



Sex Perhaps

Kathryn Starbuck

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Starbuck offers a refreshing account of an unselfconscious woman in her seventies, through lusty poetry.

Kathryn Starbuck began writing poems in her sixties in response to the deaths of several family members—hardest of all, the death of her husband of thirty years. She wanted to die herself but instead started “scribbling,” making her first efforts from out of the grief. She’d been an editor for a weekly newspaper and had authored political commentaries, but she’d never thought to write a poem before then. Eventually, she submitted a few to the *Sewanee Review*, which printed them, and before long her work was appearing in some of the best literary magazines, including the *New Yorker*.

Sex Perhaps is Starbuck’s second collection, and while she’s still writing about the husband she lost in 1996, she’s also writing about life, with joy and humor. There’s a sense that she’s arrived at the other side of great suffering, and she’s moving beyond her losses.

Travels abroad, especially in Greece, provide the setting for encounters that echo myths or refer to ancient sites, yet we remain in the vivid present, accompanied by a quick-witted woman who, if she ever hesitated, doesn’t do so anymore. After a police officer scolds her for causing a wreck because she was writing while driving, she offers a private reading (“He was young. And gorgeous.”), which he declines, threatening to take away her license. He takes her pencil instead, and she translates her afterthoughts into, “[I] promised that next time I’d get more from him than / a slap on the wrist. Living on hope, I drove on, wanting to be hit by / another poem. I vowed then to get my pencil back and him with it.” Besides being a funny account, we find the cheeky side of a woman who is now into her seventies.

In “The Shoe,” Starbuck describes getting rid of her husband’s things, then sleeping with a spoonful of his ashes in her bed, which makes perfect sense in the universe of the poem. The day she finds a single shoe “alone, crouching behind the couch, alive / with Effie’s opulent Turkish angora fur,” she knows then that “solace was something I could neither seek nor / find. Oh beloved! I know I am an old woman. But I cannot live in a shoe.”

It’s refreshing to encounter such an authentic voice, one free of self-consciousness, a grown woman who won’t be bothered with what anyone thinks and instead concerns herself with writing good poems.

HOLLY WREN SPAULDING (Summer 2014)

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