

Letter from Aaron to Miriam

(Waddington)*

1. Miriam my sister
snow white with leprosy
for daring to speak
against our brother
Moses' marriage
you have learned
the terrible lesson
and write me lamenting
the *ragged promiscuity*
of life outside
the *only decent*
human way to love
perhaps to live.
2. I reply with one
of my *summer letters*
(my brother is slow
of tongue and often
I must speak for him
performing signs
in the sight of the people)
in exile here
on the pacific side
of the country
of nations

trying to imagine
your Ethiopian
mailman poking
these words one
by one through
your broken letter
box before the sun
has run the day to rags
in *tall Toronto*.

3. Open-eared tonight
 I listened at the window
 to fanfares (male/
 female) blown
 transparent on your glass
 trumpet—*no miracles*
but the last of death and loss—
 and heard your not entirely
 innocent heralds
 of order and degree
 prescribe historic remedies
 to cure the desperate silence
 of my brother's
 state: my own plague
 stricken voice recovers
 strength, recalls
 enraptured red sea shore
 dancing, the heat and timbrel
 tongued air trembling
 with crystalized songs
 of *our blind sickness cured.*

You give my tainted mouth
 permission to repeat
 what your privileged
 royal feet retread:
 that categorically
 canadian (not jewish
 or ukrainian) imperative
 to celebrate
 private grief privately
 renouncing unsuccessful word
 plays that make a public
 spectacle of suffering
 which only the suffering
 take for real—the rest
 not at all.

4. The glass tales
you attach to swans
set floating
on silicates of sound
common sense
splinter into feathered
claws, and your bitter
flights of song
sometimes dip their wings
in sour narcotic
syllables, mumbling
numb the pain
of private loss and public
gain—all those promises
made, forgotten and betrayed
for no real purpose
except the poet's spite
against the poem.

5. Across the rockies
and the prairies
which like the years
enable you to measure
the distance between
poems, you practice letter
writing and profess
love. I would like
to nod in/come to
some agreement and lament
with you the trivial
round, the ironic task
we have in common
with the dark deliverer
of sun-bleached mail:
express consolation.

6. No golden serpent
whispering secrets
but rod-rigid it lies
unwelcome
on your well-trodden mat
my ancient epistle
petulant and lumpy
like unblown glass
until you go to work
coiling and trundling
rolling and recomposing
it in the furnace
of recurring unsuccess
driving it to heats
no human heart
can stand and by means
the mind of the people
clamouring for a new
and leading light
to worship cannot under
stand; but there
in the open air you shape
the talismen
blown *open-eyed in pure
transparency*
meaning nothing
more than what the
postage signifies.

7. Now when you throw
your timbrel down
and listen to the distances
between us and the poems
blown to the pacific
from the morning roar
of traffic in Toronto

drowning out the privacy
made in peace on paper
what can you do, dear sister,
but curse the delicate
menageries that no more
keeps mailmen from your paint
peeling door than the neighbor's
fat and lazy labrador?
What can you do but cry
out alone or in letters
to me and the rest of them
against the rags and tatters
of our rented promiscuity
in a rage of aging distress
answering only in May
the winter words
I sent you six months ago?

8. Music maker/law
breaker/love taker
Miriam what amulet
can you imagine against
the pain—brazen
instruments braying
in the dance hall
of despairing middle age?
Are you afraid no longer
of Moses but of old age
coming on and settling in
like the cold
in North Winnipeg?

Even the silences (
falling like shards
like hail stones
on the tin roof
of the tabernacle
when your girlish songs
die into the distances
between you and me
on the other side
of that imperfect
continental divide
through which the empty wind
whistles tunes true
and tactless) rattle
bones in no particular
key or mode, muffled
by the unsettling dust
of those indiscriminate
grave markers.

9. I speak as one
whose ears, deafened
by the cries of a stiff
necked people demanding
gods they can lay their hands on
and feel, still ring
with the strong lip
of acclamation
for that guilt-ridden idol
I made you but whose mouth
is haunted forever
by the ghost of bitter water
my brother Moses
gave me to drink.

10. The horse and his rider
hath he thrown into the sea.

*All italicized words and phrases are from the poetry of Miriam Waddington.

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