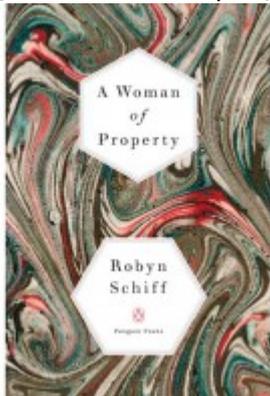


A Woman of Property by Robyn Schiff

written by John Yohe | April 29, 2016



A Woman of Property by Robyn Schiff
Penguin, 2016
96 pages – [Penguin](#) / [Amazon](#)

I made the mistake of glancing at the Penguin press release for Robyn Schiff's *A Woman of Property*, with its prominently featured blurb by Jorie Graham, and so knew, *knew*, that this was going to be Serious Poetry. I would've figured it out eventually, but I sighed, knowing I would find no humor, and therefore no joy. Not that all poetry has to do that, and if it did I'd probably give up on it. But in the Court of Po Biz, I tend to relate to the jester. When poetry starts getting Serious, I think of Marianne Moore: "there are things that are important beyond / all this fiddle."

My guess is that Schiff doesn't think she's Serious Poetry. Any poet that did (besides Jorie Graham) would probably be doomed. One example where Schiff, it could be argued, is being playful is in "Dyed Carnations," the first part here:

There's blue, and then there's blue.
A number, not a hue, this blue
is not the undertone of anyone
but there it is, primary.
I held the bouquet
in shock and cut the stems at a deadly angle.

I recognize the Plath-ness of this ("You do not do / you do not do / old shoe") but the rhyme, to me, doesn't ever get Schiff anything but sounding like Dr. Suess. What really offends me as a reader though is the "deadly." I do not like adjectives used as a way for the writer to tell me how I should be reading a text. That is, I don't like to be told. If you want an image to be or appear deadly, then show me that image. The image should stand for itself.

Just on the next page is "Although," another potentially great situation to be un-Serious, since its premise is Schiff obsessing over the lobsters in

their tank at a grocery store. Great set up, right? Except it's not. She just muses on them for while. Not even in an animal rights kind of way, as in, Oh lobsters live to be sixty and mate for life. No, instead Schiff kind of betrays her title, *A Woman of Property*, as being about a middle-class white woman trying to find profundity in shopping.

And I would almost write off the whole book at this point, except something happens, something shifts, in the second half of "Although":

...in line

at the deli counter on a day the door
was wide open to the possibility of
early spring for which
sacrifice was made
in the freezing dark a few weeks
earlier, I saw
a thinly slice rip of incandescent
honeyed ham dangling
like the pendulum of a clock
in the stringy grip of
a wasp. No, not *like* a pendulum.
Not *like* a clock. I was young then
and mistook nearly everything
I have been carrying this for
a long time now.
It was a pendulum.
It was a clock.

This is is serious poetry, a terrifying image, but what I love, and from which the power comes, is Schiff's abandonment of simile (although, she kind of gets to both use it and discard it at the same time, but ok, well done). Here, nothing is like anything. Or, that is, metaphor trumps simile every time. Could the image of the wasp carrying a piece of meat have stood on its own? Maybe, in a weird creepy way, but Schiff is taking us on her thinking process: she has to first think of the image as 'like' something in order to transcend into thinking of it as metaphor. She has to say 'like' and then 'is' for us to understand the image, as she sees it, on more than one level, otherwise we'd never (or, probably not) see the swaying meat as a clock, as in a reminder of the passing of time, and of death.

And so I find myself rebutted: the image here can't just stand for itself: it needs, we need, the poet to reveal, and connect to, a larger meaning.

Did she need the first half of the poem, and the lobsters, to get there? That is my doubt. In any case, I prefer Schiff in her shorter poems, more political ones, like "A Doe Does Not Replace Iphigenia On The Sacrificial Altar" and especially "Amerithrax," where anthrax becomes a metaphor for America and its foreign policy, where seriousness is perhaps more

appropriate, and where Schiff is more willing to go than, say, Jorie Graham.

So, lesson learned: never read the press release. And don't eat lobsters. As for reading *A Woman of Property*, I return to and paraphrase Marianne Moore: Reading Schiff, one discovers in her after all, a place for the genuine.