

ALETHEIA PLANKIW

AFTER LOSS

A (REALLY) PERSONAL MEMOIR

HIS EYES WERE OFTEN HAZY and shifted away. His face was sharp and angular, but it softened in premature crow's-feet and deep creases about his mouth. An impression of unceasing worry, a gloom that resisted happiness, enshrouded him. What had happened to him? Over months, I began to understand. Monstrously evil acts had bred irremediable anguish: that had happened.

Purdue believed that he would never be happy until he went back to Texas and killed his father. His father's death would hardly expiate the crime against him, but it might create the illusion of retribution. That illusion, pathetic as it is, often provides the only consolation ("closure" people say in their innocence) for loss. Purdue had lost something important. More exactly, he had been robbed of a fundamental dimension of personhood. I was never certain what he felt that he had lost, but it certainly included happiness. At the very least, his childhood had been brutally taken. Needing consolation, Purdue was caught in the fork of a dilemma: he could ease his memory by murdering his father or he could go on to earn a PhD in a difficult, and exceedingly cold subject. Later, I realized that a third option was the most likely. He would continue on his self-tormenting course until, nothing resolved, no solutions ever found, he killed himself or went mad. Today if he were still alive and I met him again, I expect that he would be living on the street in Vancouver or Toronto. Then he would be truly cast out. He was the most unhappy man I had ever known.

When I first met him, we were both in a lounge near the university. Purdue was alone at the bar, but a mutual friend introduced us and we ended up spending a late evening talking through a labyrinthine wilderness of ancient difficulties. He smoked incessantly, a habit that even then I found troubling, but it seemed so much a part of his character that, as long as he was talking, I barely noticed. Sometime before midnight, I was astounded to see him take a lit cigarette and grind it out against the back of his left

hand. As I got to know him better, in particular as we became infrequent lovers, I learned that he had scars from cigarette burns up and down both arms. The soft skin within his elbow-pits was stippled with black scars from burns. Often, the inside of his mouth would be cut from broken glass. He would bite the rim off a beer glass and hold the jagged shards in his mouth as blood pooled behind his tightly pursed lips. Then he might spit it out on the floor, blood and glass together. He said, and I believed him, that he really wanted to swallow the glass. Sometimes, he claimed, against bodily habit and disposition, he would succeed. I have never known another person so sad.

It didn't take me long to understand that he felt a deep uncertainty and a lack of confidence about many things, including existence itself. Today, it would probably be easier to smoke out the root of the problem: abuse, sexual trauma followed by a failed repression of tormenting memories. At that time, although I certainly had known women who had been sexually abused in their childhood, and I remembered evil moments from my own, I assumed that this seldom, if ever, happened to men. I also assumed that whatever did happen to a boy growing up, he would, as I believed men were always supposed to do, bear up and carry on. Purdue didn't bear up well at all. Memories gnawed him remorselessly. I imagined his mind as a warren of savage spirits. Several times I tried to discover the reasons for his self-destructive behaviour, always approaching the issue indirectly. ("Tell me about growing up in Texas?" "What was worst about it?") As futile as blatant, those efforts led nowhere. On two or three occasions, I asked him directly to change his behaviour simply as a matter of hygiene and self-preservation. He always said that he would, but then I would have to watch as he stubbed out cigarettes on his skin. He was like an alcoholic who promises to quit, but, intense craving overpowering her, never can. Addicted to pain and suffering, Purdue clung to his personal discipline of punishment and self-retribution.

I lived alone at that time. My boyfriend of the past two years had recently moved out in a thunderstorm of mutual animosity. After that disaster, I had moved into a rather dingy studio apartment a few blocks from the university, suitable for entertaining friends though hardly for co-habitation. After I began to see Purdue, I would bring him back to this unromantic apartment. Its smallness and overall dinginess seemed to suit him. I made love to him a number of times, partly because I did, genuinely, like him, partly because I felt empathy, as well as commiseration. Whatever had happened to him, it must have been terrible. Each time that Purdue and I had sex together, I studied the scars on his body. Each time, I smelled a faint, stale odour of

uncleanliness, even (if I made my mind grow dark) of putrescence. Purdue lived a nearly hand-to-mouth existence, spending a few days or weeks with friends, eating what happened to come before him, and generally paying little attention to his body, his hygiene, himself. Still, he was brilliant. No one doubted that. His intellectual presence, whether in the English Department or in a student bar, was always formidable. I wondered about him, almost incessantly, but I resolved to take him as he wanted to be taken: unhappy, brilliant, mysterious.

One morning, shortly before five, I woke up to the sound of faint knocking at my door. It was Purdue, stinking in a wretchedly unwashed condition, reeking of stale beer and bleeding from the corners of his mouth. He was curled up on the floor against the door, weeping and whimpering faintly like a man who has been tortured to a point near death. A man dragged back from waterboarding might have looked much the same. Once he was sitting in my room, I made him some instant coffee on a hotplate. I tried to persuade him to shower, but he wouldn't take his clothes off in front of me, even though he must have remembered that I had already seen him naked several times. Eventually, I did manage to talk him into rinsing his mouth out with an antiseptic wash. The problem that always seemed to drive him to self-punishment was, he had tried to make me believe, a terrible sense that he was unloved. I had told him that I loved him, but it was clear enough that, even in making love, I kept a considerable distance between us. I would have made, as it turned out I actually did, a better confidant than a lover. I should have been his sister. There would usually be a girl in the background, someone other than myself, someone I would never meet, who had just dumped him. "I'm worthless," he would sob between philosophical disquisitions, his beer slopping over as he would gesticulate with his glass in hand. By the time he showed up at my door that morning, I had understood that his difficulties with girls masked some other, far deeper problem. Sometimes, I would even try to reach that submerged region of darkness with my ineffectual questions.

After he had rinsed his mouth and spat out the last threads of blood, I suggested that we go for a walk. Holding his hand, I steered Purdue across the campus toward the North Saskatchewan River. There was a small park at the bottom of the hill where I often walked when I was writing a term paper. In good weather, I would sit at a picnic table facing the river and write. This time Purdue and I sat on the grass under one of the trees. Suddenly, he leant his head into my shoulder, sobbing. I felt tense, guessing that something major was about to burst out, but I drew his head tightly against my breasts.

I put my arm around him, stroking his shoulders and neck, doing my best to be comforting. This was a moment of confession.

I was never certain what had brought on the weeping, slobbering self-revelation. Probably the need to tell someone had long been stored up. These days, more than twenty years later, a young man in a similar situation would be seeing a therapist, but I never heard the least suggestion that Purdue was receiving psychological counselling of any kind. On the two or three occasions that we talked about such matters, he had expressed scorn for Freud, for psychoanalysis and for the investigation of masked intentions. He was a man, terribly damaged by something in his past, who had no resources other than his own. "Nothing helps much, not the history of Western philosophy, not the Great Books, either," he told me once (primly), "when the source of the problem is in yourself. Nothing real ever neatly objectifies itself in a paradigm." I loved that cold, far-away academic voice; the other voice, whimpering and self-hating, I simply accepted.

That morning, he abruptly welled over because I had acted like a friend, more like a sister perhaps than a lover. On more than one occasion, I had looked after him, on several I had screwed him, but on that morning I had welcomed him in a sisterly manner. He had been sexually abused. From the age of eight or so, his father had sodomized him on a regular basis. I might have guessed that he had been abused, but the knowledge that it had been his father struck me like a blow to the head. Through his sobs, he told me that he had never been able to escape his father and that his mother, though she must have known what was happening, had done nothing to help. What was worse was that his father had often given him to an uncle for sex. He had been like a rent boy that his father had kept in the house for casual sex. No one ever offered to help or had ever tried to advise him. His mother looked the other way and never admitted her terrible knowledge. His fate was never discussed or even mentioned in his home. Now, grown into adulthood, he had left his family behind, escaped the dark pit that was Texas, made a new life in Canada, and established that he was, or could be, a brilliant student. "Deep problems," he told me one night, "are never solved simply by forgetting nor even by displacement. Not even repression, if you could achieve it, would truly help. The structure of pain would always survive." Well, I replied, Freud, whom you despise so much, understood that memories, metamorphic and fundamentally irrepressible, persistently sneak their way back into expression.

All manner of things may be lost. Many things larger, and of more lasting significance, than the personal items, such as a missing lip gloss, that make us cry, end up lost. There seems to be no correlation between their significance and the pain of loss that they engender. The loss of trivial things, such as lip gloss, may be experienced as fundamental, spirit-shaking. Substantial things, such as empires, may be felt as trivial. It all depends (it seems) upon your cast of mind, not the thing itself. You will bear your own losses very differently from your friends theirs.

Purdue bore his loss hard. For him, whatever he had lost had exerted the weight of a vanished empire. After that spring, I never saw him again. A few years later, he learned my address and wrote to me in Australia where I was teaching. He wanted to know this or that, but said nothing about his bad memories, his self-loathing, the confession that day or his wish to kill his father. I wrote back, but I never heard from him again. An image of his tormented life has remained encysted in my memory. He was the first man I had ever known who admitted to having been sexually abused. I had known other women who kept dark secrets about their childhoods and who would intimate that raw and brutal things had been done to them. They would never say explicitly what had happened, but I could tell, from hints or from coded allusions, that they had experienced horrors. I, too, had survived a series of small horrors when I had been eleven and twelve, but Purdue was the first abused man I had ever known. Even the terse tale that Purdue had told was slow in coming, obviously difficult for him to articulate. He was the first person I ever met who was deeply, and perhaps irremediably, abject.

When I recall Purdue, all the contemporary clichés about sexual abuse come into play. His innocence had been abused, his natural trust in his parents had been violated, his human rights had been transgressed, he had been traumatized, he had been transformed into an object and commodified. He possessed, coiled and ready to strike, a snake-like string of memories that were poisonous to live with and which he had been unable, even unwilling, to repress. These memories made him feel worthless, unloved and unlovable, cast off both from his family and from society. All these haunting memories, and all the intensely negative affects (anger, disgust, guilt, hate, shame) that surrounded them, narrowed upon one fact and one body part. His anus had been raped, but raped not simply in the constricted sense of having had non-consensual sex forced upon him. He had been raped in the older meaning of having been carried off, of having been kidnapped. His anus had been subjected to violent, undesired sexual intromission, but it had

also been stolen, alienated from his sense of his own personhood. Unlike the phallus, a “highly social bodily appendage” (Guy Hocquenghem), the anus is proscriptively private. Sublimation is the normal method of dealing with it. Alas, sublimation was not an available recourse for Purdue.

Social formation, centring around toilet training, hides the anus from public scrutiny, denies its pleasure-giving possibilities and focuses consciousness wholly toward its excremental function. Although much happens during intimacy that is seldom made public, including several modes of anal sexuality, the anus is not commonly a topic for public discussion. In Western cultures the anus is simply a (very) private bodily part. Purdue had been stripped of this privacy, which no doubt, in a tragic, if routine, double bind, he had also been taught to preserve. Having been anally raped, many times over a number of years, he had been forced to expose his hidden anus to a terrible public knowledge. Paradoxically, this experience had also transformed him into a boy whose anus was the most important thing about him. He was granted the experience that most women have when, as girls, we learn with varying degrees of shock that for half the human race our vaginas are the most important thing about us. He had become morbidly conscious of that hidden aperture, both that it was a potential area for sexual pleasure (which could be commanded against his will) and that it had been stolen from him and made public in an extremely painful way.

Purdue experienced deep and corrosive abjection. He had been raped by his male parent, betrayed by his female parent, experienced his anus made public and denied remedy. Still another dark aspect of his experience had been his feminization. I do not want to suggest that feminization is a bad thing. Certainly, no one (who has been born female) should object to its many pleasures. I grew up enjoying being female and taking pleasure, as mere fun or as delight, in the many trajectories of becoming feminine. Purdue had been born as, and was raised as, a boy.

The human anus is massively over-determined with multiple taboos regulating the places, methods and conditions of excretion as well as the possibilities for sexual excitement. Like the eyes or, indeed, the genitalia, the anus is a mythological part burdened with legend and story. Both its possibilities and its prohibitions weigh upon the mind and, even if always in silence, pull upon consciousness. During anal intercourse, at least when it is against his will, the male is transformed. When the male anus is raped it is made into a substitute for the vagina. This seems the least one can say about an evil (unwilled, non-consensual) act. Purdue never overcame his

awareness that he had been being both raped and regendered, by the rape, into a girl. After his confession that morning in the park, he said many times that his father and uncle had treated him as a girl. It was like a poison arrow, embedded in his mind, that he was unable to withdraw. Later in life, in the time I knew him, he experienced less pain and humiliation, but he was unanchored, denied bearings, forced into false roles. And no role was more false than his self-punishment and retribution.

The world has bubbles: impenetrable, inexperiential, secret places. The world-bubble Purdue inhabited had become as spare and stark as a harsh judgment. Like a Beckett novel, it opened before him onto angular, bleak vistas.