

THE
FORBIDDEN

Louise Glück
from
Proofs &
Theories.

In the myth of the Garden, the forbidden exerts over the susceptible human mind irresistible allure. The force of this allure is absolute, final; the fact of it shapes, ever afterward, human character and the human vision of human destiny. The myth's potency derives from the fact that there is no going back: exile and contamination occur once, the explicit descent which is the lovers' punishment becomes a permanent burden or affliction. Which is to say: the myth is tragic.

It is a great theme—it can turn a good poet into a great poet. Its grandeur and utility explain, in part, its magnetism. But the charm doesn't always work, and many fine writers, in the grip of the narrative if not the theme, are beguiled into impassioned production of disappointing art. Moreover, material of this kind creates, for the writer, a dangerous insulation, since all negative criticism can be viewed as timidity and conservatism, terror in the presence of dark truth. But dark truth has become unnervingly popular, a literary convention which seems oddly incompatible with its experiential precursors: anguish, isolation and shame. In actual human experience, these stigmas persist: the child who involuntarily inhabits a taboo is marked by that fact. I don't think our society's addiction to exhibitionism and obses-

sion with progress (a narrow myth for triumph) completely explain the ease with which survivors have begun to show their wounds, making a kind of caste of isolation, competing in the previously unpermitted arena of personal shame. And the fact remains that authentic examples of transmuted suffering make plain what is missing from so many accounts.

In what would seem an impossible manoeuvre, any number of poets have managed to dissociate the forbidden from all tragic implication while continuing to claim for their efforts the prestige of tragedy. The proof they offer of their authenticity is biographical accuracy. We cannot, as readers, dispute what must have been genuine suffering. The question is: why are we involved at all; what response is solicited when the documenting voice requires that we note, at all moments, its survival (even, in many cases, its survival as a soul improved by this encounter with evil). These voices specify rage and contamination and shame; what they demand, however, is admiration for unprecedented bravery, as the speaker looks back and speaks the truth. But truth of this kind will not permit itself simply to be looked back on; it makes, when it is summoned, a kind of erosion, undermining the present with the past, substituting for the shifts and approximations and variety of anecdote the immutable fixity of fate, and for curiosity regarding an unfolding future, absolute knowledge of that future. Such truth is experienced as the inescapable place and condition, not the single experience but the defining experience endlessly recreated. When the force and misery of compulsion are missing, when the scar is missing, the ambivalence which seeks, in the self, responsibility—the collusive, initiating desire which must have been present for punishment to occur, the sense that it is better, in a way, that the self be at fault than that the world be evil—when ambivalence toward the self is missing, the written recreation, no matter how artful, forfeits emotional authority.

The test for emotional authority is emotional impact, and the great flaw in Linda McCarriston's *Eva-Mary* is that, cumulatively, it isn't moving. And it is meant to be read this way, as a whole, as it is

most certainly intended to move, to shock, to break the heart. One feels in these poems the delight of the ambitious artist at discovering terrain this promising: how could anything as powerful as incest fail to make devastating art?

But *Eva-Mary* is, despite its content, despite its grounding in the forbidden, despite the many wonderful individual poems, less myth than fairy tale, designed to name, localize, master and distance anxiety. I suppose if we could feel, as readers, the poignant inadequacy of the strategy, deeper response would be possible. But there seems no such signal here, no sense that this version of the past will not hold. Rather, the poems present themselves as the authentic telling of that past long suppressed, with all guilt absorbed by agents of suppression and all nobility divided among the helpless victims. It is an overt homage to the mother, and, as such, seems protected against charges of narcissistic self display. But the true object of love here is the suffering child, and the problem for artists dealing with this material is to not write from pity for the child one was but to devise a language or point of view that reinhabits anguish. *Eva-Mary* uses narrative, but its attitudes are fixed. The voice speaking suffers no dilemma toward the past, never falters in its judgments; this is a poetry, for all its artfulness, of functional simplification, and the speaker's recurring move is corrective, to be certain that, as readers, we know as clearly as she does who the heroes and villains are.

I found myself, reading this book, thinking of Forché's riveting *The Country Between Us*, which also arises out of protest, but moves deeply because it churns with self doubt as well as rage: the poems question the self's motives, expose its vanities. Unlike McCarriston's, Forché's speaker is suspect; the poems' extraordinary drama derives equally from rage at injustice (and the poems contain the additional drama of initiation into a reality of brutal unreason) and the recurring question of complicity, since it is to the poet's distinct advantage that this reality continue. Forché's willingness to sabotage the self's stature confers on the enemy an eerie humanity: can I trust what I see, the best poems suggest, given my preference to see it? When Forché fal-

PS 3563
E87
VMS
C3567

ters, as she rarely does, she does so because self-doubt and self-scrutiny give way.

If I am harsh with *Eva-Mary* it is because McCarriston's obvious talent creates expectations the book fails to meet. A real gift is constantly apparent here, undermined by a narrowing agenda. What alarms is the sense of self-flattering choice, presumably the brave choice of risk and darkness, presumably the choice of the harrowingly real over the decorous artful but, in my view, the choice of the schematic over the ambivalent, complex, and truly dangerous. The poems of *Eva-Mary* resemble the pronouncements of that male judge they invoke and correct who, because he does not see, can speak in verdicts.

Forché travels to Salvador a young girl; the power of the poems has its source in her hunger to be changed, whatever the cost, to be relieved of ignorance. The self she aspires to be, the Josephine-self, is worldly, informed, brutal, direct, marked by suffering, impatient; in Forché's hierarchy of values, beauty is surpassed by wisdom; ignorance, like virginity, is something to be shed as quickly as possible, not for the novelty of the experience but because divestment—preferably scourging divestment—is the only means by which adult perspective can be achieved.

Such perspective would seem, for poets, a universal ambition, which makes recognition of its absence difficult. Sharon Olds is a poet of considerable achievement and a wholesome distaste for that most depressing of strategies, the obligatory elevation of the quotidian via mythic analogy. Olds' technique, her fascination with the extreme physical, the unsayable reality, makes a case for her presence here, and *The Father* seems, atmospherically, to draw on or suggest taboos it doesn't actually investigate. Olds has an astonishing gift for that part of the act of writing which corresponds to the hunting/gathering phase, or, to put it another way, that part which is generative: many of the poems in *The Father* read as improvisations around a single word or cluster of words, and their resourcefulness, Olds' sustained scrutiny and fastidious notation of detail, amazes. This method, which characterizes nearly every individual poem in the collection, charac-

terizes the book as well, as though Williams' dictum regarding things had been adapted to an emotional agenda. If the book fails, as it does for me, it does so in part because the poems grow tedious: Williams' scrutiny was democratic, or perhaps, more properly, an application of the scientific method: it was a point of honor to have no bias regarding outcome. This is Williams' vitality. But Olds uses her genius for observation to make, repeatedly, the same points, to reach the same epiphanies; the energy and diversity of detail play out as stasis. The principal figures here, the speaker and her dying father, change very little; the scenes between them change very little. While we might not expect change of a dying man (his service, to the book, might be a fixity which would permit the speaker greater range in attitude and gesture as well as feeling, since response is no longer an issue), we do expect some fluidity within the speaker. What we find instead is a recalcitrant girliness; the voice is, here, as fixed as the father, pinned to a pre-adolescent and faintly coy obsession. To some extent the drama here, father and daughter, would seem to dictate this, and the poems do recognize the problem, though their solution is not to abandon the format but to strain it: periodically, the speaker envisions the father as her child, as a fetus inside her, and so on. What the poems do not do is move either forward or backward, backward to an earlier phase of childhood, the perspectives of which might illuminate the current confrontation, or (convincingly) forward.

These issues present themselves now for two reasons. I had the good fortune to read an unpublished collection by Martha Rhodes which treats these materials (like *The Father* and *Eva-Mary*) in a book-length collection. It is difficult to give, here, adequate sense of a collection whose distinction rests in structure: Rhodes cleaves to no fixed perspective—this is a single speaker, eccentric, various, rather than a spokesperson. This fluidity persuades because it mimics the dilemma, imitates and preserves the child's helplessly reactive mind as it survives into, and is masked by, adulthood. These short poems, by turns savage, wry, mordantly witty, tender, stern, deluded, sane, read like a series of fragments, bits of mosaic; they duplicate on the page

the sense of a past's being, piece by piece, recovered; they convey, devastatingly, the moment of a pattern's emerging: the little scenes and vignettes, the suspect tools of memory, cohere heart-stoppingly and absolutely into a narrative which fuses the damaged body to the divided heart. The *results* of the forbidden saturate these poems; reading them we are in the presence of harm (as we never really are in the books discussed earlier) and, simultaneously, a wild, stubborn, unkillable life. A few lines will give, perhaps, some sense of Rhodes' sad sardonic voice, and the ease with which, here, past and present blur:

She pretends to be dead
and unless you creep up and pinch her someplace tender
you think she really is dead.

Then she gets up
refreshed now, pink-cheeked,
her hair a little sweaty.

—FOR HER CHILDREN

Why do I always let you die,
not lifting you from bed, just watching you
lie breathless as your spirit
dangles from our bedroom wall
till it gives up and it's dead too.
Poof, I dream, no more you.

—OUR BEDROOM WALL

I hate to be touched, he said,
and this was news to me.

You love to be touched, I said . . .

—FOR ONCE

Back home, I'd rather not tell you where I've been.
Quietly, I take off my coat.
I open a screen, lean out and wave.
Does anyone drive slowly down our street
to stare up at our lace-lit windows?

I'm waving at parked cars, a grocery stand, the bus stop.
Here we are. Who out there
wants to be us?

—NEITHER OF US

He finds the dusty gin,
pours a double, straight,
then another. Lunch will be fast.
He'll sleep after, there,
on the sofa, I'll watch him.

It's mostly my mouth that's his,
and my hair, thinning,
pushing back from my brow, exposing
me, like him.

Oh, I've known since I was seven,
since then I've known I was him,
his.

—HIS

Secondly, I have been, for the last years, increasingly drawn to the work of Frank Bidart, whose territory this is. The importance of Bidart's work is difficult to overestimate; certainly he is one of the crucial figures of our time and, very likely, a major poet—we can't, I think, absolutely make such determinations regarding our contemporaries. His art, like the story of the Garden, creates narratives designed to account for what would otherwise be inexplicable suffering. Sometimes, in a kind of desperate backwards reasoning, his speakers commit crimes, to explain or justify conditions which already exist, to force the outward, in other words, to mirror the inward. More fiercely, more obsessively, more profoundly than any poet since Berryman (whom he in no other way resembles) Bidart explores individual guilt, the insoluble dilemma. If Olds—at least the Olds of *The Father*—is unintentionally static, Bidart explodes the stasis of obsession into drama, and does so almost entirely through the resources of voice. Anguish permeates these poems, the sense, sometimes vague, some-

times explicit, of the illicit, the criminal, and with this, the corollary issue of responsibility. Using intelligence, the single means available, these speakers struggle to trace to its source their conviction of culpability: the frantic isolation of these voices and their profound shame manifest a conviction that they are themselves reason enough for exile, whether they have acted or been acted upon. In either scenario, they are trapped. If I am responsible for evil, the poems reason, I am criminal; if I am not responsible, I am a victim and maimed. But the categories will not, in any case, stay still.

Bidart's speakers are not anomalies, strange examples of life on the edge, but a means by which the issues which absorb the poet can be most richly explored. Or perhaps less issues than conditions, the givens of human life, if human life is thought through and not merely moved through. Likewise, the evolving typographical innovations function to show multiple aspects of voice: sometimes a statement is enforced to dramatize or embody the lesson that will not stay learned, sometimes such statement seems to contain debate, as though the true force of statement were question: not "I did it" but "Did I? Did I?", a disguised plea for corroboration, the testing of a statement's truth by way of its sound. But corroboration, except of a particular kind I'll discuss shortly, is impossible, in part because these speakers' failure to resolve fundamental questions regarding themselves paralyzes their capacity to judge, or trust, the outside world (in other words, they cannot trust their impressions because they have not identified their purposes) and partly because compulsive conviction of the self's guilt tends to diminish the reality of an outside world which does not, in sufficient intensity, acknowledge that guilt. What Bidart's speakers share is a terminal dependence on intelligence, and minimal relief of accuracy: "... insight like ashes: clung/ to; useless; hated." Nothing, in these poems, is simple.

Nor is there any plausible relief. Love and passion are rare here; when they occur, they show their secret, their clandestine aspect. The only invitation eros can imagine, the only absolute available to humanity, is the creation of a non-thing, an erasure, a wound, the inflicting of damage that will not heal:

“ . . . You said
that the dead

rule and confuse our steps—

that if I helped you cut your skin
deeply enough

that, at least, WAS IRREPARABLE . . . ”

The ambition of passion is to replicate the drama of Eden. Or, ✓
that drama was invented to explain the drive of two beings toward an
animal pact of shared isolation, the drive to make of the body a souve-
nir or proof of the event.

Virtually any poem in Bidart's *In the Western Night* can stand as a
paradigm; virtually any poem shocks in a way that McCarriston and
Olds never do. In “Confessional” particularly, the power of the for-
bidden to take two hostages shows in a sustained bravura feat of dis-
closure. This is passion at work, with passion's drive toward the
irreparable:

“she began to simplify her life, denied
herself, and said that she and I must struggle

“to divest ourselves
of the love of CREATED BEINGS,”—

and to help me to do that,
one day

she hanged my cat.”

The poem, like many of Bidart's, begins and ends in bondage, the smaller bondage of individual life contained within the larger bondage of the species, the first (apparently) caused by, cemented by, the cat's death, the second the *reason* for that death. The voice that speaks in “Confessional” is the child, the done-unto, the passive watcher, the victim; he is haunted by his mother's act because it represents his own culpability; he participates with his mother in its creation. The space in which the speaker lives with his mother is a sealed

space, characterized by exclusion, intimacy, that quality of deadlock which exactly renders the condition of victimization, its conviction of its own agency, its will toward responsibility. And the guilt which gives "Confessional" its title and situation is the guilt of collusion which arises out of or creates the forbidden: not that the act of violence is specifically sought or arranged by the victim, but that its enactment binds victim to perpetrator in a pact of silence. It is the silence that is collusive, that becomes for the victim the emblem of his or her deepest relation, since only with the one who damaged him are there no secrets. And the progressive effect of such conspiracy is the gradual diminishment of all other possibility, the retreat of other voices, until, in this instance, mother and son are entirely and absolutely alone, entirely enmeshed, dependent on one another for authentication:

" . . . how can I talk about

the way in which, when I was young,

we seemed to be engaged in an ENTERPRISE
together,—

the enterprise of "figuring out the world,"
figuring out her life, my life,—

THE MAKING OF HER SOUL,

which somehow, in our "enterprise"
together, was the making of my soul,—"

"Confessional" searches wildly for historical analogy because insight affords insufficient possibility of change. But change, for Bidart, is specious; it gives lie to the overwhelming seriousness of, the reality of, his perception. These poems do not triumph over damage and shame, they find no cure, no respite, but, in the manner of the great tragedies, Bidart's voices protest (as Edmond White has observed). And the gravity of our dilemma, in being so profoundly experienced, in being given durable form, is dignified.

There are other modes than the tragic; plainly neither McCarriston nor Olds intended to sound exactly this note. And one of the revelations of art is the discovery of a tone or perspective at once wholly unexpected and wholly true to a set of materials. The problem in both *Eva-Mary* and *The Father* isn't the refusal of the tragic vision but the failure of both authors to find alternative visions. *Eva-Mary* is limited by McCarriston's managerial interventions, her insistence on a single rigid interpretation; limited, in a sense, by excess will. Whereas *The Father* suffers from an insufficiency of will or direction; the poems are nearly all better in their parts than as wholes, as is the collection. The aimlessness of the book itself suggests the single disadvantage of Olds' impressive facility: these poems read as great talent with, at the moment, nowhere to go. Neither of these conditions need determine these poets' futures. But I find myself concerned that, in their different ways, McCarriston and Olds are constrained by a like mechanism, the felt obligation of the woman writer to give encouraging voice to the life force (for want of a better term).

Because the character of the voice, in each case, is intended to be expansive, non-judgmental, rooted in the physical, intended to be the heroic voice of the survivor, one doesn't automatically associate its production with constriction. But to the poet, all obligation of this kind is constriction, and ought to be questioned or fought.