

Mementoes

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Ever since I began writing as a child, my poetry has explored the themes of solitude, love, and death. Lurking under my adolescent scribbles was the question of sexuality, which came to the fore in my fourth book, Bodily Presence. Increasingly, my poetry and my prose are preoccupied by differences – cultural and linguistic – in Canada and between Canadians and people they encounter in other parts of the world. This poem is from my current poetry manuscript The Craving of Knives. (blainemarchand@hotmail.com)

I was taken aback when I saw his death announcement. Usually, I'm not surprised to discover occasionally that someone I know has died. In fact, this is the reason I read the obituaries every day, to keep track. But his: Dieudonne, Guy. I vaguely recalled some gossip two years ago about how he had died. At the time, I had speculated it must have been AIDS. According to the press, everyone in the community was dying of the 'plague.' Maybe this announcement was really an In Memoriam notice. Maybe it had been accidentally misplaced. No, it was an obit.

But I was surprised by his age. 57. He couldn't be that old. Perhaps it was a different person. Someone with a similar name? My finger skimmed the details: the names of his sisters, predeceased by his mother. It had to be him. No hint as to the cause of his death.

A wave of loss overwhelmed me. Why? Perhaps it was because I had fixated on him all these years. But why him? True, he was physically imposing: tall, rail thin, with a head of blond serpentine curls. His skin was translucent, as if your fingers could pierce it without any effort. I had been walking down the Sparks Street Mall on a humid July night. A heat wave had gripped the city like a clamp for a week. The street was thick with people walking to escape the furnaces their Centretown apartments had become. Teenagers were hanging out, gawking at the first ghostly forms of the National Arts

Centre rising from the deep pit along Elgin Street. Then they would break out into gangs, dispersing along the canal's banks.

I used to do that, but now my purpose was different. I needed to escape the claustrophobic townhouse I shared with my mother. To her, I was still her "little man," a term which conjured up for me Buster Brown shoes, flannel pants, and a navy blue blazer trimmed with piping. "My little man," she would say when I was a child, and tug at the bottom of my blazer to make the corners sit straight whenever we headed out to church or to a restaurant. I hated that gesture, the proximity of her hand to my crotch. I would squirm, pull away, desperate to break free of her hold.

As I grew more and more sullen over the years, she retreated too, to the solace in drink. Evenings would find her softly splayed on the couch, one arm fallen open, her fingers cradling the neck of a bottle. The TV screen cast its pearly light across the room, her snoring like the purring of a cat. Escape was easy.

The city was changing. Old buildings were being pulled down and new boxes of glass were towering over the streets. More and more, I found suburbia monotonous, confining. We lived in Parkwood Hills where there were no parks, no woods, no hills. Downtown called, a promised land full of potential and a life my mother would have never guessed. Danger tasted sweet.

By the canal's edge, I would linger by the clumps of lilacs or sprawl across a bench, waiting. Waiting for another young man to walk by and stop just beyond where I was. There were plenty of older men, but I found their fleshiness, their obsequiousness, repulsive. Luckily, there were guys my age too, if I waited. One would pass, light a cigarette, and then circle back. We'd exchange words for a few minutes, our eyes sizing each other up. Then we'd disappear beneath the arches of the Pretoria Bridge.

Those first feeble fumbblings were tentative, awkward but exhilarating. The way desire would fill my body, a container wanting to burst. I had buried my need for affection when my father died. But in my teens, when I first experienced sex, it became a hunger I fed in secret, the way as a kid I snuck cookies into my bedroom and relished their creamy centers beneath the privacy of my covers.

Over time I learned the ropes. As soon as I could pass for 21, I hit the clubs. There it was easier. Everyone had the same thirst in their eyes. They nestled their beer bottles close to their chests, running

their fingers along the necks, tearing off the labels.

That July night was so humid. Cars buzzed around Confederation Square. The walk light refused to change.

"Hello there." A husky voice warm as a hand hovered just behind my shoulder. "Do you have a light?" A cigarette curved close to my face. I could smell the sweetness of the tobacco, spicy aftershave on the fingertips that held it.

"No, sorry, I don't smoke." I stepped sideways to a safer distance, out of the range of the scents.

"Too bad, man. Might be great if you did. Smoke that is." A laugh jumped from his lips. His head tilted back and tendons, thick as rope, stretched down this long neck. He was wearing a mesh tank top, orange as hot embers. The streetlight cast a shadow across his chest, highlighted a large brown nipple.

"What are you staring at?"

He placed the unlit cigarette in his mouth and growled like an animal.

"Ooh ... nothing ... your shirt." I decided honesty was less dangerous than a lie, though I chose not to mention his nipple.

"Groovy shirt isn't it? Makes me feel sexy. Do you think it does?"

"But everyone can see your chest." I inched closer to the curb.

"That's the idea. Advertising, man. Got a great bod, why not show it off? Advertisement ... the way of the future. Hey, you didn't answer my question. Do you find me sexy?"

I stepped off the sidewalk and waded through the stream of cars, crossed the Square and headed toward Union Station.

"Too bad man. Don't smoke. Don't answer questions. *Tête carrée*. Could have been the beginning of a ..."

Cars swooshed by drowning out his final words.

Coincidence is an amazing thing. Almost as if things are meant to happen. Maybe I'm obsessive, drawing links that aren't really there. Unearthing patterns to make sense out of the chaos of life. And death.

A month after the obit about Guy, there was one for his sister Lucie. "*Après une lutte valiante*," it stated. She must have been ill, Cancer? Lucie, I noticed, was the same age I was. Four years younger than Guy. Funny, I could have sworn she was even younger.

Where he was tall and blond, she was short, dark and heavyset.

Her hair had been shagged, as the popular style was then called. I first met her at a new club, Ray's Place. It was above a greasy restaurant on Rideau Street and drew a young crowd convinced it was exploring the edge, the boundaries of experience. One, we believed, that most others in this gray, middle-aged civil-servant city didn't know existed.

As I approached the only table in the club with an available seat, I heard her speaking French to a friend.

"Est-ce cette chaise gratuite?" My voice stammered as if I was coughing.

She burst out laughing. "No, but it's discounted by 50%. The reduced price is on the orange tag on the back."

"Huh?"

"The word is 'libre' not 'gratuite.' You mean free as in available, not as in having no cost."

"Oh, sorry."

"Yes it is. And so are we. Sit down before someone else does. At least you are harmless looking."

She winked at the woman sitting next to her, pulled out the chair.

"I'm Lucie. This is Danielle."

I wanna take you higher, the voice of Sly Stone trebled through the room.

"Excusez."

The two women moved to the packed dance floor. *High, high, higher* warbled in vibrato. An amoeba of colored lights floated across her face and clothes. Lucie smirked from the dance floor, walked toward me.

"Venez!"

She took my hand and led me toward Danielle, whose slight body moved delicately as a ribbon falling through air. The three of us spun around each other. At the end of the song I made my way through the gyrating bodies, back toward the table.

"Non. Restez ici. Il faut danser. Vivre, c'est danser."

After thirty minutes we returned to the table. "Je suis tellement fatiguée." Lucie's hands shuffled her layered hair.

"Et mouille," added Danielle mopping her face with her sleeve and fanning the fabric of her shirt.

"Let's go back to our place and have a swim," Lucie suggested as much to me as to Danielle.

"But I don't have my bathing suit."

"Swim in your underwear. Or borrow my brother's. He lives with us."

On York Street, we pulled into a spitfire-red mustang. Dangling from the rear-view mirror were a rosary, a Shiva, and a necklace with a pendant of a raised fist encircled by the female symbol. The car sped along Rideau, across the Cummings Bridge, and down Montreal Road.

The brakes seized and the car spun around in a sharp 45-degree angle toward the entrance of Notre Dame Cemetery. Lucie stepped on the gas. The car lurched forward.

"What the hell!" I braced myself against the front seat. "What's this? A shortcut?"

"Mais non!"

Lucie let out a cry, the kind a small animal makes when it is struck by the wheel of a car.

"J'ai décidé de visiter ma mère."

"Lucie! Mais non!"

Danielle's voice filled the car with reproach. A heated exchange erupted in French. I couldn't follow it. Through the window, rows of tombstones surged past. The car slowed, halted. Lucie's door flung open and she hurtled down along a row of graves. Danielle turned to me, shrugged, quietly pushed open the door, and slipped out after Lucie.

I felt I was an intruder on this private moment. I debated sneaking away, catching a bus home. But something held me pinned as the sound of crying seeped through the open window.

My father was buried here somewhere. A jumble of memories were all that remained from that day ... numbing cold ... my father's gray casket ... a lurid green carpet ... earth mounded ... the grave like a wound.

Danielle stepped out of the shadows, leading Lucie by the hand. She motioned for me to move out of the back seat. As I stood by the door, Danielle folded Lucie into the vacant spot tenderly as one places a fragile ornament into tissue. The tips of Lucie's fingers rubbed her eyes over and over. Her head was so low it almost rested against her knees. Danielle lay her back on the seat but rather than unfolding, Lucie pulled her knees up toward her chest. Her sobbing was low and deep.

Danielle swung in behind the steering wheel. She motioned for me to get in. As I sat down, her hand reached over and gently stroked mine.

“Her mother died in the spring.” Her voice was paper thin. Of its own volition, my arm extended back toward Lucie. My fingers stroked her hair with a tenderness that surprised me. I had never been so intimate with a woman.

The engine drowned out Lucie’s weeping. The steering wheel arced to the left and we slowly moved toward the gate, the gravestones flickering in the moonlight like memorial candles.

Danielle leaned toward me. “Sa mère s’est tuée.”

The words sent a shock of electricity through my body. My father in the bathtub ... his legs webbed with hairs ... his penis floating dark and thick ... an arm fallen over the side ... a red gash at his wrist. I clenched my fists, reopened them, rubbed them along my thighs. I tilted my head back, closed my eyes, willing the images gone. As numbness set in, I lowered my head, opened my eyes and focused on the lights of traffic flowing along Montreal Road. I gave myself up to the motion of the car.

We turned, then turned left again, and crawled down St. Laurent Boulevard, took the first right and headed up a small incline. Lucie had grown quiet. Was she asleep, drawn into the motion of the vehicle, a technique used to calm cranky infants? And the plight of the parents who have not yet learned to decipher nuances in their offspring’s cries.

As the car halted before a townhouse, Lucie raised her head. Strands of her hair clung like weeds to her face. She looked out from them as if she was emerging from under water.

“Revenons à nos moutons.” A guttural laugh broke like a bubble from her mouth.

Danielle turned to Lucie and quickly brushed aside the wet strands of her hair.

“Chère, la piscine nous attend, n’est-ce pas?”

Posters of Robert Charlebois, of Louise Forrestier, and of Les Beaux Dimanches were tacked onto the walls of the living room. Lucie went upstairs. Footsteps moving across a floor were followed by opening drawers and then a quick skip down the stairs. She entered the room waving a maroon bathing suit like a flag.

“La voilà. Il sera si cute avec ça, eh Danielle?”

“But it’s so small. I couldn’t.”

“Pis? Don’t be so English. It’s only us.”

I excused myself and went upstairs and into the bathroom. I wedged myself into the suit. The fabric was an elastic constricting my thighs. On my way out, I noticed Lucie had left the light on in the bedroom. I strolled over to shut it off. A drawer hung open from a bureau.

When I came back into the living room, she had already changed into her swimsuit and was huddled over the coffee table.

“Tiens.” A cupped hand reached out toward me.

“What’s this?”

“Rien. Sugar. It will give you energy and dreams.” She popped a cube into her mouth. I followed her lead.

Danielle joined us, three towels over her shoulder. With a smooth gesture, she pulled one off and swung it around Lucie’s neck, drew her close and kissed her with a loud smack. I walked over and put my arms around them and gave them each a chaste peck. The two burst into gales of laughter.

Out of the patio doors we went, through a gate in the back fence and onto the deck of a pool. It was empty except for a row of lounge chairs, their ribs of plastic the bleached bones of beached whales.

Then it happened. As I leapt from the diving board my body ascended higher and higher into the air as if it were entering heaven. Then it began to plunge. It split a stone that was liquid, that shattered into a thousand fragments as I passed through it. Somewhere in a nether region of my brain panic set in but the caress of the wet brilliance made me want to stay embedded in it forever, like the remains of the martyr in a glass reliquary. Rawness seized my lungs. I needed air. I burst through the surface gasping, a trail of silver nails dripping from my hands.

My head rotated, my eyes trying to decipher where I was. In the ‘v’ edge of the corner of the pool, Lucie and Danielle sprawled across the deck, their feet dangling into the water, their arms in the air as if they were about to rise like the dead from a grave.

At the other end of the pool, the door to the yard was ajar. Through it, a soft light beat in rhythm with the blood pounding in the artery at the base of my neck. The pulse was a voice calling to me to come to it. I pulled myself out of the water, walked toward the glow. I was surely on the path of illumination, of salvation.

I slipped through the curtain billowing out of the patio doors like a cloud, mounted the stairs and went into the bathroom. At either end, against the pale wood of the open drawer, red slashes of cloth were stigmata in the palms of Jesus. In the centre of the room white sheets, the dug out hull of a boat waiting to ferry me safely across a sea. I lay down, crossed my arms over my chest, shut my eyes, ready to meet my Lord.

His breath was upon my face, his soft words tumbled in the well of my ear. I reached out to him.

“Quelle surprise! Quelle délicieuse surprise!”

My eyes popped open. Kneeling by the side of the bed was Guy. His tongue wet his lips, a cat staking a bird. My heart beat against the trap of my ribs.

He moved closer, the stubble on his chin scraped my cheek as if it were pumice cleansing me. A fragment of recall, like a flake of skin, tore loose, floated before me. My father and I when I was seven ... in the living room ... rough-housing on the green carpet ... I thrash about in his arms, raise my head ... his comes down the sharp drag end-of-the-day growth across my face painful, yet comforting as calloused hands ... I roll over and push my face against his wanting to do it again.

“No. Don’t do that!” My father’s voice a slap.

He straightened himself, shook out his trousers and his shirt, left the room. I lay on the floor, my hands pressed against my chin to contain and hold the sensation of his bristle.

I bolted up in Guy’s bed, my fists clenching and unclenching. How could I have forgotten this memory? How could I have submerged it? It had happened the week my father had killed himself.

I grabbed Guy’s head and dragged it against my face. Once. Twice. Three times.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Tears lubricated our faces. The friction of the stubble still burning.

“Arret! Arret! Es-tu fou?”

I jumped up and ran down the stairs, flung open the front door and fled, somehow making it home despite being barefoot and wearing only Guy’s bathing suit. I have no idea how I did it, but I did.

I ran my finger over Lucie’s obituary as if I could recapture the life that was. I shoved myself out of the chair, away from the glare of the reading lamp, went down the hall into the bedroom and pulled

open a dresser drawer. I rummaged among my socks and underwear and found it. The maroon bathing suit.

I picked it up, cradled it in my palm like a bloodstone. I had always meant to return the suit but I couldn't face him. Even in those first years, when I knew where he lived, when I would deliberately walk down his street looking into the windows of his apartment, hoping he would pass in front of them or come out. But if he had, it would have meant explaining. Each time I neared his place, I would rehearse what I would say. I would have to sound surprised, natural. But though it never happened, although I never saw him again, I could not discard the suit. I took it with me each time I moved.

I reached down, slid open the lowest drawer. Sitting there in a green felt pouch were a worn pair of kid gloves, a stained silk scarf, and a watch. My father's. I discovered them in an armoire at my mother's when I was cleaning out her things after she died. Odd, I found no photos of my father in the house. I never recall her having any. These three things were the only fragments of his life she had chosen to keep. Why?

I don't even remember what my father looked like. He disappeared from my life just as I did from Guy's, never having the chance to explain, to make things right. Funny, but in some vague way the memory of Guy became the image of my father.

Carefully I folded the maroon briefs, rubbed their sleek surface one last time across my face, placed them in the pouch among the mementoes of my father. I bent down, mounded sweaters over them. I closed the drawer. It rattled.

