



Reconnaissance

Carl Phillips

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A powerful, inventive collection from one of America's most respected poets

*There's
a trembling inside the both of us,
there's a trembling, inside us both.*

The territory of *Reconnaissance* is one where morals threaten to become merely "what the light falls through," "suffering [seems] in fact for nothing," and "all we do is maybe all we can do." In the face of this, Carl Phillips, reconsidering and unraveling what we think we know, maps out the contours of a world in revision, where truth lies captured at one moment and at the next goes free, transformed. These are poems of searing beauty, lit by hope and shadowed by it, from a poet whose work "reinstates the possibility of finding meaning in a world that is forever ready to revoke the sources of meaning in our lives" (Jonathan Farmer, *Slate*).

Reconnaissance Details

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Author : Carl Phillips

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From Reader Review Reconnaissance for online ebook

Gerry LaFemina says

Phillips is one of the best lyric poets writing today--these poem's have a narrative arc that focuses on a relationship and the inherent questions that come from loving; their power is in the lyricism of how they open only moments of that story, letting us invest in filling in the blanks. What we get, then, is an intensely introspective book, quiet but fierce in its emotions. The deft way Phillips handles these poems--writing a traditional lyric that shows his willingness to experiment with form, syntax, fragment and associative logic--makes this book a pleasure. My complaint: at only 48 pages, this feels light.

Steven says

I love that we are now at a time in the evolution of gay culture that we have poets such as Carl Phillips who have lived long enough to reflect and deeply investigate as he does a life of gay love, desire, lust and spiritual connection. And these poems do just that, each one revolving around a series of existential questions that he digs deep into, allowing in the line and punctuation breaks the pauses and space the reader's mind needs to look into the tiny fractures of logic he explores. In his world, sex is a spiritual pursuit, an examination of our yearning for connection, even though there are many moments that speaker and his subject try to make it only about the body (as the telling epigraph from James Baldwin's "Giovanni's Room" foretells). This is what I find most interesting about the gayness of this exploration, for only a life spent constantly negotiating desire not just with oneself, or with the multitudes of partners certain gay lives allow, but also with the culture war around it could lead to the measured voice that Phillips employs, a voice with such powerful equanimity that even in charged moments of emotion, it searches for the complicity each person involved must own. This makes his dives into topics such as forgiveness ("Permission to Speak") and reconciliation ("Shield") more inward looking and hopeful, though the possibility of finding hope seems the eternal question of his work. In terms of language, we still have no poet like him, as his sentences often begin in the middle, or trail off, built of multiple clauses and questions that the reader must trace back to their antecedents, reflecting his meditations on past mistakes and moments, showing how they shift as you age, some shrinking, some growing bigger, always wrestling with making peace with the choices we've made in love. His voice is a gift, a constant reminder of the power of examining our lives for meaning.

Jonathan Tennis says

First collection of Phillips' work. Won't be my last. Great work of poetry.

Dennis Bensie says

Beautifully written. Nothing unexpected. Just layered poems with a capital "P".

Laura says

"Shield"

Kim says

It's a forgiving collection of prose-poetry. Overuses the ellipsis, but this thinking-aloud approach is quite personal, and captures a fair amount of falling light.

BookishStitcher says

The windfalls of my mistakes sweetly rot beneath me

Poetry is a very personal thing. I think different things speak to certain people. These poems are beautifully written, but none of them spoke to me personally that is why I only rated it three stars. I know there are definitely people out there for whom this would be a five star read. The italicized line above was my favorite from the collection.

Lou Last says

Moralia

The Golden Age, the Silver ... And then there's the nothing
everything returns to, flies to a bloated stag found
strangled, say, among the reeds,
the reeds where the roseate,
the thick in the head but all the lovelier for it, the lion-
muscled, graceful, syphilitic—all the lovers you've
ever had, meaning all the bodies you've variously given
sway to
or made sway—rise as one before you: not ghostly,
more like perennials you'd forgotten to expect again,
finding their way back into the violence and non-violence
of light, sunlight. They're what the light falls through.

The Darker Powers

Even if you're right,
and there's in fact a difference
between trouble unlooked-for, and

the kind of trouble we pursued,
ruthlessly, until at last
it was ours,
what will the difference
have been, finally? What I've
called the world continues
to pass for one, the room spins
same as ever, the bodies
inside it do, flightless, but
no less addicted to mastering—
to the dream of mastering—the very
boughs through which
they keep falling without
motion, almost,
that slowly, it seems they'll fall
forever, my
pretty consorts, to whom
sometimes—out of pity,
not mercy, for
nothing tender
about it—I show the darker
powers I've hardly shown
to anyone: Feel the weight of them,
I say, before putting them back,
just behind my heart, where they blacken
and thrive.

For Night to Fall

You could tell from the start that the best

were frailing. We made the wishes we made,
beside the wishes we also hoped would
come true, for there's always a difference,

the way what we remember of what happened
is just memory, not history exactly, and
not the past, which is truth, but by then

who cared? The truth by then as a snowy
owl becoming steadily more indistinguishable
from the winter sand in twilight, feathered

emptiness filling/unfilling itself for no one,
no apparent reason—who? who says?
who says the dead are farther away from me

than you are?—across the hard, hard shore.

Reed says

I found this collection of poems difficult to read. The poems were often opaque, and occasionally lucid. The issue for me was the depressing emotional content. I recommend filing on the side of the poetry shelf much closer to Sylvia Plath....the opposite side of the shelf from Billy Collins. I have my own speculations as to what demons Carl Phillips has had to endure in his life. Whatever they are, the emotional burden and toil they place on him comes out in spades with his poetry.

If I were to recommend a single poem in this collection, it is For Night to Fall, which has a nice description of the difference between memory and the past:

... for there's always a difference,
the way what we remember of what happened
is just memory, not history exactly, and
not the past, which is truth, but by then
who cared?

Molly says

This book was fine, but it didn't draw any emotion.

Well, one line was pretty good,

" you are the knife,

but you are also what the knife

has opened, says the wind" (pg 19)

I guess this book could've been good I just am not a Huge poetry fan or anything so for me to really like a poetry book it's got to be pretty good (I have enjoyed poetry books in the past, like Ask Me How I Got Here) But I guess this topic didn't draw me in and if a bad topic is to be enjoyed the writing has to just be that much better, and the thing is I do enjoy some poetry so I think I'm going to make a point of reading more poetry books if I can because just because this book wasn't my cup of tea doesn't mean that no poetry will be.

Emily says

"where arrow meets flesh, the blood corsaging..."

"if I've / been restless, then the way a compass can be, / and still be true."

Stuart Greenhouse says

What a great book. Not as satisfyingly knotty as say Pastoral (from what I remember. Should revisit.) but that might be just my familiarity at this point with how his mind and words work. So, felt like a more straightforward read, but still as brilliant a conversation to be listening in on. Emotions, landscape, syntax. Fantastic.

Mark Ward says

Made it halfway through before abandoning it. Just didn't like, and couldn't get into his poetry at all.

Kell says

4.5

When I read poetry books I note poems that strike me, and return to sit with them, gather them up and hold them, before I feel I am finished the book (and, as I mainly read library books, I return it). There is sitting and understanding left to do.

Short review: beautiful; a harmonious clutter of bits of plant, sea, cliff, light, dark; reading the collection as a whole creates a horse with all its smell, sound, heat, breath, right there in front of you.

Sandra says

In these volume, a light moves across a life into darkneses where the wild that is in us never is absent, and out again. There is a sense of having matured with experience:

All the several darkneses that I hated once,
though more often, lately, I row inside them,
stolen boats, blown aslant these waters . . . (30)
