

Memory's Duty

Ronald Wilcox

“Has memory done its duty? Or has it proven — by the act of misleading — that it's impossible to escape the mortal sin of our time: the desire not to come to grips with oneself.”

CHRISTA WOLF,
A Model Childhood

1

Like an irresistible green vegetation
easing over everything in time,
a sense of comfort crept over my mother,
weaving into her slowly tendrils of death.
Death is a long rest and deeply to be desired
her long life easing away seemed to say to me.
Watch, while I while away my time and ease down
where bright leaves cannot follow,
leaves like songs or laughter or rhymes.
And the pity of it was I believed her,
believed in the silence of sinking
and clear cut grass over graves
and yellow flowers.

2

I didn't think my death would be forever
until I saw her die, listlessly,
exasperated with life, aspirating her soul:
quite quietly she relaxed for the first time,
I think, ever. It was all over. It was all past,
suddenly, a switch with no click, off.
Quickly time ran in and kissed her face
before I could.

3

I met my mother coming round a corner
 four days after the day she died.
 We crossed paths for the last time
 halfway between the Mormon Ward and home.
 Arriving early for the prearrangements,
 a clean blue hearse pulled up,
 stopped at the four-way stop sign.
 I stopped myself at the very same moment,
 stopped, turned, stared,
 me in one vehicle, she in the other.
 The driver of hers, unaware, looked right through me.
 Then the clean blue hearse floated on like a low cloud
 easing a right turn east toward the Ward,
 blinking its turn signal red red, red red.

4

I sat idling at the stop sign,
 totally aware of myself and this situation,
 almost blinded with meanings, symbols, histories,
 allegories, images, what have you, red red,
 my own turn signal repeating pulse-like red red:
 I wrote a one million word autobiographical novel
 about me and my dead mother in one moment;
 one hour later, I attended her funeral.

5

I sat stunned as a cut flower next to my father,
 listening intently to the succession of speakers
 who had known her well, the last of whom
 canonized her on the spot.
 I sat hoping in the deathly silence between hymns
 no one could smell my breath
 and held my father's hand.

6

I heard my father cry, once,
 days and days after the day she died.
 We had been talking, not about her,
 and he lowered his head and cried, woman-like.
 By woman-like I do not mean the act of crying:
 I mean the sound.
 High, whining-high, the very highest grief.
 I've heard it in telegraph wires in the wind
 and in my father's voice.

7

Mom planned her funeral facetiously
 for as long as I can remember,
 counting the speakers and their expressions
 as she would sunflowers or lilacs in spring,
 whispering loving kindnesses to her quietly
 like unto returning perfumes upon the wind.
 She had a special poem about young mothers
 upon her wall of photos among the faces
 of me and my three brothers and my father,
 faces changing thru time from babes to manhood,
 this, her beloved "rogues gallery."
 The poem, printed beautifully in inky flowers,
 a page torn from *Better Homes and Gardens*,
 ended prophetically with the phrase,
 "She is a living presence."

8

It disappeared from the wall a year before she died,
 mysteriously, and by her own hand, I believe.
 Although intended to be read at her actual funeral,
 the fact remains I could not find it *anywhere*,
 its absence the only real disappointment
 she would have felt in the heartfelt rites
 I remember now photographically and poetically.

9

Why did she take it down?
 And when did she decide
 the young mother had died?
 It sat absent that day
 like unto an empty seat.
 We mourned her together,
 that poem and I.
 It wept silence.

10

I commemorate my mother not as she was,
 nor as she would have been, given choice,
 but as she is in my mind, diamond-like
 and bright: She is a living presence.
 I miss her and I'm glad she's gone;
 that's a truth I live with.
 She had the most penetrating personality,
 possessed the most singular powerful single mind

I have ever known personally, that's a fact.
 Single to me. Fixed upon me.
 I could not have loved her more.

11

My mother lived as in a cage of lasers,
 glass bars of light blinding her to the world.
 Infinitely bounded by my mother's fantasies,
 I saw through her illusions like ropes of crystal.
 I lived my life as if she was watching.
 I could in no way free myself
 without shattering her intricate exquisite vision.
 It lies about me now in bright shards of pure light.
 Her death was my exit.
 Like an idiot exceptional child
 I sit fitting pieces of light into patterns,
 dropping poems from fumbling fingers,
 trying to reassemble the jigsaw puzzle
 of shattered glass which is my soul,
 because the catch is she was right:
 reality's a charnel house and no bargain.

12

The diamond knives facts are
 rendered me free in three cuts:
 omnipotent to impotent to potent to poet.
 I sliced cleanly by logic and logistics
 my precision lobotomy, self-performed,
 but that piece of meat on the floor, there,
 the front part of my brain,
 it reeks of meanings
 and writhes.

13

Hyperbole!
 Far-fetched metaphor!
 Each time I try to write directly
 of the Mormons, my mother, and myself,
 my words veer off, of themselves, upon themselves,
 wrecking my meaning upon god forsaken far-fetched metaphor!

14

God enters into it at this point:
 when the weave gives way.

15

I assume each frame of each movie I've ever seen's
 fixed indelibly upon the retina of my brainscan,
 to be retrieved by me if I choose to revivify
 the image
 if you get my meaning: how much more thoroughly, then,
 each moment of my senses must be etched retrievably
 upon a film of time, the patina of my Mormon self.

16

I was born at the foot of Mount Olympus,
 Utah.

17

For hours
 she'd listen to me,
 totally enjoying my conversation,
 and I, hers;
 we agreed I was extraordinary.
 I use the word with care:
 out of the ordinary,
 not usual.
 Extra.
 [*<L. extra ordinem, out of order*]

18

What did she say?
 Whom did she say it to?
 Sometimes I can't remember,
 other times, I do.

19

I was meant to be a girl but I surprised us all,
 me, especially, when I learned later her game plan.
 I was prayed over long and laboriously
 long before my birth and not a few times after
 but for all the wrong reasons.
 She purposely planned me in the other gender,
 another style, as it were: female I am not.
 It is *the* basic fact of my life: my very being.
 I fit myself well, I must say, as a man,
 was never regretted for being, well, me,
 by anyone but me but the truth is, I think,
 something smiled at my birth
 for something other than my worth.

20

Off-center, over-compensated, fed-up, p'd off,
 I proceeded to rearrange my life
 along life lines of my own devising,
 untangling and rebraiding carefully
 along lines more in keeping with my own nature
 albeit what *that* was I could only guess at.
 I arrived, finally, in a tangle, back where I started,
 like a giant string ball I had saved for forty years,
 a one-man Laurel and Hardy movie
 in another fine mess I'd gotten me into.
 I stared in a mirror of shattered webs
 and wondered where I went wrong . . .

21

I do not have children.
 I do not write letters.
 I say hello to the postman in a friendly manner.
 I order my days in a predictable sequence.
 I repeat myself.

22

I am the late child.
 Not completely Jack or ex,
 nor totaled by lack of time,
 I am the *almost* Mormon.
 I accept the contradiction
 of my testimony:
 I don't believe what I believe.

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