

How I Lost My Virginity to Michael Cohen and other heart-stab poems

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How I Lost My Virginity to Michael Cohen by Alexis Rhone Fancher
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Reading Alexis Rhone Fancher's *How I Lost My Virginity to Michael Cohen and other heart-stab poems* is a bit like going to a Georgia O'Keefe exhibit with a friend who loudly proclaims all the paintings are of vaginas. Everything is about sex, to this friend, and while they may be right, you might find yourself blushing. *How I Lost My Virginity* is a collection of erotica, so put on your pearls and prepare to clutch them. Or rip them off and watch them scatter across the floor, because Fancher's collection transcends typical erotica, and lies instead in that delicious overlapping section in the Venn Diagram of Sex and Art. Granted, there are plenty of cocks and cunts and other necessary parts, but the people fucking in her poems aren't doing so in a vacuum (if that's even possible; Fancher would know).

In Fancher's poems, there is a rich narrative of using and being used. And despite the pain caused by the people who have hurt Fancher's narrators, a theme of forgiveness runs strong throughout the book. Among poems about rape and being taken advantage of are poems about still greatly appreciating sex, which is a deviation from the typical narrative of a woman post-assault. Fancher's narrators ultimately love people, and this is reflected in the great attention to detail of the characters who populate the collection, as well as the black and white photographs interspersed throughout. Whether it be in the description of the budding sexuality of a teenage girl in "Lust at the Cafe Formosa," or the picture of a woman riding the subway with headphones on, the striking details Fancher employs create a well-developed cast of characters.

How I Lost My Virginity opens by introducing Michael Cohen, the man who seemingly started it all (though we quickly learn that the narrator's sexuality began far earlier). Instead of focusing on the emotional implications, as another poet might, or employing accursed flower imagery, Fancher's narrator, in outline format, lays down the facts, physical and logistical, of the evening, with such lines as, "20. He was holding his cock as he licked me./21. I had never come before./21a.) Not like that." This nearly clinical approach establishes Fancher's atypical approach to writing about sex. Emotions do make an appearance, but so much of it is a celebration of the body and its nearly infinite capabilities. Fancher's poetry takes uncommon and unexpected approaches to a nearly universal subject. The effort to establish Fancher as an unexpected poet continues immediately with the next poem, indicative even by its title: "This is Not a Poem," and onward throughout the collection.

Fancher is not afraid to address the taboo, even within an already somewhat taboo world of writing about sex. In "The First Time I Gave My Cousin Lisa an Orgasm," her narrator explores familial sexuality. Across the page is a photo of two upside down Barbie dolls wearing full skirts that, flipped upside down as well, cover the dolls' heads, torsos, and arms, leaving just two pairs of legs sticking straight up in the air. It is my favorite pairing of photograph and poem within the collection. The sexualization of a young

girl's toys is a perfect accompaniment to the two girls exploring each other. The poem, like the rest of the book, is more than base sexuality, with beautiful couplets such as,

The first time I made cousin Lisa come
we looked into each other's aloneness; the boys

who didn't want us yet, the girls who shunned us
like they saw something we didn't.

It closes with punishment for Fancher's narrator's childhood exploration, reading, "her steady rocking against my wrist//a sharp pleasure, the rug burn that my knees endured/a penance, prepaid."

This theme of Catholic discipline runs through several of Fancher's poems about childhood sexuality, reflecting an inevitable punishment for Fancher's experimentation, if not from her parents, then from God and society. In one of my favorite poems, Fancher juxtaposes the poem's plot arc about teenage experimentation with a Catholic girl with Dylan lyrics to create a vastly multi-dimensional experience. Section three of the poem emphasizes where Fancher's narrator's urge for penance stems simply and beautifully:

Donna hits the Confessional.
"Father, forgive me for I have sinned."

I am that sin. I listen in.

"I kissed a girl," says my girl.
"You'll go to hell," says the desiccated
man in the box.

The fear present in "Subterranean Lovesick Clues," such as when Fancher's narrator is scared not to drink the bourbon, else "word might get/around," humanizes the narrator of the collection as a whole. So many of us are uncomfortable as sexual beings, and while Fancher's poems unabashedly embrace it for the most part, these moments of insecurity, whether about sex or otherwise, make her voice more accessible and interesting.

For Fancher's adult narrator, she has moved from exploring sexuality, to settling within a thriving system of trade. Her poem "I Want Louboutin Heels" carries echoes of Kim Addonizio's poem, "What Do Women Want?" Fancher has shifted her childhood insecurities about her sexuality to pride, as in the lines referring to the heels, "I'll wear them like flesh,/like hooves, like sin./I'll keep their secrets, won't spill/where they've been." Though "Subterranean Lovesick Clues" and "I Want Louboutin Heels" are not the only poems that mention sin, it is hard not to imagine these two in conversation with each other. The next poem in the collection, "Handy," expresses the crude but vital truths that signify a Fancher poem, opening with the quartet,

I wanted you small and folded
in my pocket. Like a Swiss Army knife.
Like a blow up doll. I wanted you
to fuck me and then disappear.

and closing with the lines,

That day I saw you in Venice,
you walked past me
like your cock had

never been in my mouth.

I almost grabbed a fistful of you,
crammed you in like food.

Fancher's work may dabble in vulgarity, but only as a reflection of the world where her poems take place. Her poems exist in a space where many other poets' work does not, and this is mirrored by Fancher as the performer—she is known to read her poems in sex shops. Fancher's work expands the audience for poetry, and defies the expectation of what can be achieved through a poetry collection. Her poem "Staying Put, after Edward Hopper's painting, A Woman in the Sun, 1961" closes with the narrator asking the painter, after he says his favorite thing to paint is sunlight, "So why paint me all the time?" to the answer, "So you'll stay put." Fancher is a woman adamantly *not* staying put, she is a woman telling her own story. If she shocks, it is to speak to the rarity of women writing poems like hers. In a poetic world where discussion of sex is still dominated by the male voice and experience, Fancher's voice is crucial.