

## ANALYSIS

### "An Influx of Poets" (1978)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"An Influx of Poets" (1978), the last story published before Stafford's death, describes very openly the unhappy expanse of her marriage to Lowell and its ending weeks at Damariscotta Mills. It is so painfully autobiographical that it is difficult to view it separately as a work of art. Theron Maybank *is* Robert Lowell. Cora Maybank *is* Jean Stafford, Minnie Rosoff *is* Gertrude Buchman. Buchman did fly into Damariscotta Mills in a Piper Cub. In the summer of 1946, Stafford and Lowell did entertain various visiting poets, 'baby bards...[who] would very soon usurp their elders' thrones and their dominions.' She did type and retype Lowell's poems as he changed an *a* to a *the*. Eileen Simpson was astonished that, in the midst of her own work, Stafford seemed to accept this responsibility for playing typist for Lowell without question.

In the character of Cora, Stafford writes: 'This was not the way I had planned the summer. We had limped painfully through the fifth year of our marriage, having changed the scene of our travail each year from the beginning. Cambridge was no better than New York, New York was no better than Connecticut, Connecticut was no better than Louisiana or the mountains of Tennessee. But we often limped on different routes, shedding our blood on sand and rocks miles apart. When we did meet in some kind oasis or quiet glade, we were at first shy and infatuated and glad, but the reunion did not last, the shade and water were part of a mirage, lightning smote and burned the hemlocks of our forest sanctuary.'

She had expected their lives to be different in the house in Maine she had bought and furnished for them as their own: 'My parlor! My own! I bought the house, I bought the furniture, the student lamps, the cachepots, the milk-glass bowls I used for water lilies from the lake...' She had seen it as a sanctuary from Theron's aberrant impulses resulting from his conversion to Catholicism: 'Immersed in the rhythms of Gerard Manley Hopkins the poet, [he] was explosively ignited by Gerald Manley Hopkins the Jesuit...' Herself a convert at eighteen, Cora has not found in Catholicism what she was seeking. Despite her attempts to explain that she does not simply doubt, but repudiates the teachings of the Church. Theron insists on remarriage in the Catholic church and on Cora's performing the duties of the church: 'He'd run hellbent for election into that blind alley...and yanked me along with him, and there we snarled like hungry, scurvy cats.'

'Supinely,' the word Cora uses to describe her acquiescence to her husband's religious fervor, is also apt as a description of her reaction to what she at first perceives as merely a flirtation between Theron and Minnie Rosoff. Even before the summer had begun, there had been warnings that Cora's hopes for the new life in Maine were doomed. The delay caused by the remodeling and preparation of the house cooled Theron's enthusiasm for the planned move. Thus, by Christmas of the preceding year Cora 'was a witch again, and all day and all night my God-fearing yokemate burned me at the stake in Salem. He was right. I made no plea for myself, for I had the tongue of an adder and my heart was black with rage and hate.' By the time Minnie arrives in Maine, Cora has spent the summer wracked by 'brutish headaches,' 'lurching nausea,' and insomnia, which she copes with by drinking herself to sleep. The day of Minnie's arrival, Cora has been to Boston for an examination to determine the cause of her headaches. The 'appalling' diagnosis has been that they are caused by her mental state, which she perceives is caused by the conflict in her marriage.

Cora seeks a release from her pain by fantasizing an affair between Theron and Minnie: 'Dishonored, I would ascend refreshed, putting aside the ruin of this marriage shattered so ignominiously by *the other woman*, by that most unseemly of disgraces, above all by something *not my fault*, giving me the uncontested right to hate him.' Never believing her fantasy will come true, she encourages what is already a reality. Cora's 'sensible and wifely side' was pleased that Theron was enjoying himself and was perhaps losing some of his inflexibility. Her 'hermit side,' the 'secret boozehead side,' looked on the alliance with

even greater pleasure: I was blissfully addicted to the fantasies the genie of the bottle contrived for me each night...' She is shocked from her passivity when Theron dismisses her by saying, "I don't want a wife... I want a playmate.' Cora's fantasy has come true. She is 'dishonored'; she does 'taste the vilest degradation, the bitterest jealousy, the most scalding and vindictive rancor.' Most shattering must be her knowledge that she had cooperated in her own victimization. The futility of finding a release in marriage from isolation and pain provides the theme for other stories [such as] 'The Connoisseurs' (1952)."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh

*Jean Stafford*

(Twayne 1985) 65-66

"In 'An Influx of Poets,' Stafford's retrospective story, the priest who confirms the narrator's husband has an 'austerity' that was 'right up Theron's alley, and before I knew what had happened to me, I had been dragged into that alley which was blind.' Although her husband at first promises that he will not impose his new faith on her, within weeks she is being remarried in the Church, attending daily Mass, going to benediction, and telling her rosary twice a day. 'What had become of the joking lad I'd married? He'd run hellbent for election into that blind alley...and yanked me along with him, and there we snarled like hungry, scurvy cats.' The metaphor of the blind alley is all the more striking in view of the scene of the car accident that had smashed up Stafford's face (which incident plays no part in 'An Influx of Poets'). One wonders just how conscious Stafford was of this analogy between crash and conversion....

It is...hard to judge today whether the Catholic charade Stafford's protagonist acts out in 'An Influx of Poets' represents Jean's own real but rueful hypocrisy at the time or the retrospective cynicism of one who wished she had not so easily submitted to her husband's zeal for conversion.... The elder Lowell's attitude toward Delmore can be guessed from his habit of telling his literary son that he 'talked like a Jew.' In 'An Influx of Poets,' Stafford has the Robert Lowell character say of the Delmore Schwartz character, 'I would never have a Jew as a close friend.'... An irreversible estrangement was creeping over the couple. In 'An Influx of Poets' the protagonist ruminates, 'I had thought that when I was out of his sight I was literally out of his mind...' The tenor of their fights over Jean's drinking is captured in 'An Influx of Poets'...

One of the last guests of the summer was Gertrude Buckman, Delmore Schwartz's ex-wife and a friend of Stafford's since 1944. As Minnie Zumwalt, the 'pretty, small, dark, *zaftig* girl,' the 'little minx' who is by turns a sharp-tongued literary critic and 'adoring as a daft maiden when she was in the presence of a poet,' Buckman serves as the villainess of 'An Influx of Poets.' In that trenchant but bitter story, Minnie arrives like a grand dame, landing on the lake in a Piper Cub float plane.... In Stafford's short story Minnie and Theron (Lowell's alter ego) take picnics out on the lake in order to get away from Cora, who meekly makes sandwiches for them. Minnie is portrayed as a giggly, baby-talking vixen who flirts with Theron in front of his wife.' 'But Cora doesn't know how I got here! I flew down from Castine in a *wee* plane, like a kite exactly. With such a sweet boy, and the plane is still on that *tiny* island. The moon will be full--it's summer time! Say that you want a picnic, sweetie!'

If one had no other evidence to go on than 'An Influx of Poets,' it would be easy to conclude that Buckman and Lowell began an affair in Damariscotta Mills, right under Stafford's nose, and that the affair was the chief cause of the dissolution of their marriage. But according to Buckman, 'We never so much as touched hands. We used to go to the market to get food, and we used to go out in the rowboat together, and once we brought home a lot of water lilies and put them in the bathtub, and the bathtub became full of little black insects.' She insists that Lowell and she did not become lovers until months after he and Stafford had separated. Yet a strong mutual attraction between the two of them did make itself manifest in Maine....

Buckman avers that when she realized what was happening, she decided to leave, but Stafford objected. 'I remember that scene in the middle of the night. I said I couldn't stay, it was just too painful. She followed me and pleaded with me on the stairs, please, please, not to go off.... She begged me to [stay]. 'An Influx of Poets' confirms this claim and goes even further: as Cora reflects, 'I helped in every way to make the match, which was already a *fait accompli* and which, when I discovered that it was, was to hurtle me off the brink on which I had hovered so long into a chasm.'

It is of relatively minor moment whether it was in Maine or afterward that Lowell and Buckman technically became lovers. The affair in which Stafford so perversely and yet so characteristically collaborated had a far more devastating impact on her than she could have foreseen. As for Lowell, who only months before had summoned one of his best friends to Maine for a dressing-down about an extramarital dalliance, he seems in August to have pursued Buckman with no thought of any moral inconsistency, nor any qualms about the effect his action might have on Stafford. In September Lowell and Stafford closed the house and rode south together on the train. Their marriage was in tatters. Whether or not the ending of 'An Influx of Poets' is accurate as to the precise details of that doleful parting, Stafford's story surely renders her internal experience in September 1946.... 'An Influx of Poets' [is]the last story Stafford published in her lifetime, and one of her best.'...

John Thompson took Stafford to a party to celebrate the publication of the story. 'She couldn't talk, but people made a fuss over her,' Joseph Mitchell recalls. 'Reading that story was eerie. I could hear her telling it.' 'Influx' brought Stafford a large number of emotional letters, from friends, strangers, and writers as various as Bernard Malamud, Edward Albee, and V. S. Pritchett; all admired the story, and some were overwhelmed by it. At the beginning of 1979 Stafford was sixty-three years old. Smoking had worsened her pulmonary disease to the point where breathing was difficult. Weighing less than 105 pounds, she had all but stopped eating. On February 20 she went into New York Hospital for the thirty-fourth time in her life; the following day she suffered a respiratory arrest that had to be relieved with a chest tube."

David Roberts

*Jean Stafford: A Biography*

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"Like the poet Theron Maybank, a character in Stafford's autobiographical story 'An Influx of Poets,' Lowell was disdainful of his wife's 'nesting and neatening compulsions,' and she, in turn, could not tolerate his messiness.... Stafford would later make reference to the traumatic events that occurred during the first year of her marriage. Some of the details have been fictionalized, but the story appears to be an accurate portrayal of her own reaction to Lowell's conversion and to his tyrannical behavior after he became a devout Catholic.

'What had become of the joking lad I'd married?' her protagonist, Cora Savage, muses about Theron Maybank, a poet and zealous convert: 'He'd run hellbent for election into that blind alley--that's what had become of him--and yanked me along with him, and there we snarled like hungry, scurvy cats. If I had stubbornly withstood him from the beginning, or if I had left him when he left me for the seraphim and saints--but I had tried to withstand and had got for myself only wrath and disdain.' Cora Savage stoutly maintains that she herself does not 'believe in any of it--not in the real Presence, not in the Immaculate Conception, not in God,' but nevertheless she continues to receive the Host each Sunday without confessing her disbelief. An inveterate list maker, as was Stafford herself, Cora endures the tedium of daily mass by making lists of cities she has visited or buildings on her college campus or all the people she knows whose given name is John.

In 'An Influx of Poets' Cora Savage observes about her husband, 'Leaving him had not really occurred to me, for I had married within my tribe, and we were sternly monogamous to death.' However, in contrast to her protagonist, Stafford often fantasized about leaving Lowell during these difficult months in Baton Rouge, for no matter how brilliant, handsome, and socially well connected the real-life counterpart of Theron Maybank was, he was also a bully. As Stafford quickly learned, if one chose to contradict him, one might be subjected to verbal or even physical abuse. Yet the alternative to being married to Lowell was even more frightening to her than remaining with him, for she knew she did not want to join her parents in Portland or remain at her sister's ranch indefinitely, nor did she want to teach or work at some menial job to support herself. So remaining with him, she continued to quarrel with him, and as she had done in the past and would do in the future, especially during periods of stress, she drank and smoked much more than was good for her. Consequently, in addition to fighting with Lowell about Catholicism, she also fought with him about her excessive drinking and smoking....

Reflecting Stafford's own sentiments when she purchased the house in Damariscotta, her protagonist Cora Savage observes in 'An Influx of Poets,' 'I was thirty now, and I had achieved at last what I had striven for from the beginning: a house and a lawn and trees'.... In 'An Influx of Poets' Stafford would...describe the somewhat uncomfortable relationship between Cora Savage's husband and the Jewish poet Jerry Zumwalt, a character based on Delmore Schwartz. The narrator of this story, Cora Savage, says that her husband, anti-Semitic 'by heritage and instinct,' had remarked soon after they first met Jerry Zumwalt, 'I would never have a Jew as a close friend,' and she observes that the two men had never been close in the way her husband 'was close to friends from boarding-school and college days.' But whatever their reservations about staying with Schwartz were, both Stafford and Lowell welcomed an opportunity to be in a warmer and quieter place than their house in Maine; perhaps, too, they hoped to mitigate the growing tension between them by spending time with their congenial host....

In her autobiographical short story, 'An Influx of Poets,' Stafford described that 'awful' summer when 'every poet in America' came to stay with them.... Many literary people did visit that summer, including the Berrymans, the Rahvs, the Blackmurs, Patrick Quinn, and Robert Giroux, as well as Lowell's friends Frank Parker and Blair Clark. When [Eileen] Simpson accompanied her hosts to St. Patrick's on Sunday, Stafford confided to her that Cal insisted on focusing on the aspects of Catholicism she found least compelling: spiritual exercises and religious retreats and good works. She said that she found his insistence that she too adhere to these practices 'maddening and enervating.'

Just as Cora Savage does in 'An Influx of Poets,' Stafford typed her husband's poems, draft after draft after draft, and she cleaned the house, weeded the garden, and cooked three meals a day for their visitors.... A meticulous housekeeper, Stafford kept the vases filled with fresh flowers, and she set the table for breakfast each night before she retired, a habit, she said, that dated back to the time when her mother had run a boardinghouse. No doubt Stafford was thinking of Lowell's reaction to her own housekeeping obsessions when she had Cora Savage observe: 'My nesting and my neatening were compulsions to me that Theron looked on as plebian, anti-intellectual, lace-curtain Irish.... My pride of house was the sin of pride.' Yet Jean Stafford insisted that were it not for her, Lowell would have gone for days without sleeping or eating or bathing'....

The parallels between Jean Stafford's life and that of her protagonist Cora Savage are striking. Yet one crucial difference between them is that Cora Savage is not a writer but a schoolteacher.... Stafford's friend Nancy Gibney wrote to her: ...Robert Lowell is up against precisely Jean Stafford, no hopeless school teacher...but a blazing genius, with better looks and taste and sense than he has, and the achieved success he only longs for.' A devoted friend and staunch champion of Stafford's, Gibney expressed the belief that Lowell, whether consciously or subconsciously, had been committed to Stafford's destruction.... In...'An Influx of Poets,' the death of a marriage is symbolized by the death of Cora Savage's cat and her kittens, put into a gunnysack weighted with stones and dropped into the lake by Cora's husband... Having identified with her intellectual father during much of her lifetime, she found herself transformed into an avatar of that bitter drudge, her mother.... She ruefully was forced to acknowledge that her Boston adventure had come to a dismal end....

During these dark months, one happy event in Stafford's life was the appearance of 'An Influx of Poets' in the *New Yorker* in November of 1978. Realizing that *The Parliament of Women* would undoubtedly not be complete, Robert Giroux decided to extract this witty, insightful, and very bitter fictional account of Jean Stafford's marriage to Robert Lowell from her unfinished novel... Perhaps Stafford would have been somewhat reluctant to publish such a nakedly autobiographical account of her marriage to Lowell while he was still alive, but by 1978 both Lowell and Delmore Schwartz, who is represented in the story by a character named Jerry Zumwalt, were dead, and the real Minnie Zumwalt, Gertrude Buckman, was living abroad. 'An Influx of Poets' generated a good deal of interest, particularly among people in the literary circles that Jean Stafford and Robert Lowell had frequented... However, telephoning her to congratulate her on her latest achievement, they realized immediately when they heard her garbled speech that she was still aphasic....

Between October of 1975 and October of 1976, she wrote a monthly book review for *Esquire*, as Dorothy Parker had done for the magazine between 1957 and 1964. Her reviews are witty, insightful, and

sometimes exceedingly snide. A vitriolic review in *Esquire* of Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* [Brownmiller argues that 'all men are rapists']...gave rise to the kind of 'hate mail' from outraged feminists that she had earlier described in her 1974 essay in *Esquire*, 'Somebody Out There Hates Me'..."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman  
*Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart*  
(U Texas 1990) 114, 119-20, 149, 155, 158-61, 163, 295, 310, 320

"For years she worked intermittently on a novel she called *The Parliament of Women*, which she describe as her most autobiographical fictional endeavor, one that she promised would (among other things) cut up 'the poets to a fare-thee-well.' Gleefully she reported that 'A well-known American poet, with whom I was once closely associated, is petrified. And well he should be!'

As it happened, that comically scathing account of her marriage to Lowell and its collapse was the only part of the stalled manuscript that was published during Stafford's life. Her longtime editor and friend Robert Giroux helped her excerpt for publication as a story, 'An Influx of Poets,' in *The New Yorker* in 1978. By then Lowell was dead, so he never had a chance to read her version, which bore little resemblance to the assorted memories of their life together that he himself had committed to poetry over the years. The merciful nostalgia that often moved Lowell in memorializing his past was not a mood that came easily to Stafford.

But neither was 'An Influx of Poets' simply a vehicle of revenge, as she had humorously hinted it might be. The struggle to free her imagination from bitterness, to find a liberating aesthetic distance, was all-consuming, and the last story that appeared in her lifetime was proof of the dauntingly high standards she had always set for herself. She ventured closer than ever before to intimate, painful facts of her life; and amid ruthless satire, of her young self and of the young poets, she found a way to cast a light of comic forgiveness on the scene. She wasn't after factual veracity, and she wasn't after agonized self-dramatization, and yet because she wasn't, she found both truth and tragedy. Stafford's words, in her fiction and in her eloquent streams of talk, were rarely transparent windows onto anything so simple as the facts, which is one of the triumphs of her art and one of the frustrations and fascinations of her life....

In the last story published in her lifetime, 'An Influx of Poets' (1978), the most directly autobiographical she ever wrote, Stafford put more emphasis on the desperation of her youthful search for faith, but still there was an air of futility about it: 'My mission had no been accomplished, despite my fervor and my need. Later on, from time to time, I tried again in different churches of different towns at different seasons of the year and different hours of day and night. But I was God-forsaken; the shepherd could not hear my bleating, for I was miles astray in the cold and the dark and the desert. And at last I vanished without a trace; with a faint shiver and a faint sigh, I gave up the Ghost.'

In Baton Rouge, a deep passivity seemed to come over her in the face of Lowell's fervent mission. This time, instead of straying from the path, she was pulled along by Lowell. 'An Influx of Poets' dramatized her unconsciously acquiescent detachment as her husband, whom she called Theron in her story, swept her up in his all-consuming new cause: 'Like Father Strittmater [Father Agatho], Theron's instructor was Pennsylvania Dutch--a coincidence that only mildly interested me but one by which my husband set great store: Our Lord (he adopted the address with ease) had planned likenesses in our experience.' Stafford's protagonist was both observant and distracted, accurately sizing up Theron's teacher but then stunned to discover her own situation: the priest's 'austerity was right up Theron's alley, and before I knew what had happened to me, I had been dragged into that alley which was blind.'

What Stafford left out of the story was her own alternative mission, writing. She was groping there, too, but it was clear that she felt her efforts at literary discipline, at greater control of her craft, offered a more congenial route to order and meaning than the religious observances that Lowell urged ever more forcefully. She was also skeptical of the emphasis on criticism. She worried that Lowell was neglecting his poetry: 'Cal is to make a new edition of Herbert which will be published by LSU Press. He is immensely respected here, particularly by Cleanth Brooks who asks his advice on all literary questions,' she wrote to Hightower proudly, but she went on to express apprehensions. 'Cal has not written any poetry for five

months and I would rather have him a poet first and by his merit establish his invulnerability.' She knew how difficult it was to claim writing as her priority amid her many mundane preoccupations, and yet it was an important source of stability and self-definition for her; she was afraid of the effect of divine preoccupations on Lowell--and on herself. Through the winter and spring, while her daily life with Lowell became more difficult and the devotional routine more demanding, Stafford was at last experiencing a literary breakthrough of sorts. Her faith was frail, and a source of conflict with Lowell, but her religious struggles proved to be important inspiration for her writing....

St. Teresa of Avila was her inspiration. Stafford's account in 'An Influx of Poets' of her discovery of the saint is revealing. 'Theron once told me that I was going through the dark night of the spirit and I should meditate and read John of the Cross. I did, with a certain kind of recognition, read St. John's friend Teresa's 'Interior Castle'....' The emphasis was on a disobedient independence of mind: told to read St. John, she read St. Teresa instead. Her need was less for abstract meditation than for some sense of empathy, and she gravitated to the more accessible Spanish saint, and a woman, to find it... While Lowell set about mastering the intellectual intricacies of Catholic doctrine, Stafford made her way to a mystic--and not to the Thomistic St. John recommended by her husband but to untutored, colloquial Teresa....

The troubles began in the spring and they culminated in 'That awful summer!' That was how Stafford opened the short story, three decades later, in which she presented a version of the events that led to her collapse, and the collapse of her marriage to Lowell. 'An Influx of Poets,' extracted from Stafford's last, unfinished novel, *The Parliament of Women*, and published in *The New Yorker* in November 1978, has understandably enough been mined for facts. It was clearly an autobiographical story, an appropriately stylish record of a season that in retrospect stood out as a turning point not only in Lowell's and Stafford's lives but in the collective life of a loose literary circle--the promising writers whom the newly established Lowells overeagerly invited to come visit.

The Rahvs and the Blackmurs were part of the literary Maine circuit that year too, but the ferment was taking place at Damariscotta Mills. It was a summer when the younger writers were on their own turf, away from their mentors, declaring their ambitions to one another--a memorable moment of high hopes. John Berryman, one of the steady stream of visitors (which included the Taylors, Robert Giroux, Patrick Quinn, Eileen Simpson, Delmore Schwartz, Gertrude Buckman, and others) called it his 'last summer of innocence.' From the exhilarating heights of the crowded summer, the Lowells' subsequent fall seemed to mark the border between promise and reality: with their house in 1946 and then with their second books in 1947, they stepped into their own--and it was clear that the way was not going to be smooth. Their books were successes--Lowell's won him the Pulitzer Prize; Stafford's was well reviewed--but their lives were difficult.

Stafford's story merely alluded to the spring, which was the traumatic start of the troubles between her and Lowell. It was such a harrowing time, perhaps, that it could not be tamed into a story. 'It has been the most confused and difficult spring of my life, I do believe,' she wrote to Cecile Starr as it ended. 'I have got so accustomed to the confusion that now, when there is quiet and little to worry about, I am still unable to be calm.' Her letters gave only a general clue to her distress. For the most part, she played the role of long-suffering but resilient hostess. But shortly after she finished *The Mountain Lion*, there seems to have been a Trappist retreat. She called it 'the incident,' as distinct from 'the accident,' the other memorable shake-up at the hands of her husband (the New Orleans episode, when Lowell broke her nose, never seemed to figure in her memories); she claimed that Lowell beat her up and threatened to kill her....

'An Influx of Poets' is remarkably free of bitterness. It had taken a long time--decades--for Stafford to find the right tone and perspective to write about what had happened in Maine. The immediate circumstances had been galling: her husband's flagrant flirtation with one of her erstwhile best friends, Delmore Schwartz's ex-wife, Gertrude Buckman. The repercussions had been long-lasting. Stafford's marriage to Lowell always loomed as the formative chapter of her life, its collapse as a traumatic event. It would not have been a surprise had she, with her 'tongue of an adder,' dedicated the story to fierce revenge. In fact, that was the hope, or at least the expectation, of many of her friends (some of them remnants of that old literary circle, others of them allies from subsequent, very different, milieus). Certainly her anecdotal tendency, with rare exceptions, was to cast Lowell as the villain, herself as the victim. But on paper, she

once again discovered the detachment that so often eluded her in life--and that enabled her imagination to work, dramatizing a more complicated account.

Her inspired narrative strategy was to juxtapose her younger self (Cora Savage in the story) with an older Cora who was telling the story many years later. Both were subjected to the same satiric irony that informed the story as a whole, and the facts were altered just enough to give the two of them a philistine air to set off the poetic pretensions of the rest of the company. Thus young Cora was not a writer, though she had an ornate style. She was merely the wife of a poet, and she had bought her house with a legacy from her aunt, rather than with the proceeds from a best-selling novel. Not that authorship would have elevated her much. In a survey of the Maine literary scene, Stafford made clear that prose writers were at the bottom of the heap in any case: "There was an influx of poets this summer in the state of Maine and ours was only one of the many houses where they clustered: farther down the coast and inland all the way to Campobello, singly, in couples, trios, tribes, they were circulating among rich patronesses in ancestral summer shacks of twenty rooms, critics on vacation from universities who roughed it with Coleman lamps and outhouses but sumptuously dined on lobster and blueberry gems, and a couple of novelists who, although they wrote like dogs (according to the poets) had made packets, which, because they were decently (and properly) humble, they were complimented to share with the rarer breed."

The young Cora, suffering from headaches and unhappiness, was distinctly on the outskirts, estranged from her poet husband, Theron Maybank, and skeptical of "Theron the poet's friends. He was beside me and they were in all the rooms around me and in the barn, but I was dead to their world, and they, thereby, were dead to mine." She was like a ghost hostess, actively arranging the domestic details of the influx but passively aloof from the artistic, erotic intrigue. Not that she was unaware of it. Cora saw, as through a hazy scrim (of drink, she acknowledged, and depression), all the flirting and flattering going on--especially between her husband and Minnie Rosoff, the Gertrude Buckman character whose visit was the most fateful of the entire influx. But out of a perverse instinct for escape and for self-mortification (precisely the opposite of the poets' self-preening inclinations) she could only abet the adulterous romance: "I helped in every way to make the match which was already a fait accompli and which, when I discovered that it was, was to hurtle me off the brink on which I had hovered so long into a chasm."

The older Cora was very much present, recounting and commenting on events, in an outspokenly colloquial and rather curmudgeonly style that established the distance she had traveled since that summer. Where the young Cora was blind and self-destructive, the older Cora had a therapeutic clarity. She was not venting bitterness; her tone was too entertainingly farcical for that. She was simply setting the record straight with satiric zeal. "(Mine! Remember, Cora Savage, if you forget all else, that this is *your* house)," she scolded her past self in one of the conversational parenthetical asides that litter the story. "(God almighty! Never was a man so set on knocking the stuffing out of his bride!)," she exclaimed at another point. The effect, along with her device of casting the poets (and herself) as children, was to knock all of them off their pedestals, to offer an irreverent look into the legend. The "baby bards," as she described them, were infantile in their self-absorption--but not innocent, by any means. This was the point at which their flailing ambitions were becoming more focused. (Though they were no longer enfants terribles, the blood of despots was in their veins and they would very soon usurp their elders' thrones and their dominions)," the older Cora reported, looking back.

Young Cora was oppressed by the poets' self-importance, but docilely played her role as helpmeet, typing endless revisions of Theron's poems and listening to endless recitations of poetry. In the story the older Cora wasn't docile at all and was perfectly prepared to risk philistinism in declaring her position. "I was in this throng of litterateurs (three poets in one medium-sized room constitutes a multitude), enjoying nothing." The once-loyal typist was none too respectful: "(I admit they were brilliant poets, if you happen to be interested in that sort of thing), but if they changed an 'a' to a 'the' the whole sonnet had to be typed over again. And I grant that such a change can make all the difference in the world (if, that is, you happen to be a poet or a lover of poetry), but why couldn't the alteration be made by hand?" The once-silent auditor, trapped into "listening to the poets listen to themselves and not to one another," confessed that "she took a drink as the poetry was read, but drink didn't help."

But this was not a simple feminist complaint against the elitist, overbearing bards.... Marjorie Perloff...points out the pattern of 'the prodigal poet, the unselfish and forgiving wife or mistress' that seemed to characterize the private lives of these same poets (and was then presented for public consumption in their poetry). In a sense Stafford's story could be read as the record of the emergence of that pattern: aside from the Tates' troubles and the Schwartzes' divorce, the Lowells' Maine turmoils were the first of the dramatic marital difficulties that were to become a theme of Lowell's and Berryman's lives in particular. Stafford was more ready to point the finger at the poet-husband: she drew on Theron's outrageous behavior for much of the colorful, witty drama and repartee of her story.

But at the same time, almost as if offering her autobiographical story as a commentary on the autobiographical poetry that the poets--especially Lowell--had been writing out of their personal troubles throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Stafford undercut any effort at self-vindication or inflation of the episode. She, unlike the poets, was not about to project her private troubles as historic turmoil, or to write herself a tragically heroic role. The story was finally less about the poets' injustices to her than about her injustices to herself. There was no clear-cut victim and victimizer. It was her own psychological distress, not the poets' pretensions that afflicted her most: 'I knew--although I did not want to know--that I could not honestly attribute [the headaches] to too many iambs and too many dithyrambic self-congratulations by the baby bards.' It was her own passive will at work, bidden by an inchoate desire for escape, that undid the marriage as much as Theron's preemptory moves. Not that Stafford substituted a kind of ennobling self-castigation for self-justification. Her strategy was satiric deflation throughout. Her failure to plead her case, to have a straightforward revenge, infuriated at least one of her friends, Nancy Flagg Gibney, who felt she had missed a historic opportunity: ...'You had the war between the sexes fought out on the highest possible plane Miss hydrogen-bomb-bearing Savage, and I wish you had reported it straight.'

But precisely what seems to have liberated Stafford years after the Maine summer to rework this section of her stalled novel for publication was the sense that she no longer needed to see it as a war. Time had allowed a cooled perspective. She was free to let irony replace the agony of betrayal. In this case, the domestication was devastating, as she cast the episode comically as a story about children and a bygone time, not about important poets whose lives had acquired the status of cultural symbols. The truth, of course, was not so comical. And the power of 'An Influx of Poets' is that, for all its witty shapeliness, it does capture some of the shapeless confusion, the real desperation of that summer.

The trouble was clear to the earliest visitors, John Berryman and his wife, Eileen Simpson, who glimpsed the marital tensions and Stafford's distress beneath the mostly convivial, intensely literary stay. Jean's 'somber mood was growing more obvious every day,' Simpson remembered in her portrait in *Poets in Their Youth*, which captured Stafford slipping from ordinary depression into more serious disequilibrium. Caustic as always, and a solicitous host, she was nonetheless drinking more and more and sleeping less and less. Lowell certainly seemed dead to her unhappy world, endlessly verse swapping and talking with Berryman, and Stafford became ever more distant. She drank against his wishes, from bottles hidden around the house, and she was awake at night, her insomnia a solitary vigil (though one night she told her Lucy story to a sleepless Berryman, the third poet to urge her to put it into prose). A letter in June from Stafford to her sister Mary Lee, to whom she often confided her unhappiness at this stage of her life, conveyed her mixed mood, which easily shifted to real bleakness:

'Everything is going much better in one way--so that day to day existence is easier--much worse in another; it will be harder to make the break. In my absence [in Pennsylvania and New York] Cal realized the horror of solitude. Now I do not know what to do. In some ways the problem is not terribly complex. I am suffering from years and years of accumulated fatigue not only from working too hard but from knowing too many people. Being a writer and being married to a writer is a back breaking job and my back is now broken.'

Stafford cast her predicament in literary terms. The allure, and burden, of being married to a promising, difficult writer--and being one herself--had been clear to Stafford from the start. And the tension between dreaming of the communal literary life and dreading the arrival of litterateurs was a familiar one, dating back to her feverish days in Louisiana. Now the allures and dreams seemed to have faded almost completely. It was clear that Stafford was looking for a way out. She announced her verdict in a flip tone,



but behind it lurked serious intentions: 'I've now decided,' she told Mary Lee, 'that writers shouldn't be married and certainly women writer shouldn't be unless they are married to rich responsible husbands who fill their houses with servants.' She sounded almost like the older, wiser Cora Savage speaking, who had put those poets behind her.

By August neither Lowell nor Stafford was sounding remotely flip, and an end was in sight. Gertrude Buckman had arrived in a plane and captivated Lowell while Stafford watched, her passivity a spur to their affair. Lowell wrote to Taylor, leaving out the specifics but emphatic about the impossibility of life with Stafford: 'I don't care for confessions, but I suppose I must tell you that everything is chaos between us. Jean is driving like a cyclone and we both have had about all we can stand and more. Right now I think I'll go to New York sometime in September.... Jean has a lot of plans, none of them too good, including going to Hollywood. Anyway, we have got to *leave each other alone* and the future to time.'

Stafford, writing to Cecile Starr, sounded much less composed and wasn't yet ready to announce the end. In fact, she claimed she felt some calm might be at hand: 'There has been such a stream of visitors ever since Memorial Day that I was half out of my mind and so was Cal. I was half out of my mind with all sorts of anxieties and was drinking too much--as I do, you know--and had got no work done at all since April and in general I thought I was at the end of everything in my life. Now that everyone has gone and no one else is coming and the leaves are beginning to turn...I feel as if I were recovering from a long and feverish sickness, one that has covered a great many years, and I have some kind of hope that I will at last be able to pull myself together.... Our plans are as vague as they have always been.'

When she wrote a little later to Peter Taylor, the hope had faded, the recovery seemed out of sight again. Stafford too was silent about specifics--there was no mention of Buckman--and, far from blaming Lowell, she shouldered responsibility for the disaster, though it was clearly more complicated than that. Neither of them stable at the best of times, both had drastically lost their balance. That Stafford still had the poise to bear the guilt for the failure was a sign of hard-won maturity, but at the same time a last act of self-punishment: 'I have wanted to write to you ever since Cal told me he had written but there have been so many people here and besides I have been rather too miserable to be coherent. It is just barely possible that if I can ever pull myself together something will work out for us but I love Cal too much now to allow him any longer to be subjected to what seems to amount almost to insanity. I am very much afraid of the future, but I will pull through somehow. What I most need now is to go far away somewhere to a place where I know no one and cannot therefore be influenced by the wrong people. I am almost altogether to blame for my life being the ruin it is.'

She was right, her sickness wasn't over, and its course continued 'like a cyclone,' sweeping away a house and a husband. Stafford was left to rebuild a life, which inevitably was a literary life, despite her vows to avoid the creative company. But it was a strikingly different literary life, a world away from the poets and critics among whom she had come of age.... In September 1946, Stafford and Lowell left Maine by train, and as she told it in 'An Influx of Poets,' the trip from Damariscotta Mills was the culmination of their estrangement. It was a bleakly symmetrical ending to a marriage that had begun less than smoothly with a train ride....

Lowell was in fact the subject of the last piece of writing that appeared before her death, her story 'An Influx of Poets,' which Robert Giroux carefully excised from the unfinished manuscript of *The Parliament of Women*, laboriously working over it with Stafford, conversing with her in the form of questions to which she could manage simple answers. She did what Lowell had urged in his poem: in her story, which appeared a year after he died, others heard what he had 'forgotten or never heard, being a man'--and being Lowell. It was her belated answer to Peter Taylor's challenge years before, to tell her side of the story. She crafted her version of her marriage to Lowell and its collapse and produced the first story to which she had come quite so close to her own personal history. In the ordeal of transforming autobiography into fiction, she managed to confront one of the most devastating episodes in her life and turn it into a distinctive mix of social satire and psychological revelation. The story was not a therapeutic self-exculpation, not a thinly veiled brief against the famous poet. Its unexpected, perfectly tuned comic edge--the detachment from her younger self, the ruthless eye for ironic details--rescued the story from the bitterness that constantly

threatened to overwhelm Stafford's imagination. In fact, it was precisely the hard-won, tenuous balance between clear-eyed irony and corrosive grievance that gave the story its power.

Sustaining that feat of imaginative poise was now beyond Stafford. Not only did the rest of her autobiographical novel keep escaping her control, but the publication of 'An Influx of Poets' in *The New Yorker* in November of 1978 seemed to throw her completely off balance. To acknowledge that this was almost certainly her last published piece of writing, that her long-awaited novel had come to this story and no more, was too much to bear. She in a sense turned deaf as well as speechless, claiming that she had heard no response to her story, though in fact her friends had been quick with their congratulations. She became disoriented in her bitterness: Giroux and her friends were cast as her betrayers, and she wrote them off one by one as ingrates and enemies--much as Molly in *The Mountain Lion*, in her frantic unhappiness, had compiled her list of unforgivable fat people. Stafford was to live another four months, mostly reclusive but every so often rallying in her typical style.... During those same last weeks, she told her friend Joseph Mitchell at dinner one night that she was half in love with easeful death, and it was clear to him that she had made her choice."

Ann Hulbert  
*The Interior Castle: The Art and Life of Jean Stafford*  
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"'An Influx of Poets' was extracted by her publisher Robert Giroux from her unfinished novel *The Parliament of Women*. By making her heroine, Cora Savage Maybank, a teacher and not a writer, Stafford, even at the remove of 30 years, thereby avoids the issue of literary competition that plagued her marriage to Robert Lowell. Throughout the narrative, Stafford conflates the religious and the secular: Cora's doctor counsels her to 'go and be shriven of [her] mortal sins by a psychoanalyst'; the Deep South cockroaches in Baton Rouge feast on the matched set of Cardinal Newman's works; and even the kindly Father Neuscheier, having chosen Baton Rouge as a perfect place to mortify the flesh, '[wears] the miasmas from the bayous like a hair shirt.' The religion of art to which Theron and his contemporary poets genuflect is its own exacting mistress, much like the peculiarly distorted Catholicism he invents, cast in the same mold as his Salem witch-burning ancestors. Cora, a victim of her domestic compulsions to decorate the first house she has ever owned, rationalizes by paralleling the adornment of churches to the enshrinement of marriage in its domestic temple. Clearly, these curious obsessions--artistic, religious, domestic--cohere in this masterful short story.

Cora Maybank, the first-person narrator who wistfully evokes her past from a more mature, enlightened vantage point, is herself a portrait of the artist--imposing order on events that at the same time seemed random and senseless. Like her creator, she has allowed events to sink in, impressions to germinate, before she can conjure them up in a structured narrative. In fact, the story functions as a kind of companion piece to the earlier 'A Country Love Story' because it recalls some of the same events from a radically different perspective. The marriage, the fears of madness, the isolation, the retreat into domesticity--all emerge muted in this retrospective, remarkably self-aware narrative."

Mary Ann Wilson  
*Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1996) 24

Michael Hollister 2021