

A POET'S WIDOW WRITES TO HER LATE HUSBAND

What I remember most vividly is the scent of dying chrysanthemums. It was Labour Day weekend. We sat together on the sundeck steps, in that nameless season between seasons, breathing in the piercing smells of rain-soaked earth and stunted vegetation. After a while, a beautiful grey cat padded out of the night and settled between our thighs, as if to endorse our budding relationship.

You were still a virtual stranger. One of my creative writing profs had been granted tenure and decided to throw a party. The McGill Ghetto house was too small for so many guests: faculty and students, neighbours and relatives. You were my prof's cousin, an English graduate student. Everyone seemed to be drinking too much, talking at the same time. We decided to stay outdoors, smoking and chatting, idly stroking the wantonly purring cat. You had just had two poems published and were in high spirits. Remember?

I recall being hugely impressed. When I told you I hoped to have my work published some day, you asked whether you could read my stories, and I blushed and said, "Sure. Though I've barely written half a dozen. I'm too obsessive to be prolific."

I gave you my phone number, which you wrote on the flap of your cigarette box, and also on the back of a bookstore receipt—just in case, you said. At that moment, a gust of wind rose from the river and the cat bolted, vanishing among the shuddering trees, as if pursued by malevolent spirits.

We both burst out laughing, like doting parents over a toddler's caper. Soon, we found ourselves sharing our own foibles. You thought irrational fears defined human beings more significantly than their aspirations. I did not agree. I told you I couldn't sleep with my feet exposed, no matter how hot the weather. Ever since I was three years old, I'd feared some nocturnal creatures might creep up from under the bed and nibble on my toes.

“I doubt this says anything significant about me.” I was gnawing on a stubborn hangnail, making a worm of blood seep along my thumbnail. You noticed and made a face. You were, you confessed, trying to overcome a lifelong aversion to the sight of blood. A week earlier, you had tried to give blood to the Red Cross, but ended up vomiting in public. You told me this and averted your eyes. I, too, disliked the sight of my blood and was rattled when, during our first night together, the leg I’d cut, shaving it for your hand, bled and bled. You concluded I was not a virgin. You went so far as to write about it later.

Oh, time has shaken out dozens of fragmented poems. My favourite—the one that eventually won your first literary prize—was inspired by our Newfoundland honeymoon. It was a long poem titled “Gift,” but I still remember the bewildering final line. We had arrived in St. John’s on a radiant fall afternoon, rented a convertible, and the setting sun, you later wrote, had turned my head into a gorgeous wound. “Oh!” was all I could say on first reading it. *“A wound?!”*

Years went by. I finally published my first short story, written when our son was born, extracted with flashing forceps from my howling flesh. You were in the delivery room with me, but somehow managed not to throw up or faint. Your growing reputation seemed to be strengthening your resolve. It was odd how exquisitely you wrote about our marriage, considering you never seemed to pay much attention. You had become a university professor, busy with papers, exams, departmental meetings.

I learned to talk in questions, note the distances between embraces, mark the intervals between your occasional escapades with some avid student. Each time the scalpel cut a little deeper, flooding my mouth with blood and drowning words.

You wrote about that too. Your reputation grew. You dedicated a book to me, your eternal muse, your inscription said. I knew you would never leave me. My blood had become your ink. The more you wrote about us, the more redundant my own words became.

Perhaps to compensate, you took to complimenting me extravagantly in front of colleagues and dinner guests. We learned to praise each other, the way others might praise a holiday resort, each vacation perfect as only photographs can make it. But in the distance, beyond the camera's eye, lay vast, murmuring forests, a tundra of pulsating silence broken only by one of your dazzling stanzas. For years, that was how you communicated your innermost feelings. And now, four and a half decades since our hands met over a purring cat's back, it is all I have left of you: nothing but your incandescent words to illuminate the thickening darkness.

Both my vision and my hearing are starting to fade. My voice, too, seems to be changing. Five years after your death, I still catch myself adopting your speech patterns, your facial calligraphy. Some nights I drift off recalling the glint of silver at the back of your mouth whenever you laughed, and how the moon would shape your knotted, nocturnal smile.

For mysterious reasons, I seem to dream more vividly these days. Even after all these years, you still surface in my sleep, sometimes surprising me with your words or actions. One night, you and I have the following exchange.

"I'm getting drunk," I say in my dream.

"Drink," you say, "and pretend to be drunker than you are."

Did this weird conversation ever take place? Is it something I've read somewhere? I don't recall our having this exchange, but it sounds vaguely familiar and this worries me. Is my mind, too, out to betray me now?

I ask myself this question virtually every day, feeling myself being robbed of my only weapons, my dwindling cache of words, minted long before my neurons began to show signs of entanglement.

So here I am, writing to you on this bittersweet anniversary: words meant to punch you like a marble fist, to rouse your ashen heart like a child's caress.

A few days ago, after granting permission to reprint one of your poems, I wept in my sleep, mentally towed toward a private family dance where our cellist son kept playing the same mournful tune, and our daughter's limbs helplessly swayed to our own doomed refrain.

And that's how it had been in the early years. But slowly, slowly, my watchful eyes grew dull with the veil of indifference. You had gradually grown so cunning. Your aging legs kept retreating, then coming back, always coming back, kicking their way into a storm of indignant protests, until one day there could be no more denials. Much too late, you clasped my hands—my innocent, spurned hands—and begged my forgiveness.

It was, as I say, too late. Instead of offering forgiveness, I wrote my first short story in years. In the story, my mind tossed up the memory of a blind cat I'd spotted outside a Greek *taverna*. We had flown to Athens to celebrate our thirtieth anniversary and stopped to have lunch around the Acropolis. We ordered a huge platter of seafood and ate it outdoors, on a flower-festooned terrace, surrounded by jolly diners. It was a fine, extravagant lunch. The sun was so dazzling I almost forgot that, in recent months, I'd come close to telling you I was planning to leave you. I couldn't muster the courage, but as we were walking away from the restaurant, I saw the sightless cat pause, sniffing, outside the hectic entrance, trembling with apprehension. The stray was sluggish with hunger and blind with mucus, but both the smell of grilled fish and sound of waiters' boots came from the same direction.

The story was published in a national magazine, the year I reached menopause. It was also the year you found yourself for the first time unable to write a single stanza and blamed it on me. My censorious eyes, you claimed, robbed you of the peace of mind you needed to do your work.

My story eventually won a prestigious award. Of course, you congratulated me. You bought me an expensive gift. But when I finally told you I'd decided to leave you, you looked like a child whose cookie had been snatched away just as he was about to bite into

it.

“But why?” you said. “I mean, after all these years?”

“After all these years,” I echoed. A year had gone by since you begged for forgiveness, promising change. You had not kept your promise. I made no reference to this. “I’ve decided to give myself a special gift this year,” I said, and achieved a smile.

“Very funny,” you said.

And then you spun around and went into your study and slammed the door. I thought you were probably struggling with a poem. As it turned out, you did not write a single line, but all the same managed to have the last word. When the ambulance came, you had been gone for hours, hunched over your desk, your head resting on a blank sheet of paper.

I’ll never know what it was your wayward heart could not withstand: my decision to leave, or your own failure to shape your rage into beguiling words. The truth is, your reputation was on the wane. Unlike some of your colleagues, you had never taken to the bottle but had, in recent years, begun to swallow a multitude of prescription pills. Of course, I wept. Everyone assumed it was wifely grief.

I thought my heart was too atrophied for that. But then, just last night, you surfaced again, repeating your tearful apology, your pores oozing blood. The dream must have been triggered by the Labour Day anniversary, but perhaps, too, by a magazine article, from which I learned that some quantum physicists had to advance a theory of backward-flowing time. Though I did not really understand physics, the idea of defying time has taken hold of my imagination. *What if...?*

Hence this long letter; hence a preposterous question I suddenly find myself compelled to ask on this solitary holiday weekend. If there really were such a thing as backward-flowing time, and you could see your memory-smitten widow burning your poems on her rooftop terrace, would you hasten to return from your bitter exile; would you try to rewrite all those gouging poems?

No answer. I am still lucid enough to know there will be no answer between now and the ultimate

silence. How exquisite, though, are autumn's dying trees; how wounding the setting sun.