

Chapbook 2

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Going After

23 March, 2001

this is one way in which I can imagine death

a wind-sharp snowfall
sweeping a white field, sloped upward
from the left hand to the right
my cheek singing

I pursue through that blankness
a narrow footpath cut one man wide
by so many before me
where no two can pass

beyond, at a great distance
a woods, obscure
the path will not enter
and behind, the eternal erasure of snow

these thoughts, Louis
walking to McGill
not knowing you had composed
your final travels

Letter to Patrick Lane

I hear my own language for the first time
in the days of its dissipation, when the idiom's
vitiating, the rhythm flat and orthodox, and in no homeland
more than two or three speakers, widely scattered
in ignominious service. No one teaches the poet
his ten syllables, guides him to the line's end, to
spool syntaxes and utter flowers in the asides.
We picked it up from our first nurses, long gone,
or only from their bound remains, found one afternoon
of rain in the attic, blown out of dust, and opened
like the skin of a new world. It was like that the day
you opened your brief book and closed it again
and in the gap between you were wholly the proud
orator, in the cadences I know, as a ghost knows envy.

"There is no way to tell men what we do," you said
to yourself, but you were generous with the plural,
reaching beyond that late afternoon winter field
with your poised hands, a quarter-century, in plain longing
that one would read the line and not need telling—
the pale feathers of the silent birds and the wind
in the broken grass were for the audience you craved,
but the poem's good lay elsewhere, not at last in the beauty,
and it couldn't be spoken. Only the man of the same guild
ignores the finished facade, turns to appraise your tools.
I heard their clean music, wood on metal, metal's
edge on stone. I may never cut to the shining eyes
of a perfect bird, and leave it there, but I do own the tools,
and it's good to know the old trade's not gone.

As the friends die off, you said, and the years divorce you
from elders, brothers, rivals, those who have to remember
simply for having a handful of decades in common,
the loneliness returns, no one can take you for granted
gladly again. You were talking only of death and the years;
I know the same by miles, by provinces. I told you the critics
didn't know how to read courage. I meant I had lived
among strangers for thirty years, had written for strangers,
perjured my hand. I meant that a man speaks his mind
but I'd fallen sullen, lost the bevel; my poems grew fine,
thinned out, stiffened, and never found that open ear
ready to take a strong wind, to bend and rest on my heart
for the cadence alone. And then, sir, you were reading,
and I sat with my hidden tears, the miles and years—gone.

What were your people? Not civil servants and bankers like mine when their pioneer health failed, one lung out in the Great War, one spine spilled out of line in a dive from the *Sicamous*. Grandfather came out of London at sixteen and built that homestead near Princeton; father into the RCAF too late for action, lived to spawn diffident children. But under their physical caution the sweet laconic tightness, words from the corner of the mouth bitten off before love, a way with a sky and a hammer and a keen sideways eye. Nothing loosens the reins on that rhythm of hills that canters into the bloodstream, opens the forehead high, throws a lope in the shoulders. A hairline that looks like it's taken the dry Okanagan wind face on too long—mine, now that I'm ageing.

How else did I know already each of your sorry men? The blue of his severed hand lapping against the pail-side. The "Jesus" that was all he could say as you drove him down. The poor fiend you call "mad boy" running with that glee in his arms, upright into the pleasure of capture, time and again. The newborn daughter loose in her father's hands and kissed between the legs, her mother blessing the scandal there. The stolid son leaning over the truck: taking your father's willowy blows for love, for love. All of them lean a little into death, push their torsos forward against the guns, in silence. I turned away hard from all their manhood, its inarticulate, morbid pride caught in my throat. And I swallowed hard, as your lines tugged their voices from the pale dust of my lungs.

Having their solemn tread for a heartbeat, you made it a rhythm you held to. I want to think we're divided by circumstance only—your years of manual labour taught you to shoulder the weight of their bodies, embarrassed, obliged; mine of vicarious teaching, profaning the holy good of art, taught me the anaesthetic deafness of men—but there's a gift to it, isn't there, and it can't be apportioned fairly between us. You had the dogged helpless brutal need that makes a body write through the night; you had a people. And you didn't scorn them for long—bathed them in the darkness of your poems with a gentleness I failed in, knowing in yourself the same leanings and asking the same forgiveness. A blessing of exile flowed freely from your hand, in blood and faith.

And you paid with your life for that pleasure. You needn't have said so—I'd heard in the sore light of the poems the price you had paid for each of the few true lines you'd scattered among them. There's a way with a line break only the sometimes broken will know, an instinct for outcry in the plosives you struck in the darkness. But you told us anyway of the beast you had only lately put down, and that no one love in the world you loved could have kept your hand from the pen—not one woman, not one night without shelter, not the last indignity—and that's how you must have thrown the bottle, when at last it blurred the page in your hand, that once had sharpened your inward eyes and opened a vein in your pen. The great poems know us well: and the cost fairly paid or refused is their measure. The rest is a kind of beauty

I may have mastered now and then, as well as any. As for your knowing as if by birthright the poem was greater than the creatures who gave it rise, I felt it fully; spoke it loudly to women, then married; and in fear of the children I never meant to have, found work and performed it as they would have done, those good fathers, with set teeth and a sense of shame. The kind of devotion due to the calling I showed elsewhere, and was paid well to stand up the Muse. I've tried to stare at the mirror with candour, scorned excusers, so I say as I said to you, I failed the cost. So why go on so long to a master? There's failing, and then there's quitting. Besides, I was given true in the ear, and enough good in the hands to move them line by line toward you in gladness and comfort.

I write for my own kind, and count you now among them, without more pride than to say you walked ahead where I stumbled, but we paced one trail leading west or east from the Okanagan, orchards our people thought good to live by. And wherever they throw our remains we'll yellow among strangers, no one will tally the good we have done or not done for years thereafter. For all I know, a thousand workers in exile and as many lacking devotion—and some who stayed fast at home, not longing beyond their frame of hills—have written the poems I look to when my glass is empty, as I look henceforth to yours. I raise it nonetheless to the west and seek your fraternal blessing—*audience*, I call you, and offer you in return—the man a man always writes for.

Letters to Louise Glück

I

it was physical, and it was not quite pleasure or suffering
but *recognition*; instantaneous. Your face on the back cover

meant nothing; your name, *recto*, had reached me
only as that of the friend of a friend. You see, my hand fell

on *The Seven Ages* with that much amiable ignorance.
But I parted the poems at random—and parted again—and again

always at random—until half the book was gone in my hands
and I knew myself. *Anagnorisis*, I'm trying not to say:

to lift away the veil, the hair, maybe the very face
of another and be greeted with your own damned level gaze

and hear yourself whisper, *here are your tragic errors*
here in these pages—presumption, among them

so to claim for myself the life you have given me
and handing it back to you, say, *some of this was mine*

II

at first it was the sculpture of it all, the wry tongue-lash
shearing away the right-hand edge of your verse

and the clipped, ascetic diction—always that little slant,
like the late-day sunlight you prefer, or the moods

you cultivate for love. From that white continent
where the poem rises you could have brought me

anything at all. What else is trust than thinking
the other's candour will be habitual? Even so

timed, so husbanded. There's always more to render
but the poem ends abruptly: you look away, you've had enough

of that germ of thought—or the rhythm's nervous
tension is suddenly broken. Or at last the world you're after

gives off its essence in a final supple image, and the light
and fragile vessel rests on it, rocking slightly

after impact. The problem of too much beauty and poise—
the body's longing for them, the pen's mistrust—

or you close in the hammering voice of the gods
with perfect clarity and a faint contempt I adore

III

you teach us the sensual delights of irony:
the reader's pathos moving in and out of a light

raised in the poet's hand; a vision of a familiar past
knocked wholly to one side, and intensified with longing;

to see the whole world from an angle, above, below, to love
it all askance, to love so helplessly, even without pleasure

and yet to linger kindly in that minor tone of horror
that settles under family, or rides the decay of fruit,

of memory, with death a consciousness growing
under the left breast. Fending off so the young

imminent husband, or yielding to his urgency with dispassion:
irony is love in the wrong hands

IV

because you say the names of the Greek gods
as others say *headache, infidelity*, and know them

as some know shortness of breath, the spastic
grip at the chest—and know yourself too the Fates’

plaything, their little thread, briefly entangled—gods
to be spoken to casually, or with an intense pleading,

like the memory of a remote friend now grown bitter
or the ghosts of your sister, mother, younger—or *anguish*

when your father appears in shade at the foot of the garden
in the stiff linen suit and absurd panama

he wore at the seaside when you broke from his adoration;
he doesn’t know he is dead, merely stretches out his arms

shaking his head, rueful, and then—not *disappears*—
but agrees, smiling, with the emptiness of the garden;

his pale lapel-flower is now one hanging rose
and you have no weapon against the force of this last god

so you write him terse prayers, beginning (always
hidden in the margins, poem after poem) *O Time*

V

though I too know the poignancy of siblings
remembered as they were on summer afternoons

suffering in a melodramatic boredom under the same roof
the faults of their parents, taking that as a bond

that would always yoke them; who then lived after
the parents' deaths had left them cool and individual

and the family legacies suddenly precious—loved or scorned—
to become the faulty ones in the house: losing each day

a little more confidence, more of their children's trust;
some of them opening eyes into institutional mornings,

losing all hope of help—but their letters revealing only
a patter of cheerfulness, distinct politeness, proof

that what we knew as family love was fiction: posed
for photographs in slanting sunlight, smiling, smirking,

made to hold hands. You can't have seen your sister
this precisely before your parents died?

What brings her back so vivid to your pen, the animal
languour of her body reading, the grossly outmoded hair,

the episodes of sudden intimacy over letters, then flight
into separate bedrooms, having learned the real desires of men?

How might she now return your gift of unwanted candour
with her own gaze and report on the coltish past—

for no one else but she could level you in turn,
knowing where the graves of your ignorance are

in your grown-up gestures, your care with speech and laughter,
or the father-legged walk your mother tried to alter;

such sisters seeing as no other can, behind all prizes,
some loved one small enough to cry if simply left behind

VI

You recognize the language of immoderate desire
for a mere spectacle battening down a fear of death

with the temporary stay of gluttony. We thinner ones
consume our language sparingly, love the economy

with which the body inhales and releases
its chosen savouries, and is itself at last consumed

in silence, from within. The stringency of our speech
is proved by adoration of the world, all its pleasures and goods:

even if arthritic pain in the reaching fingertips
leaves them unsteady, even when the lover takes them

and holds them to his lips—your instinct to withdraw
from that intimate pressing of his words onto your skin

and then to comment, a little rueful, and then to surge
forward against him, to assure yourself that the flesh

is as full of longing as you long for it to be;
all of this later to be cast in iron in the good poem,

the words already precipitating helplessly around you
onto the lover's shoulder and the twisted sheets—

though I know poetry cannot answer the slightest
material desire; it cannot answer immaterial desire

but when desire is nameless, objectless, its possible satisfaction
unimaginable, unknown, when outcry is pointless

and beauty astringent on the wound, wounding further,
poetry alone will light the stranger's passing face

VII

what do we look like to others, we who abandoned God
as a father but not as a longing, as a discipline or service

but not as a cathedral, not as a *Missa Solemnis* in D?
Our features share the angularity of ascetics

and softness of children, our gift of tongues demands
call and response, our eyes the pain on the crucifix

and we spend our days spurning an infinite vacuity
we mean to fill with a liturgy sprung only from ourselves—

Protestants, whose vernacular bible remains to be written
and hectors of others who skirt the problem of faith

we scorned in our teens, solved for good in young adulthood
by mocking the Virgin, then resurrection into song. We gained

the troubadours' fatal nearness to an unattainable love
and began to compose praises to hair and windows and veils

as if the world had lost gravity, and we alone could restore it
if we caught just the right sparrow, held our heads so

for the sound of the ocean's suction, and wrote it down
exactly, once, before death—whose coming is now made plain

as we age with our fevers, punish our great desires
with an ever more careful language, a sharper edging off

of the music. Death, we say, meaning God; or Time,
we say, meaning the many years we have travelled solo

since all this was no matter at all, since the family gathered
for a roast on Sundays, since the universe felt that lucid and small

that the father's hand, extended, could frame and warm it
while his other danced on the perfect rhythms of scripture

VIII

this sisterhood won't last, I know this equally well;
communion isn't natural to us, neither is feigning

only the certainty remains that we may never carve
out of ourselves the eternal form we conceived first

in the morning, after however many afternoons
writing in sunlight, or evenings wasted with love-talk

under stars. You grasp fruit at the market and earth
refuses again and again to render the perfect pear;

what you touch is the real world, only your fingertips
falsify it with consciousness—the flower not releasing

scent without you, without your words
and every petal shortly after yellow and infolding;

though I never once find you flinching in your gaze
at the cruelty of change, or failing to praise the waves

on which it foams, waves of the lake, radiation waves
waves of the hand raised in farewell

*as a gift to the youngest child: the demon of perfection—
watching others to know what's not to be done*

in a language that can't be mine you have thrown my world
into the open air—have left me less than I was

with more than I had before of kinship and of voice;
sister going before me, vanishing into recognition

I claim your perfect readership, and in this deftness
can welcome silence; a gift I give you

as between strangers—to whose regard I restore us
when my hand lifts up *The Seven Ages* to the shelf

Last Page

Sixteen years since I saw you fall
from the Faculty Club stairs to the sidewalk below
at the age of eighty-eight. P.K., admit it,
you'd had too much to drink that charming night.
You missed the fourth or fifth last stair
and fell with such abandon, like a happy beetle
on the carapace of your shoulders, rolled
like a pro, the look on your face
not fear or pain but a grunt, and concentration—
someone intent on getting the memory right.

You looked so good all day, a real dish.
You wielded that cane like swordplay, piano teacher
rapping the world's knuckles. *Get the tempo right,*
damn it. Not once, I suppose, as we laughed
over one more gin and tonic, did I stop to care
how much pain you were soaked in, how many miles
that cane had done, those nerve-spiked legs
had braved. I hung behind with Thea
when I should have had your arm in my willing hand—
young attendant bringing you safe to land.

Mother? Maybe. Sister? Would that it were so.
Lover? I should be so lucky: in the fleet imagination
we are without time, and the hands will try
their touching. Anyway, I'd have kissed you
where you fell. You came up grimacing and smiling,
denying any pain, refusing ambulance and hospital.
My heart was turned by a wrench that holds it still.
The shame of failing in gallantry survives
and you knew I'd feel it, so you took the whole
nonsense of the event and clasped my hand

military-tough, as your historic father taught you,
shone your eyes into mine (or so I'd have it)
for a moment only, then vanished into a cab.
Farewell too soon. To this day I take whatever
lesson I can from you, lady, stringency of the eye
and a hard image and a gift for surviving
silence. We both know how it felt when the rhythm
dropped from your fingers, but you came out that night
word heavy and vivid with lines and none too sober,
and even in falling surpassed my outstretched hand.

Glosa for Irving Layton

*So, circling about my head, a fly.
Haloes of frantic monotone.
Then a smudge of blood smoking
On my fingers, let Jesus and Buddha cry.*

Irving Layton, "For Mao Tse-Tung: A Meditation on Flies and Kings"

I know you are lying broken in mind and hand
somewhere in NDG I can't and won't attend,
and the fifty years since you prayed aloud to Mao
have leached from your proud orifices, scandalous
old friend. The morning is cool grey mist there
in your head, and here where I choose briefly to lie
spewed out with you across the passionate grass
you sowed with your "Cold Green Element," until
our communion busts, and I stand up, because, like
so, circling about my head, a fly

has dazzled the front of my gaze, blurred the page,
and put me in mind of *you*, you irritant, short king.
These were the pests you rhymed your right to kill
with laughter and an indifferent swat: *massenmensch*,
joyless accountants, the ignorant rich, professors:
horde of the timid biters. And you knew me for one.
Yet you kindly read in my eyes some greater failing—
a damaged lyric heart, a waiting page. But nothing less
could silence *you* than the fly of Alzheimer-Parkinson's
haloes of frantic monotone

in your leonine head, its features sagged Roumanian,
the old long hair unkempt. *Bah*, you'd have said,
this old one's done for, put him down; life's for the young
and beautiful, and every other need than sex is sentiment.
You'd jangle your hair-twined chest medallions of gold
with crooked wrists and fingers whose joints were aching
and spit at the pity you saw in my dullard glances.
You might even rise from that wheelchair and dance
with your irises sun-blue, till your open gown was soaking.
Then a smudge of blood smoking

the glass of some synapse in your brain will bring you down
to the little human chair, and you turn to gaze out the window,
mumbling a little, wanting to be fed. Irving. You wrote
not one long poem, because your sun-drunk life

swivelled like epic; and you're your own last line now,
refusing to be penned. This is no way to die,
bitter old badger! Your poems stain these sheets
as I raise you in my arms and hold you still for Death;
and if only the shed skin of a gleaming snake now lie
on my fingers, let Jesus and Buddha cry.

A Life in Art

on the cover of his life
Cohen strides toward me;
I am the friend of his gaze

he is dressed in habitual blacks
and grins at my blonde hair
(his own whitening now)

he's working his way
by me into sainthood
I have to keep walking too
trace his steps and hope
to fuck the folly he just left
passing him as I do

he's kissed by all the eyes of passers by
although he's left their love before—
or was that my mistake

the crowd knows a true from a good fake
I should have been have known
but I tried to taste my sainthood
before I sinned

now we are raincoat to raincoat
and we're both feeling blue
ah, both playing
the one good game
 winners beauty
 losers time

so long