

Elise Cowen: Poems and Fragments

written by John Yohe | March 25, 2016



Elise Cowen: Poems and Fragments by Elise Cowens
Edited by Tony Trifilio
Ahsahta Press, 2014
208 pages – [Ahsahta](#) / [Amazon](#)

Elise Cowen is, was, and/or should have been known as a Beat poet, though like many women writers in that group and time, she was overlooked. Known more now as the woman that Allen Ginsberg had sex with in an attempt to overcome his homosexuality, and the typer of his poem "Kaddish," Cowen wrote poems as well, though only managed to publish a few, before committing suicide. Alas, according to the editor of Ahsahta Books edition of her collected surviving works, Tony Trifilio, most of her notebooks were destroyed by neighbors as a way to protect her parents from her writings about sex, in particular sexual love for other women.

What we have left of Cowen's work, decades later, are those few poems published in her lifetime, and poems and fragments from one single notebook, turning Cowen into a modern day combination of two of her biggest influences: Emily Dickinson and Sappho:

[Your arms around me all night]

Your arms around me all night
I woke to find me there
Cramped
Frightened
Not knowing what you held
Cramped Frightened
By the tenderness holding me

And once my eyes opened on
Creation
Tearing through your face
In the act of come,
I didn't know you looked like that

Alone.
Time.
Everything I love, I need to be
Hides in you.

That we even have a collection of Cowen's work is due to two men: Trigilio, and Leo Skir. Trigilio shares the whole fascinating story in his introduction, and it's a strange one: he claims that Skir rescued the one remaining notebook of Cowen's, and even typed it up at one point, but then sat on it for decades, claiming to be the copyright holder, when in fact he was not. When Skir refused to give up the notebook, Trigilio found a way (he doesn't go into detail) to get a copy of the whole thing, facsimiles of which appear in this collection, so readers can see where Cowen herself made changes.

I can't help but think of Cowen in terms of Allen Ginsberg, though I know some readers won't think that fair, but hear me out: If Ginsberg was who really revived the Whitman-esque style in American Poetry, Cowen could have and would have revived Emily Dickinson. Not that Dickinson needed reviving, maybe, at that point: many poets in the second half of the 20th century would claim her as an influence. Yet Cowen's style is the closest I've read, visually and sound-wise, to what Dickinson did, and I mean that in the way you can almost just even *look* at Ginsberg and see the Whitman influence, so too with Cowen and Dickinson. The perfect example is "[Emily]" (there are no actual titles assigned by Cowen—titles are taken from the first lines), one of the best in the collection:

Emily,
Come summer
You'll take off you
 jeweled bees
Which sting me
I'll strip my stinking
 jeans
Hand in hand
We'll run outside
Look straight at
 the sun
A second time
And get tan

Looking at the sun is of course one of those things adults tell us not to do when we're young, so of course it becomes tempting, and so becomes a nice metaphor for sex, and/or sexual love, between women, which certainly back in the 50s, but even today, children get warned against and about. The 'second time' implies that the (of course imagined version of the) speaker and Emily

have already experimented with sex, and survived, and so this becomes a snide aside, a comment on the know-nothing adults, who were wrong. As they are. The "And get tan" feels like a veiling of what the speaker really means, though Cowen leaves it up to us: and get laid? And fall in love? And be healthy?

Notably, though, with this metaphor is in fact that looking at the sun too much *is* actually bad for you, which I think reveals the speaker's/Cowen's guilt about her desire/love for another woman. Like Dickinson's short poems, there's a lot going on here, and hidden.

Trigilio also provides a Notes section at the end of *Poems and Fragments*, where readers can read about changes, and previous versions of many poems, based on either mis-readings (most of these poems come from the handwritten versions in a notebook, remember) and/or, for example, when Skir chose to seemingly change words.

Trigilio also spends some time in his introduction talking about a couple major differences in poem versions, and how he therefore critiqued them wrongly in previous essays. It's all interesting, though I don't think anyone would hold anything against him for that, he seems to feel bad, but really what comes across is his passion (desire?) to show readers how important he thinks Cowen's work is/was. I mean, this project took *decades* to put together: this is a labor of love, and a great service to poetry lovers.

I know I'm guilty of thinking of the Beats as a bunch of dudes, but a book like this shows us (reminds us?) that they didn't come out of a void, and that women were a vital part of the exchange of ideas going on at this time. Kudos too to Ahsakta Press for putting this collection out—also a labor of love, and a useful reference text for future scholars of the Beat Generation, and American women poets. Don't let that intimidate you though. Reading *Elise Cowen: Poems and Fragments* is almost impossible to read just as a text unto itself: there's way too much history informing it. But, enjoying it, despite and because, is very possible.