

Suzanne Vega and Carson McCullers's presence

A short commentary on our meeting with Suzanne Vega at Passa Porta, International House of Literature, Brussels, 12 June 2017

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2017 marks the 100th anniversary of Carson McCullers's birth and the 50th of her death. Suzanne Vega released her album *Lover Beloved*, which contains ten songs about the life and work of McCullers in late 2016, but her engagement with the writer long predates any centenary initiatives. I interviewed Suzanne Vega in Passa Porta this spring (2017), before her concert at Ancienne Belgique. Excited to talk about her album, she told our Brussels audience that she first encountered McCullers's work as an adolescent, when reading a collection of stories by multiple authors.

McCullers's story "Sucker," which sketches a teenage entanglement of friendship, love and power, stood out, and as a college student Vega decided she wanted to know more about its author. Carson McCullers, she discovered, was a woman who had lived a passionate life, of which the main elements were literature, music, alcohol and cigarettes, and who had written some of the most gripping and compassionate stories about the impossibility of love in twentieth-century American literature.

It is telling that Vega traces back her interest in McCullers back to her adolescence. Both the writer and the musician take childhood seriously. In her book *The Passionate Eye* (1999), which contains lyrics, poems, essays, short stories and diary fragments, Vega incorporates texts that she wrote as a child because she wanted to show how little of our young dreams or concerns actually go away. The poem "By Myself," made by her nine-year old self, became "Solitude Standing," which she composed when she was 27.

McCullers excels when she writes about young ambition. When she published her debut *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* at the age of 23, reviewers expressed their amazement at the fact that someone so young could look so deep into the soul. Yet the experience of reading *The*

Heart is a Lonely Hunter reminds you of how naïve we are in thinking that children know little, or that our life develops progressively from blank slate to a state of stoic wisdom.

In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* McCullers's adult characters doctor Copeland and Jake Blount haven't "outgrown" their rigid fervor for changing the world and the adolescent Mick Kelly is sharply aware of the constrictions of the adult world such as gender patterns and class. Mick is neither a clichéd teenager (classical music means more to her than prom dates) nor a miniature adult (she loves to run wild with the neighborhood kids). She rather embodies the paradoxical dynamics of the world opening up and closing in that defines adolescence; the combination of a soaring energy, making you feel that you could will the world into functioning differently, and a growing insight into the social and political forces blocking change. Mick's reflections at the end of the novel capture this perfectly:

Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been – the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good.

Mick Kelly may well be McCullers's most autobiographical character and while there is no song about her on *Lover Beloved*, the stubborn drive she embodies resounds in the songs about McCullers. "New York is made for grander things. Just like me," Suzanne Vega sings in "New York is my Destination."

Vega has worked her admiration for McCullers into a rich album. The sprightly jazzy sound conjures up the New York of the 1940s and the blues elements reference the South where the writer was brought up. The songs bring back to life the figure of McCullers yet aren't limited to her biographical details or her work. "We of Me," based on McCullers's novel and play *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) for example, doubles as a comment on the way in which pop songs tend to erase the madness that love can imply by repeating the same bland fantasies. Not so in "We of Me." Lines such as "Noah's Ark admitted only two by two, we know this isn't always true" make room for an out of place love, as a mixture of affection and menace.

In the lives of McCullers's characters, like in that of their author, love never comes in a workable amount or at the right time. McCullers was unhappily married to a husband she loved to hate and fell in love with women without ever entering into a relationship with them. In all of her books she explores a fundamental loneliness. Suzanne Vega's *Lover Beloved* is a timely tribute to a hard headed storyteller who identified with the misfits and the freaks.