of that enchantment emanating from the eye of the painter who has lost his muse and wife Bonnard s Nudes Hips, thighs and loosened hair celebrating in the dark sensuality of liberty This Word Love The traces on a lip left after a wild night Yesterday The bittersweetness of longing and hope, the pain of losing love Still Looking Out of Number One , of loss and grief, of missing, of transience, evoking tenderness and melancholy without threading onto mawkish ground, conjuring up a quiet night where a couple unobtrusively breaths together closing the day in the intimacy of their home The Best Time of the Day , or seizing the simple joy and warm thoughts when coming home where the one you love welcomes you Waiting It s not that house It sthe next house, just over a rise The house where trees are laden with fruit Where phlox, forsythia, and marigold grow It sthe house where the woman stands in the doorway wearing the sun in her hair The one who s been waiting all this time. The woman who loves you. The one who can say, What s kept you Honest and powerful, minimalistic and suggestive, reading this tiny collection struck up a delightful acquaintance with Carver s poetry. Milan Kundera in his short story collection Laughable Loves, talks about the inevitable absurdity that revolves around the highly misunderstood feeling of Love that begins with innocent stargazing but later tempt numerous meteors to destroy the vulnerable abode of lovers Promises are ditched, mushy definitions are torn apart and even when other things remain equal or unequal he she still loves me just doesn t matter any What remains is this filthy carcass of emotions that some people tag along wherever they go while some bury it in the most unwholesome style in the graveyard of their hearts A laughable business and some compelling stories, which underwhelmed me initially but after reading Carver s What we Talk about when we talk about Love, I reconsidered my reaction towards Kundera s book and now I can appreciate it a lot by reason of few hazy intersection points I perceived between these two works I thought we d be like that too when we got old enough Dignified And in a place And people would

Delta of Venus

Metamorphoses

Lady Chatterley's Lover

Kushiel's Dart

Sappho's Leap

Claudius the God and
His Wife Messalina

A Princess of Mars

The English Patient

Robert Mapplethorpe
and the Classical
Tradition

Tropic of Cancer

The Piano Teacher

I, Claudius

Sex and the City

The Nude: A Study in
Ideal Form

Thy Neighbor's Wife

come to our door. In an instant, the surefooted destiny stumbles and a suffocating despair assumes a confident stance because when we talk, we often fail to communicate effectively and rely a little too much on the unsaid. Carver succeeds with this book because of the negligible distance he has maintained with the reality that defies the lofty motifs of life and explores the silent frustration of clueless mortals. The characters appear to be the uninspired architects of some amorphous structure that demonstrates their clumsy choices and in their attempts to justify the same, they toss around rhetorical questions and alternate opinions without any didactic purpose. Every story implies a different concern rather than a direct reference to love that renders uniqueness to this collection, which elevates manifold by Carver's minimalist prose. He often indulges a little too much with the privileges of ambiguity but it's hardly a flaw in the light of wit and ingenuity that makes one come back to meet people who prolong their last goodbyes while taking every last thing they think belongs to their individual self or to feel compassion towards the young couple who had some other plans rather than becoming young parents; it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we're talking about when we talk about love. Continuing from just another day to a deserted afternoon and crawling slowly towards an imminent night, these stories happen everywhere as the result of some unnatural disorder that human beings were able to conceive so it's better to think and feel a little before we talk and listen. A collection of slice-of-life short stories that mostly go nowhere and end ambiguously, and for some damn reason I loved them. Carver gets mileage out of yard sales, photographers offering their services, accidental death, a night of bingo, doing things and doing nothing, talking yet saying nothing. As a reader, I was frustrated when some of the stories went nowhere. I expected and hoped for big conclusions, finality, and instead I got dudes driving away from confrontations holding ashtrays. But then there would be subtle moments of human nature revealed, true revelations of our unnecessarily complicated lives, that would make me catch my breath. I read this over 20 years ago and I'm afraid some of the particulars of the collection escape me. However, what I'll not soon forget is the quiet desperation Carver made me feel for everyday people whose lives had derailed. I was in college and

Atomised

Les Liaisons
dangereuses

The Naked Woman: A
Study of the Female
Body

Atlas Shrugged

Justine, Philosophy in
the Bedroom, and Other
Writings

full of life Middle aged regret is not something kids of that age tend to fully understand, yet Carver made me feel that horrid indecision, that deep seated pain These are emotions worth enduring for the price of reading this beautiful prose. This collection part of the 1980s Vintage Contemporaries series includes seventeen vintage Raymond Carver, including Viewfinder An abandoned husband chucks stone as he is photographed up on his roof by a door to door salesman photographer who had hooks instead of hands A Serous Talk An ex husband expresses his rage when his ex wife takes a telephone call in the bedroom by cutting the telephone line in the kitchen One More Thing A husband, wife and daughter accuse one another of being nuts To share a larger helping of what a reader will find in the pages of this book of early Raymond Carver short shorts, here s a bit of detail on the title story alone with my sidebar comments What We Talk About When We Talk About LoveSymposium Two couples, Mel and Terri, Laura and the narrator, Nick by name, sit around Mel s kitchen table one evening drinking gin when the topic of conversation turns to love Sidebar Echoes of Plato s Symposium and, of course, the meaning of symposium is a drinking party However this is 20th century Carver county America, so the object of love remains always women for men and men for women not even close to seeing the opposite sex as the first step on the ladder leading to a generalized universal love of philosophic wisdom Dionysius, One Terri lived with Ed before she lived with Mel Terri tells how Ed loved her so much he tried to killer her, dragging her around the living room by her ankles, while repeating, I love you, I love you, you bitch Thus, the four launch into a debate about Ed s madness and passion being true love Sidebar Ed embodies the ancient Greeks myth of Dionysius, the frenzied, drunk intensity of unbridled passion gone wild Dionysius, Two Mel relates how Ed would call him up on the phone to threaten his life and once actually tried to kill him Mel had to buy a gun for protection completely out of character, he admits he s a cardiologist, for God sake and he and Terri lived like fugitives Terri, in turn, says how when she left him, Ed drank rat poison causing serious facial deformities Sidebar Raymond Carver noted how a little menace is good for the temperature, good for a short story Very true, Ray Since Mel and Terri were personally so

threatened by Ed, the whole tone of the discussion on love takes a much serious turn Dionysius, Three Ed shot himself in the mouth but he didn't die he was taken to the hospital where at one point Mel actually saw him His head swelled up to twice the size of a normal head I'd never seen anything like it, and I hope I never do again When Ed was in his hospital room dying with his much swollen head, Terri sat in the chair next to him, counter to Mel's wishes, right up to Ed's last breath Sidebar As these two women and two men drink their gin, Terri's compassion for Ed is the sole example given in the story where love transcends physical attraction for any of them True Love Laura comments how she and Nick know what true love is, as they touch knees and Nick makes a big production of kissing Laura's hand Terri tells them they are still on their honeymoon, even after being together for nearly two years, but just wait As an afterthought, Terri tells them how she is just kidding about that just wait Sidebar Like hell Terri is kidding she knows from experience that at some point the honeymoon ends, but Laura and Nick are in honeymoon mode now, which is the pinnacle of love for each one of these four, thus her jealousy Probing Question Mel waxes philosophical when he acknowledges how he loved his first wife very much but now he hates her guts Same thing with Terri in her love for Ed, same thing for both Laura and Nick since they both were married previously What happened to that love And if anything tragic happened to any of them, their partner would find someone else to love Sidebar Good question Why is such a powerful, all consuming emotion for one person alive within us for a time then it either dies or turns to an equally negative emotion Even when it comes to something that doesn't change, like music, the type of music we love changes over time Why is this DOA Mel relates a story of love that really impressed him, a story where a drunk teenage driver at high speed slammed into the car of a seventy year old husband and wife The kid was DOA but the husband and wife were at his hospital in traction, bandaged head to foot, in the same hospital room and the husband tells him through a mouth hole in his bandaged head that what really depresses him isn't the accident or being injured or the pain but the fact that he can't turn his head and see his wife through his eye holes. The White Knight and His Kids Mel says how he wants to be like those medieval knights in their armor where nothing can

hurt them Then, tipsy with gin, Mel wants to speak with his kids Terri cautions him that his Marjorie Mel's ex might answer the phone Mel becomes extremely angry and upset, tells everyone how Marjorie is bankrupting him, how she doesn't marry her goddam boyfriend since she wants to still continue to collection money from him Knowing Marjorie is allergic to bees, Mel swears he will show up at Marjorie's front door wearing the white suit of a beekeeper and let loose a hive of bees to kill her

Sidebar Echoes of Ed and the spirit of Dionysius as Mel is possessed with the mad desire for destruction and killing.Silence All four fall silent, sensing how Dionysius isn't all that far away it is only a matter of what can set us off The story ends with Nick's reflection I could hear my heart beating I could hear everyone's heart I could hear the human noise we sat there making, not one of us moving, not even when the room went dark Raymond Carver, master of the short story Booze takes a lot of time and effort if you're going to do a good job with it Indeed If one wanted to distill the stories within this collection down to a pithy, inverted, Hallmark style aphorism, this would be a top contender Click For Review Soundtrack Little Person Drinking and smoking and talking these are the true main characters of Carver's world and make no mistake he's summoned and crafted a distinctive world Okay, we can quibble and refer to this trifecta aptly as the true plot devices perhaps In any case, these things, whatever we want to call them here, are not merely a thread uniting the stories, but a thick multi braided rope, the sort one of Carver's blue collar archetypes might use to drag a freshly felled by hand oak through the snow, or, likely, to break their fall while snapping their neck in a final, irredeemable act, right after polishing off a fifth of cheap bourbon.Basically, the character's names and jobs seem to matter less than the brand of booze they're downing, or the sort of receptacle they extinguish their cigarettes in At the same time, though these things seem to stand out, the characters do not feel like mere vessels for Carver's words They somehow mysteriously manage to be sympathetic, despicable, objects of pity, curiosity, and so on But basically everyone is miserable in one way or another Carver's characters cause the ol' chestnut that Misery loves company to take on a new and energized tone and hue That shit really comes alive and drunkenly tap dances upon the

page. And herein lies the magic of Carver for me how does he do it I say magic in both in the colloquial, metaphorical sense of pleasant, enchanting, and so on and also, so, in the sense of literal magic tricks How does he do it You see this famously spare narrative before you, you see the extremely narrow range of subject matter drunk, sad, average people, being drunk and sad and average repeating to the point that stories easily begin to merge into one another, you see the distinct lack of purple prose, the bluntness of it all, and yet you're being affected in a tremendous way by it all, to the point that it becomes oddly difficult to explain Affected in a way that you feel you shouldn't be, given the way your descriptions of the work look on paper. Perhaps the problem is that every way in which I'd like to describe the depth of these stories simply comes off as an unspeakably repetitive cliché that almost makes me shudder Another thought that crossed my mind is that it almost feels wrong, like morally incorrect, to try and put some new, clever, summarizing spin on these stories and the superior collection Cathedral, which left me or less wordless in my review To try and wax analytic with such raw slices of life does indeed seem to miss some Point that may or may not be hovering about But I ultimately feel that it's also not a grave sin to do so, or to want to do so, rather it's a reflection of the desire found in each and every story of Carver's to find some company, for our misery and otherwise To exchange pieces of ourselves while we can I'll just have to save it for a night with You, seated at a table, with a large ashtray and a long line of adult beverages trailing behind us. He makes it look so easy He almost makes it look too easy in this short story collection, as though there isn't much here aside from spare language and even sparer plot But there is The stories are deceptively small, but there's a depth of authenticity to these shrapnel blasts In each of these stories, which explore the transience of love and the various ways we damage or destroy it completely, there is a hard, dark centre I Could See the Smallest Things has a woman thinking of slugs as she looks at her husband in the middle of the night, a new vision of their marriage coming to light So Much Water So Close to Home is a story of men on a camping trip who come across a woman's dead body The way they deal with it disturbs their women and everyone who knows them Tell the Women We're Going tells how a

senseless violence erupts from men who feel trapped in their suburban families Popular Mechanics , a story of the acrimonious split of a couple s assets, made me throw the book down as though it was a deadly snake The visual it gave me was too much to linger on Everything Stuck to Him is about the pressures of early parenthood, a look back at a difficult but sweet time when a relationship still had tenderness. The other stories are also memorable, with the themes of infidelity and alcohol glugging through their veins They aren t uplifting, that is certain But there s a truth here, a humanity, a shared pain, that make them worth reading. As I mentioned before, these stories are deceptive They are understated, and certainly underwritten The power of Carver s writing comes afterwards, in sickening waves, when you realise the implications of what it is you just read. Apparently this particular collection is heavily edited After his death, Carver s widow fought to have his original, unedited stories published, under the title Beginners I haven t read those longer versions, but I will say that these terse, clipped shots to the heart worked very well for me. What do any of us really know about love It seems to me we re just beginners at love We say we love each other and we do, I don t doubt it I love Terri and Terri loves me, and you guys love each other too You know the kind of love I m talking about now Physical love, that impulse that drives you to someone special, as well as love of the other person s being, his or her essence, as it were Carnal love and, well, call it sentimental love, the day to day caring about the other person But sometimes I have a hard time accounting for the fact that I must have loved my first wife too But I did, I know I did I have read this volume several times, and this time listened to it So it s very important to me In a former life I got an MFA in short fiction, in the eighties, and at that time the premier living short story writer, or certainly the most stylistically influential, was Carver He himself, a minimalist, would seem to have been himself influenced by Ernest Hemingway And maybe noir fiction Very simple, straightforward prose Carver was particularly a working class fiction writer, an alcoholic writing about booze and the effect of booze Drinking s funny When I look back on it, all of our important decisions have been figured out when we were drinking Even when we talked about having to cut back on drinking, we d be sitting at the kitchen table or out at the picnic

table with a six pack of whiskey and people on the edge of serious collapse We opened our eyes and turned in bed to take a good look at each other We both knew it then We'd reached the end of something, and the thing was to find out where new to start Grace Paley wrote a story collection entitled Enormous Changes Happening at the Last Minute, but this is Carver, and the changes for him are cataclysmic Booze, divorce, but also with stripped down language All this, all of this love we're talking about, it would just be a memory Maybe not even a memory Am I wrong Am I way off base Because I want you to set me straight if you think I'm wrong I want to know I mean, I don't know anything, and I'm the first one to admit it There was a time when I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself But now I hate her guts I do How do you explain that What happened to that love What happened to it, is what I'd like to know I wish someone could tell me Devastating Clueless Lost Drunk Sad. And elegant The light was draining out of the room, going back through the window where it had come from Besides the title story, I love many stories, including Why Don't We Dance about a guy going through a divorce who takes all of the furniture from his house and leaves it on the front lawn arranged just as it looked inside the house A young loving couple sees it, assumes it is a yard sale, she sits on the bed, and then the guy comes home with booze and suggests the couple dance, right there on the street Why don't you kids dance he decided to say, and then said it Why don't you dance Surreal, devastatingly sad and sadly hilarious Viewfinder A man without hands came to the door to sell me a photograph of my house The Bath On his birthday, young Scotty is walking to school when he is hit by a car and knocked unconscious The Bath is a predecessor of A Small, Good Thing, one of Carver's most famous stories, which was published in Cathedral It is much shorter than A Small, Good Thing and ends on an ambiguous note as Scotty's mother goes home from the hospital to take a bath, which is where this version of the story gets its name So Much Water Close to Home At breakfast, Claire learns her husband Stuart and his three buddies had found the body of a girl washed up on the river shore upon arriving in the afternoon for their yearly camping trip Instead of reporting the body to the police right away, the four enjoy their vacation fishing, eating, and drinking whisky as they sit by the

fire, ignoring the body still in the water downstream a bit When Stuart talks to Claire this leads to a reconsideration of their relationship. This collection is stunning, but it is also threadbare minimalist, and as I understand it highly influenced by Carver's editor and teacher Gordon Lish. These are great stories, as is, though later collections have fuller, uncut versions. But yes, read this wonderful collection. Alternate Cover Edition Can Be Found Here. In his second collection, Carver establishes his reputation as one of the most celebrated and beloved short story writers in American literature. A haunting meditation on love, loss, and companionship, and finding one's way through the dark. I first became interested in this book when I read Haruki Murakami's memoir *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. Any book that can inspire Murakami to steal most of the line must be worth reading. Mustn't it? Well, I thought so, though it took me some time to get around to this collection of 17 short stories. The cover of the Vintage Classics version I read is sparse and the blurb gave nothing away. Ah well, in for a penny. Originally published in 1981, the prose is lean and the general mood somewhat disturbing as Carver explores the nature of life and love. As I worked my way through the collection the stories seemed to increase in length and complexity. Many of the characters were not easy to like; many were alcoholics and adulterers but there was a compelling darkness and variation that seemed to draw me, urgently, from one story to the next. Midway through I came across a scene I recognised, I'd seen it before in a film I'd much enjoyed *Short Cuts* directed by Alan Atman, in 1993. In looking back at the film I discovered that Altman had based it on a group of Carver's short stories. About Carver, he says: His stories are all occurrences, all about things that just happen to people and cause their lives to take a turn. Maybe the bottom falls out. Maybe they have a near miss with disaster. Maybe they just have to go on, knowing things they don't really want to know about one another. And this seems to be the essence of it. Life's miseries are not sugar-coated here. The stories are uniformly melancholy. But overriding this is the feeling that as long as life includes the precious opportunity for us all to experience love then maybe it's all worthwhile. I did enjoy some stories more than others, with the title piece probably being the most memorable, but overall I'd say it's well worth setting aside a short amount

of time to experience this powerful collection. If I had a teacher in high school who assigned Raymond Carver, I would've gone bananas for *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, a 1981 collection of seventeen stories published in literary journals in the 70s or early 80s. After being required to read Orwell and the goddam *Canterbury Tales*, reading *So Much Water So Close to Home* where men on a fishing trip discover a woman's body in the river and wait until the end of their weekend to report it would've been like ducking a bullet fired from a gun. It would've left an indelible impression on my teenage mind, caught between a Doors phase and a Public Enemy phase. Today, not so much.

Exploring Carver's fiction for the first time at the age of forty-three, I feel that in many ways I'm over this. Like listening to someone coming out of AA with their raw stories, epiphanies and apologies, I'm happy they're exorcising their demons, but I can only tolerate point-blank despair for so long. I was, is, and will always be a big fan of *Short Cuts*, the bold 1993 film adaptation in which filmmaker Robert Altman relocated the Carververse to contemporary Los Angeles and whose script drew in part from four of the stories in this collection. While the spiritual root canal on screen was numbed by the humor and humanity of its cast, in printed form, these tales are bleak.

My favorite stories were *I Could See the Smallest Things* (*Missouri Review*, 1980) in which a woman named Nancy wakes on the night of a full moon at the sound of her backyard gate opening. Her husband Cliff passed out, she puts on her robe to investigate and finds their neighbor Sam Lawton, formerly a friend of her husband's, out exterminating the slugs that feed on his rose bushes.

Sacks (*Perspective*, 1974) in which book salesman Les Palmer visits with his recently divorced father during a layover in Sacramento. Unable to unburden himself to anyone else, the father relates to the son in detail how he ended up breaking his marriage vows with his mother. This idea made its way into a scene between Jack Lemmon and Bruce Davison in *Short Cuts*.

The Bath (*Columbia*, 1981) in which an unnamed mother and father stand vigil beside their young son at the hospital after he's hit by a car and slips into a coma. Canceling their son's birthday party and ignoring the cake they'd ordered, they draw the wrath of the alcoholic baker Andie MacDowell. Bruce Davison played the parents and Lyle Lovett the baker in *Short Cuts*.

So Much

Water Close To Home Spectrum, 1975 In which Claire is shaken by the behavior of her husband Stuart, who despite discovering a woman s body on a weekend fishing and drinking trip with his buddies, waited until they were on their way home to contact the police This act, which seemed reasonable to Stuart, gives Claire no choice but to look at her husband in a new light Anne Archer and Fred Ward played the couple in Short Cuts Everything Stuck To Him Chariton Review, 1975 In which an unnamed couple on holiday in Milan revisit their past when she asks him to tell her what it was like when they were young The man recounts the time their infant daughter came down with an illness and he had to choose between a fishing trip or staying home with his family While I was able to race through these micro stories in less time than it would take me to duck from combat gunfire, providing some of the same sheer joy and terror, they didn t cast the same spell they would ve had I discovered Raymond Carver in high school As an adult, I ve met enough addicts recovered or otherwise to know how miserable they make their lives and those closest to them I don t need that behavior illustrated to me any That said, the effect of reading Carver was palpable This material got into my bones There s a closing time quality to these tales that I can only imagine is like a barfly staring into an empty bottle at 2 a.m like he was staring into an abyss.In 2009, two decades after Raymond Carver s death, his widow Tess Gallagher helped editors William Stull and Maureen Carroll restore all seventeen of these stories to their original length in a collection titledBeginnersBy their accounting, Carver s editor Gordon Lish had excised up to 70% of Carver s text, which indicates that readers and academics have come to appraise Carver s speeding bullet style and bleak vision after only reading 30% of his work I plan on purchasing a copy of his edition and will review it at some future time As for What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, it gets an incomplete grade.

RAYMOND CARVER

WHAT WE
TALK ABOUT WHEN
WE TALK
ABOUT LOVE

STORIES

"One of the true contemporary
masters."

—Robert Towers,
THE NEW YORK
REVIEW OF BOOKS

VINTAGE
CONTEMPORARIES