

Inheriting Your Life

Homage to Emma Goldman

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There in the streams of time, Emma, I trust
you will recall the late
November evening when you stepped down
into Toronto, the immense bleakness of the Canadian
National station, the finally stilled twelve-wheeler
panting enormously to your left
in a sour ambiguous light. That early winter:
flowers of faces, warm
hearted and eager, opened
spring to your eyes, a promise
of a new field, and the bundle
they gave you was like a child
already born for you, from you: the pink
roses sent by your newest lover, the one you hoped in
to be an adequate love, at last
the love of fire and peace your hope
in the world, alone in the world,
made real: the pink roses
were laid in your arms. Here for you:
a sort of new world all rose trees, all moments
of a happy struggle to come—for you to hug
and carry under your breasts
down the dark platform into solemn cold
immensities of geometrical stone
and out into the night. Not alone for now but with
your laughing followers, who led you,
surrounded you: I almost see them as if strowing
palms at your feet. That was 1926. But maybe times
mean nothing to you now
in the streams of freedom,
where you play, beyond all betrayals, your spirit
accomplishing everything—the pure
streams of time where you meet
true loves amid love set free. There you come
across no boundaries scarred through paper
into the poor earth, scarred into minds
to stop the divine human body
in borders, bind it, make it seem
a limit to itself.

In your dream—that earth
 more real than ours, our earth
 than this one we've made to plant regiments
 of cleated feet on... in your dream, the daylight face
 of the world we're given, only visible
 to love, if we'd only take it... maybe you're free
 of the absurdity, police, prison, that here
 the beauty of the body is made to be. As you
 were always free
 in a peace surpassing, as you understood,
 even your own understanding. Maybe you're free
 in death from the indifference of distracted
 spiteful swarms of us hurrying
 to make to make a cringing treaty
 with fate, the mediocre. Maybe you are
 accomplishing the free play of forever
 joyful struggle, there in what we call death.
 There invisibly, as once visibly here,
 you are the life
 of this world—life hidden from us,
 people who failed
 to flame up to freedom of love
 from your repeated kindlings. People, hunched bulks
 on loading docks, wrapped in rough
 filthy burlap with twisted hempen bindings,
 machinery or skids of products waiting
 by the cars to be loaded
 and shipped. Waiting not far
 down the tracks from you
 as the new Toronto comrades engulfed you,
 a happy flood, and carried you
 like a spirit in its pinnace, its canoe,
 on a shining spate, a spring rill
 of refreshing flame through a magic land
 to that evening's party.

'Yesterday they swept me off my feet...
 to celebrate the fact that you and I
 have survived,' you wrote to Sasha. Later: 'A table
 beautifully set', as in a legend, an enchanted castle,
 'and the people presented me
 with a wristwatch, the first in my life.
 People in Europe are dead
 to the lot here. They took ten years
 off my shoulders.'

I met Emma Goldman first in a dream.

Not dreams shifting in the dark but the dream,
with eyes suddenly open, the one
of hunger and homelessness all around
suddenly appearing in the midst of the flowering world
of happy childhood. Dream of bondage opening in the dream,
freedom. But which is the dream? Or must both be
the total dream? The dream in me was terror
at the prison house, the human-made world,
and the dream was the fire-fountaining
image of being...being given,
being let be. Left to be
together because let alone
by the termite armies of wardens
with no imagination of any thing to do
but to enlist me, march you,
cage up all, impose the gift of
idiot rule.

Freedom: the image of being

let be. What is
 that image? A world a garden
 that is more than garden, for why
 a garden at the start? I love a garden. I would not
 impose my love. There are many I love who want
 some other fruit of the love of earth,
 fruits I've scarcely tasted. Does the hunter on bare feet
 look back in tears to some garden? Was Eden
 a garden? Let there be also the wild land
 of milk and honey. Pure place for the making
 of all human goods: many gardens,
 all gardens possible, for those who conceive
 that excellence. Dream land
 of meadows and forests, factory-ravaged
 perfect land of my birth racked
 by big industry, paltry ambition. Or the land
 of mountain passes for trekking alone through peaks
 from the coast to the plains—O ice in your lungs,
 eagles circling beneath your bleeding feet
 but here in the real, the dream, you will not fail
 though you fall and your frozen body is examined
 by scientists in an alien time. No, beyond death the adventure
 always ends in the flowering of the adventure.
 Land of tundra, muskeg blooming—bistort,
 starflower, arnica blossoms...land for standing alone
 or with a small band to gather the coming in
 of the geese in great sky-arrows, their haggard,
 stony music, echoes as from a cavern in the sky
 in the warm beloved frigidity of spring. To live
 and make
 as you desire. According to the image
 of what you have worked and managed
 to have the heart to love.
 What is that? No one knows
 but you if you'll find it patiently
 savagely looking in your heart. Everyone has
 groped for a tree bole to steady himself,
 searching for the moon, looking up
 through oak leaves, everyone has shaded
 her dazzled eyes,
 and has received it, its visit—the sun
 rising on the ocean or on the treetops,
 Or was that not the sun but *the great white bird of light*
 or a goddess that we saw walking
 on the wave crests, the leaf crests? All

have glimpsed it, none have seen it except in the dream
they scarcely dare. I met Emma Goldman
in that dream.

You are a life's companion, Emma. I can't remember
 a time before I knew some fragments
 of your story
 to shelter me. You were a Cyclopean trace
 in a scurrying country of automatons. Rumors of you
 seemed in those days a ruin left by ancient
 titans—the true humans, people of the dawn. Once
 they were here, and built, and then left
 tumbled stones—but they were here
 once! They existed. To those stones a boy
 could escape and dream there, sheltered
 in the lee and shadow and legend
 of a broken column, a toppled altar.

That was

what fell to me in my home town,
 Niles, Ohio, birthplace of the president
 William McKinley and I was told
 “in my cradle”, as they say, he had ben murdered
 by “an anarchist inspired by Emma Goldman”. What
 was an anarchist to a four-year-old?
 Who was Emma Goldman?

Then soon I began

to know. Through the demeanings
 and lies of the accounts I could glimpse
 and love you. I won't tell the story now—
 the story you know well, of a quest
 that as it travels through nothingness produces
 the enchanted kingdoms around it,
 the sites, the earth of the adventure. It arises
 in a heart that longs. *Where do they come from,
 a heart that longs, a stream that purls,
 a bird that sings?* The body may sit poised while the heart
 traverses forests, meadows and seacoasts, and comes
 to castles flying oriflammes, to broken chapels:
 that vision, kernel of love, seeming still
 in the heart's contemplation, will explode one day
 in the struggle to break open to the gift
 of everyday freedom for all.

I won't tell

the whole long quixotic chaotic romance
 of my growing close to you. But one day we arrived,
 my love and I, here in Toronto
 to live here, scarcely recalling our scarce knowledge

that you had worked and raged, loved and considered,
in these same streets. Here one day we were charged,
with the task of writing the book
of your presence here. Here we found, searching,
that we could follow
you work here, your days, your hours. Here...

(That word, here, beloved to me, with its sound of quiet
wind gathering up the scent
of woods and prairies, the sound of a step
in dry duff or wet malm, always rings to me
as a bell of earth and fire—I love it: Here, here, hear:
be here, listen, look but then close your eyes
and hear what is said here.)

Here, you, Emma, like a gliding
stubborn seed, angry but grateful at every peremptory
gust the grabbed you up and swept you
elsewhere, always elsewhere...loving it, you made
each elsewhere a new here.

In Toronto you had lived the veneration
for the true human you had borne
in Kovno, Rochester, Pittsburgh, Moscow,
London and Saint-Tropez, Madrid and Barcelona. Did it ever
blossom? Let me recall
two small twin flowers. In Blackwell's Island
Penitentiary, thrown in that rusting
pot-iron manmade hole for a speech you gave
in the country of free speech,
you learned nursing and were grateful
to the government for that year. That gratitude
an irony, a sarcasm, and still a pure
grace of gratefulness from one who could transform
bitterness to hope: that miracle. And how better
to think of you than as a nurse, a midwife, a lover,
a mother. You said it yourself, to Berkman,
writing in final disappointment, final exultation
to the one above all, the one for all life long
you had hoped in, to be the adequate love,
the one who most helped and loved you, the one
who most failed: 'the one
treasure I have rescued
from my long and bitter struggle
is my friendship with you... I know of no other value,
whether in people or achievements, than your presence,
the love you have aroused, in my life.
You were lacking often, you harsh man, in comprehension
of my actions, the motions of my soul
that moved them. But that is nothing to the force
of your voice since I first heard it
in Sach's café, *your voice, your voice, your voice*
that I hear now and I have heard through half
this century of bitter clamorings from shops
and jails and tombs. That first astonishment,
first great love, that sudden
advent of your voice: I hear it now—it's in
that moment I was born, am born, am borne along
invincible through all winds,
a woman, mother, comrade, friend. Men
come and go in my long life but you my dearest
continue and remain
forever.'

Then she had no more hope
of their union and had to pull down an utter
darkness between them
to thwart her desire, end distraction, be again
concentrated on the task, struggle, life,
and go on as someone who carries a lost love
as a true and vanished world
into a loveless scar, today, a smoking
devastation, field of wounded faces
with lolling tongues, eyes staring out of cracked frames, seeing
what passes but not caring,
or blind—who can tell? ‘The fact is,
dearest,’ she had written, ‘we are fools. We cling
to an ideal no one wants. And I am
the greater fool. I go on eating my heart
and poisoning my life in the attempt to rouse
the people. If only I could close my eyes! I see,
I cannot help but see
my futility and yet I can’t let go.’ There it was
in 1934, the cry, the sentence of the perpetual
outcast wanderer, *I can’t*
go on, I’ll go on, the fundamental song:
poverty of generosity, the unremitting holding out
of the gift despised—hope against hope,
hope beyond hope a silent power,
indomitable enduring, action in impossibility
that brings the strange birth
under the only star: freedom to love
in any moment. The only form
of progress. The word
that makes the changing world and looks at it
and pronounces what it has pronounced already
in birds and beasts and flowers and men, pronounces this
over again, in words: *It is good!* This exultation
in life: why did we bury it? Was it only a bone
of our own skeleton? Will it live again?
Was it a seed? Unless it dies
and falls into the earth, can it never
bloom in living gold and give a home on earth
to the birds of the air, now living homeless,
naked glory, travelling on their plumes in the air?

You remember Saint-Tropez, poor fishing village,
beautiful gruesome legend, where the head
of martyred Tropez had landed: Nero's men had cut it off
and put it in a rotten boat
with a dog and a rooster
and that trinity had drifted on the middle sea
in the sunshine, the paradisaal breezes
to strike in this gulf, and give its name
to the place where the playground
of commercial nudity
would be erected later. Here you absorbed
all the beauty of the earth you hungered for
in splendor of cliffs and sea, in the poor people
taking joy in every
movement and moment of the day
that flows to us. In them, the perfect human—never
perfect in power, always in the blooming
anarchy of their lives, faith in life, hope
in the present day and the expected hard welcome
tomorrow. So progress exists! It existed
here in the sun, the fisheries, bread
on the docks at dawn, lacing the selvedges at dusk,
with the children all around
in the evening, the first stars, the last supper
of that day. Always there is the chance
to make a decision for love.

You found the perfect human—happiness!—
 in those lives mounted, as if small, but vast
 as a magic gem in a setting
 of incomparable nonhuman glory. Our life, so often
 curbed, bribed, harried, whipped to abet
 its own restriction. But here, it escaped,
 it leapt up. Here in action, word and relaxation
 was the rhythm of true work, rhythm of life,
 one with the joy of the planets and seasons, effort
 and leisure, production
 and play, idleness and natural
 stewardship, one with the air of beauty
 that had surrounded you
 in your desire, in your glimpses
 of desire's fulfillment, since girlhood. You had always
 lifted your avid mouth and nostrils
 to that air out of the stink
 of factories: to the dreamland—the cleanly human earth,
 clean forests, waters, hills and meadows
 where you saw people move freely to fish,
 plant, reap, cook, and eat, and laugh. Always
 you heard them—you heard us—exclaiming
 over the newborn and the dying. You watched us
 sharing *the splendor and misery*
of being women and men.
 In the ecstasies of speech, in silent jails,
 in your father's and then your husband's
 narrow house, in starry liberties
 of speech with the comrades, in wasting weeks
 scratching for enough to live on,
 you watched us with what we ignorantly call “unfailing
 love”—a poem with scarcely a meaning unless
 we say it looking at you. Here at Saint-Tropez,
 in a home of your own, a gift from your friends,
 the cottage Bon Esprit, generous spirit, you lived apart
 and patiently, unremittingly you wrote and grasped
 your life and the present
 realities of life of the people, and then returned
 to Canada to live them more.

To Toronto you returned
 from Russia, the betrayal, the prison house,
 and from England, the cold inertia as of a dead
 physical system, final entropy
 of an empire of logic, time transformed
 by pale figures to money. To Toronto you returned
 from the France of the joy of life
 and the abrasions of Berkman, then his death...
 Sasha dead!—a suicide because of age's pain
 added to life's. To Toronto you returned
 from your rebirth in Catalonia, brief seed
 of the free community of equals, and from
 its murder. You returned to here, to more harried scratching
 for poor means, more frantic work to save
 the harassed exiles. You returned here
 to proclaim the defeated
 forever unconquered, those who love comrades
 and liberty more than life. Here you too slipped
 unconquered into defeat: the stroke
 in Toronto returned you to helplessness,
 helplessness of a child, rage at your engagement,
 moments of peace returning on your bed, immobile
 amid the busy love of your many lovers
 appalled sometimes at your tears. You died. So strange,
 the silence that all at once came: you were gone,
 the star of a planet system of fervor. Gone
 the excitation—joy!—you caused to burst and shine
 from inert bodies, our selves. Dis-
 heartened, we fell
 silent, fell apart, went wandering off
 each alone, *like someone who has come
 to a favorite bench for a rendezvous
 with a lover who does not arrive. We looked
 all around, waited...only silence. Then sadly
 we went away.*

Later—today!—we returned
as you had. We returned on a day
that is every day, the day we begin
to hear you again. You never died,
you were one now as then in the peace
of loving fellowship with that power
that moves freely in each thing, drawing all time
together. It shows its face—love—so that we live now
in our buried
interior and final splendor. Our betrayal,
defeat and self-defeat, our squalor: that too
present to you, Emma,
always now
in its inner greatness you saw, its beauty
that it has never yet possessed or seen: a seed that is
the tree already while only
a dry seed. You arose to me again
out of martyrdom, as you first rose
out of the witnesses in death
of the Haymarket. You were taken from Toronto, by train
as you had come, to lie in Chicago
with those martyrs you never met,
but they spoke to you alive and became your love
in the words of comrades. They were
passed down, as we say. You took life
from that life. I never met you, Emma,
you were seven years dead, what they call dead, when I
was born, what they call born. But you were passed down
to me and I followed you. I would pass along
the presence of you. Let me
emerge
out of my knowledge of you into life,
out of your life as you did out of the rage
and peace of those seven courtly men
judicially murdered so long ago
and alive in Chicago. Let me live that way
with you here in this place where the ancient
living people's fishing posts still stand
in our dream, in the fecund pure rivers
in the world to come, Tkaronto.

Notes

Passages in single quotation marks are paraphrases of remarks in letters by Goldman quoted in *The World's Most Dangerous Woman: A New Biography of Emma Goldman* (2001) by Theresa Moritz and Albert F. Moritz. Verbatim quotations of the three passages, in order, appear on p. 63, pp. 152-3, and p. 151.

Passages in italics are paraphrase translations or direct quotations from the poetry of Juan Ramón Jiménez, Octavio Paz, William Blake, Samuel Beckett, and the Book of Genesis.

In the last three lines of the poem, “fishing posts” refers to a meaning of the name Tkaronto. It is thought to designate the wooden poles that native peoples erected in the local rivers as an element of their fishing techniques.