

‘The Very Worst Ache / Is Not Knowing Why’: Remembering Madame Cluny

Karen Holmberg

i.

*Il pleure dans mon cœur It's raining in my heart
Comme il pleut sur la ville; As it rains in the village;*

Out of the blurred scenery of sophomore year, one moment steps forward in its original limpidity: being called before a blackboard obscured with clouds of dust to recite the Verlaine poem Madame Cluny required we know *par coeur*. Lightheaded with stage fright, I awaited my turn. As she interrupted to enunciate a bungled word or prod an amnesiac forward, I scrutinized her face for irritation or impatience, but it remained flawlessly neutral as the face of Blind Justice. When my turn came, she tilted her head intently, rewarding me with a faint, beatific smile. To reach the few of us who were capable of reverence before the mystery she was willing to endure many barbarities against the French language, like a priest who expects most of his flock to stumble, yet keeps his eye on this or that pure one.

I was still in that blessed age when memorizing required little effort, as if the folds of my brain were lined with magnetic tape. Verlaine's poem became a sort of mantra, the words conjuring in my mind a small, exquisitely decorated chamber unchanging for all eternity, a sanctuary from the wind tunnel velocity of conversational French. It was a place of intimacy and tender attractions; when the

pronouns and verbs, verbs and objects touched lips, I saw their relations clearly and understood the meaning instantaneously. Reciting the poem was like entering the balmy shelter of a grammatical terrarium: a simplified but complete linguistic ecosystem.

Because the poem was in a foreign language, I experienced the materiality of the language more acutely. Text was tissue – verbal velvet, vaporous silk. At the same time, the language had the sonic textures and dimensions of music – foreground and background, brass and bass, flute and timpani. Sounds transformed into words, words combined into images, images released ideas and emotions in a supralogical, almost synesthetic way, as if the poem exuded hearable fragrances or tastable chords. The mysterious power of sound captivated me, the way it amplified – like the sustaining pedal on a piano – both image and idea. The R's purred like a low fire, the plosive B's and P's of *pleut* and *pénètre* and *bruit* realized the hypnotic, gently percussive quality of rain.

Of course, there were other attractions. The confession of a soul bruised by life's unrelenting monotony, craving hate or love but consigned to a numb in-between, consecrated the situation of adolescence as poetry. Arresting, too, was the illusion that the speaker lived, that the poet's voice – his *cri du cœur*, Mme. Cluny called it – would never die. With the matter-of-factness of someone whom little surprises, she had relayed the main points of Verlaine's biography: his alcoholism; his abandonment of wife and child; the rampage

of jealousy in which he shot his lover, Rimbaud, in the wrist; the absinthe drinking and mental illness; his poverty; his death at 51. Eclipsing these dramas was the discipline of the art, the full mastery of the poetic resources, rendering beauty that could last as long as humans draw breath.

I was writing poems too, enshrining in the transparent casket of the sonnet my dread of death and insignificance, or the numbness that would sometimes drop its disorienting shroud over my attachments and affections. Writing poems returned sensation to the numbed parts of the self, as if mastery of language metered out feelings that might otherwise overload the voltage gates of heart and mind. As I labored to create the effect of *always-been*, my own language became strange to me; each word – handled, turned, arranged – acquired arcane luster. The ultimate test of fluency in any language is poetic mastery; without really being aware of it, I was aspiring to this state, losing time, often waking from the poem to find the trees outside my window backlit by a greenish light. It was dawn, somehow, time to get ready for school; below me, I heard the slap of keys and the cheery *ding!* as my father, a biology teacher, typed up an exam at the kitchen table. I wondered at the feel of being: at once exhausted and restored.

ii.

*Quelle est cette langueur
Qui pénètre mon coeur?*

*What is this languor
That sinks into my heart?*

The hour a day I spent in Mme. Cluny’s class had a voluptuous tedium. We were on a pilgrimage to fluency, a destination so distant that it wasn’t yet possible to become excited. However, by the end of my junior year I had learned enough French to read Maupassant and Flaubert, although I hadn’t been conscious of especial effort on my part or of any distinct pedagogical system. One moment Mme. Cluny would be declaiming “LE LA LES devant LUI LEUR devant Y devant EN devant le verbe!” like a grammatical Jean d’Arc, helping us keep the ranks of objects and adverbial pronouns in order. Then, her gaze fixated on someone in the back row, she would masticate with bovine frankness until, broken by our titters, the violator slunk to the wastebasket and spat out his gum. And then, as if the hierarchies of grammar had reminded her of them, she would describe the telescoping marble cloisters of the tenth century abbey in Cluny, France, where her family’s descendants were from.

In fact, she looked somewhat like a medieval abbess. She wet-combed her blond, perm-sizzled bangs onto her forehead and temples to frame high cheekbones and wide-set blue eyes, arched like half-moons under fine brows and prominent brow bones. Between her small upper teeth was a gap wide enough to accommodate the tip of her tongue. This versatile gesture could register that she was lost in thought, dismiss some idiocy we had just uttered, or signal a transition in

her class plan. Like many grown women I’d observed, she had adopted a uniform, wearing an A-line navy skirt with a collared shirt, a small scarf wound about her neck and knotted to the side, and, on alternate days, a long-sleeved boat-necked T-shirt with wide culottes.

She tolerated no nonsense. All she had to do was fix a miscreant with her mantis-like stare, and the whole class grew still. And yet, she never demanded ostentatious respect. Radiating a confident acceptance of herself, she invited us into her life, organizing a *pique-nique* under the shade trees on her lawn or telling anecdotes in French about her five year old son. Once or twice a year, she would charter a bus, buy a batch of Broadway matinee tickets at the group rate, and chaperone her friends, students, and senior citizens of her acquaintance to New York City. Mme. Cluny’s bus navigated the streets with the supercilious authority of an ocean liner while she stood in front, pointing out the Empire State Building, the World Trade Center, the Statue of Liberty, Central Park. When my best friend and I stumbled out of *Cats*, wincing at harsh daylight, salt on our cheeks from the tears jerked forth by the high notes of “Memory,” she reacted with nonchalant satisfaction, as if to say, *Enfin, une expérience importante.*

iii.

*Ô bruit doux de la pluie Sweet sound of the rain
Par terre et sur les toits! on the fields, and on the roofs!*

The summer before my junior year, Madame Cluny invited me on a trip to Montreal with the Spanish teacher from my high school and two young women she called her *jeunes filles* who had lived with her as exchange students. I sat between them on the bench seat of her cavernous station wagon, contributing terse, pre-assembled remarks, avoiding the more complex verb tenses and exercising caution with my direct and indirect objects, afraid that I would make a grammatical error and plunge in Mme. Cluny’s esteem. The French girls were large-nosed and small-boned as birds. Whereas I changed into a new outfit every day, they wore the same cotton skirt and cardigan for the entire trip, and never showered, but instead combed a powdered shampoo through their short, mink-fine hair.

The French girls were appreciative and pragmatic, and had the equanimity of fully-formed adults, an interesting contrast to the Spanish teacher in the front seat who gushed about a certain pop singer with a groupie’s giddy relentlessness. She was catching a ride with us not to see the rows of tiny wooden crutches belonging to the miraculously cured pilgrims in the Oratoire Saint-Joseph du Mont-Royal, but because she had a back stage pass to the pop star’s show in Montreal. As she displayed her libidinous euphoria before a student, the child of a colleague, no less, I felt nothing but scorn. She had betrayed my hope that we would outgrow the hormone-fueled narcissism of adolescence. I stole

furtive looks at her vacuous expression and wandering gaze, comparing it to my teacher's clear brow and pragmatic mien, noting how Mme. Cluny occasionally would duck her chin and sweep the horizon restlessly with her eyes, repressing her impulse to change the subject the way one politely represses a belch. Even then I marveled at Mme. Cluny's tact, her sheer tolerance for this varied assemblage of flawed people, each encased in the amniotic sac of her own world.

We broke the ten hour drive into two days, spending the night on the living room floor of her friend's house, just over the Canadian border. I slept little, stimulated by the novelty of the mundane but unfamiliar: the texture of the sculptured carpet on my cheek; the moonlight, distinctively Canadian, that shone through the windows; behind the extreme silence of the house, the barely audible creaking of its bones. But Mme. Cluny fell asleep instantly, as if she possessed some secret switch; *il faut bien dormir*, she said, and her breathing shifted deeper.

In the middle of the night, I woke. Strong moonlight lit Mme. Cluny's face, only a foot from mine. She slept with her mouth slightly open; I could see the wet texture of her tongue and its slight involuntary movements. With her eyes closed, the brow bones seemed more prominent, and the skin of her lids lay gently over the spheres of her eyeballs. The tips of the lashes appeared dusty, like the antennae of moths. Her teeth were the pale yellow of ivory, small and clean; the gap between the front teeth gave a child-like impression. Her skin had the fine pitting of weathered marble; a flush tinged the cheekbones. Her lips were slightly chapped. I had never examined the human face so closely, so uninhibitedly. I remember being aware that she must be dreaming, that inside her unremarkable body was a unique imagination and an emotional landscape that could never be replicated. I had a flash of what the world might look like to her. Moreover, I realized that whenever I was examining her in class, she could examine me also. That anyone could. That out in the world there were thousands of Karens encased in memory, or briefly held in a passerby's gaze, each distinct from *me*. For a disorienting moment, I looked back at myself through her eyes. I looked quite small, as if I were viewed through the wrong end of a telescope, but perfectly formed. I realized that my adult self would coalesce out of what I already was, that Mme. Cluny still contained a girl.

iv.

*Pour un coeur qui s'ennuie,
Ô le chant de la pluie!* *For the listless heart
O, the song of the rain!*

After my junior year, I saw Mme. Cluny rarely; she had transferred to another school. Advanced French was taught by someone less gifted than Mme. Cluny, who kept a tenuous hold on order by firing off inscrutable, often ribald French *épigrammes*. The elite society of AP achievers was, in many ways, like the 18th century court of

Versailles. Letterman-emulating, Pink Floyd-worshipping, the chief talents they cultivated were irony, parody, and ridicule. Monsieur O tolerated their pranks, allowing them to sing "Comfortably Numb" in class so long as they attempted it in French. Among my peers, strong emotion sincerely expressed seemed unimaginable; an open passion for beauty or ideas could not be risked. When Mme. Cluny left the school, my love of French began to cool, as if the language itself had betrayed me. Since then, I've never underestimated the motivating force of a teacher's unselfconscious, ardent love for a subject.

Almost forty years later, I can still recite the Verlaine poem; it still conjures Mme. Cluny before me. I still hear her voice, fluting and earthy, somewhat like the song of the red-winged blackbird: *Repetez après moi*, she would say, and we'd fling back her song in a graceless starling chorus. She died over twenty years ago, yet only now, belatedly, has the catastrophe of her death caught up to me. Her death had seemed bearable; after all, there are many people in our lives we are profoundly separated from, whom we never expect to see or hear from again.

v.

*Il pleure sans raison There's no cause for tears
Dans ce coeur qui s'écoëure. In this self-sick heart.*

I was twenty-six, had just entered an MFA program in poetry, when a childhood friend called to tell me Mme. Cluny was dead; a neighbor boy had taken a rifle from her husband's gun cabinet and killed her fourteen-year-old son, then lay in wait for her. My face went numb; my hands went numb as though the blood withdrew. My whole body cringed, awaiting a pain that never came. I inventoried my memories of her, yet could not accept that she no longer existed; she became encapsulated in my past, and in my past she continued to explain the subjunctive tense, how an action can exist outside of time. Her crouching over her only child, her realization he was dead, her nearly instantaneous annihilation – I didn't know how to imagine these events. I hadn't had children; now, of course, I live in fear of that world-altering devastation.

And then, four summers ago, my poetry student took her own life. She was a person so meticulous in her seeing, so sensuously attached to the world, that I couldn't comprehend how she could choose to leave it, or what would attract her to a tool whose only purpose is destruction. As if the grief for one person can unlock the grief for another, as if one loss compounds another, the two deaths converged. Over and over, I imagined a gun blasting apart these tender, tender lives, annihilating in the tiniest fraction of a second the gifts, potentials, and talents nurtured up with love over time. Day after day of glorious sunshine, I walk to my office early in the morning, the only movement the faint stirring of the

leaves, talking to my student, asking her the same thing over and over: *why, why would you go and do such a thing?* As her mother leaves our building with a cardboard box of her only child's office knickknacks in her arms, the dazzling sunshine makes her stumble on the steps. I take her arm to guide her down, remarking at the harsh light, and she winces at the sky, murmuring, "Yes, it's too bright. Shouldn't it be dark?" Compulsively, I reread the twenty-year-old newspaper articles about my teacher's death. The boy who killed my teacher and her son was tried as a man, and is still in prison; his parents' world, too, is darkened and defined by an instant's decision, by a finger's sufficient pressure.

vi.

*Quoi! nulle trahison?...
Ce deuil est sans raison.* *No betrayal, no treason –
It's a groundless grief.*

For months after my student's suicide, I kept waking to the sound of a gunshot. Did I hear it, or dream it? My husband sleeps soundly. I check on my girls, quietly breathing, lips rosy – my flowers, fresh and whole. The night is quiet; a murmur of rainwater in the gutters; not a dog barking; no distant sirens. I met my student every Wednesday for a year; heads together, we looked into the tiny spacious worlds of her poems. Was she just my student? A better term would be *poetry daughter*. As I was, in a way, Mme. Cluny's *filie*.

My student wrote poems about yearning for what is beyond language, writing in the voice of a whaling captain's wife who has received word that her husband's ship has gone down: *When the world ends, and all/our towers crumble/let us take the pennies from our eyes/and sail south, into the place/beyond language*. And then she set her boyfriend's gun to her head, and put herself in the only place that is beyond language. In the same poem, she wrote, *No more letters now, /those slim white fields where I have looked for thee ... I am done with words*. I had assumed this was a dramatic persona. Was she resolving, even then, to die?

Since her death, I've been thinking intensely about the peculiar intimacy between student and teacher. So much is revealed, yet so much still hidden; so much entrusted, yet so much withheld. The relationship sits like a changeable screen between us; it can be darkened, can become a one-way mirror, can be made – in an instant – entirely porous. My student had once confided that she was taking medication for epilepsy, and that it made her feel groggy, and not herself. Perhaps this is true, or perhaps *epilepsy* was a code word, as if making her illness indisputably physiological would lessen its stigma and her shame. She had only had one seizure, she explained, but she didn't want to worry her parents by going off her medication. Impulsively, she asked what would happen if the department chair found out: would her teaching be taken away? I reassured her that a medical condition could not be used as grounds to remove her from the classroom.

But the magnitude of her anxiety struck me then and haunts me now; it seemed out of proportion to the cause. I could feel it around her and between us like a magnetic field. But I did not ask about it.

I received an enigmatic phone call a year before Madame Cluny's death in which she urged me to accompany her and her *jeunes filles* on a trip to New York. It was a conversation most memorable for what went unsaid, for the cryptic, meaning-laden pauses as she sought arguments that would persuade me. A palpable need flowed toward me like current. Was it loneliness? Did her life also have its tedium, its disappointments? Was she trying to resist despair by insisting on a role that had always given her satisfaction? Perhaps, in fact, she was giving me a chance to remove the screen between teacher and student, a chance I did not take. She said goodbye to me somehow sadly. I, too, was obscurely sad, unsettled by her lapse in character. I didn't want to be her student anymore; yet I still needed her to remain my model of adult self-sufficiency, of engagement with a world that, however imperfect, was always interesting.

vii.

*C'est bien la pire peine The very worst ache
De ne savoir pourquoi Is not knowing why*

Near my desk, a red map pin secures a scrap of pale yellow paper to the wall; on it, my student letterpress-printed the opening lines of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: *Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote/The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote/And bathed every veyne in swich licour/Of which vertu engendred is the flour ...* The lines praise renewal, the spring rains that nourish budding flowers. I unpin it. Humidity has lightly curled the paper, and as I smooth it with a finger I retrace the path of the hand that placed each leaden letter, or touched with pleasure the polished surface of the ornaments, set like a floral garland round the text. The fragile paper still exists. Each time I use the press, I see the red ink that dried on the rollers overnight and could not, to her dismay, be cleaned off. While tidying the printing studio this summer, I came across her body of type, a neat lead block bound with white string. I can't bear to distribute the letters back into the drawers. There is so much evidence of her all around us, yet she is gone entirely. A dream has perplexed me, but now, as I hold the narrow slip of paper, the images make sense. My student's parents have invited us to a picnic in a meadow; though a slight sadness lingers like mist over the grass, we all play and race about like children. And at the end, as if to signal the end of mourning, my student's father distributes small bouquets of white flowers, the petals loosening, beginning to yellow, their stems wound in white string. The flowers are casually arranged, as if a large bouquet had been divided into loose handfuls. In the dream his face, which is thin and grief-harrowed, is young again – young and full of happiness. I look again: he has *her* face, the tender curve of

her upper lip, her impenetrable dark irises. The handfuls of white flowers divided from the bouquet are her memento, the part of her each of us keeps in mind.

viii.

Sans amour et sans haine A heart devoid of love or hate
Mon coeur a tant de peine! Still overflows with pain.

A week after my student died, my daughter Lily came home from elementary school, and this is what she said:
Today I was coming down the hall when no one was around and I thought, here I am! I am a SELF; I was made inside my mama and no one like me will ever be made again. And I am – a miracle, because no one else can ever see like me or feel like me or think my thoughts. And she gave that away and left forever and can never

change her mind. Why, Mama, why? Where did her self go? Does she still have a self?

I wanted to answer, yes, she has a self, in part to buffer my child's realization that death returns us to nothingness. And for some time after her death, I *did* feel the press of my student's self upon the world. Even as I write this, I feel the tender pressure of her inside me, of Madame Cluny, too, as if I have taken their essence, memory, and meaning into myself – as if the dead come to inhabit us. Perhaps I wrote this essay to find an answer; for if I could convey Madame Cluny as a character, it would prove that writing is one labor that can deliver us of that haunting pregnancy. I've found a small comfort, and I cling to it, or it clings to me like a burr with the determination to be found over and over again, like the lines of Verlaine's poem, gotten by heart over forty years ago.

David Allan Evans

In Sync in a Shopko Parking Lot

Waiting in the car for my wife, I was listening to songs from the 70s, and paging through my portable *Hamlet*, looking for a favorite passage (part of it already on my lips): when Horatio is telling Marcellus about the sun rising over a hill.

Over the dashboard, I noticed that the beat of one song was exactly in sync with the steps of a man (too far away to hear my radio) as he was walking by me and up the concrete incline to his car. But that was evidently not enough, since my fingers found Horatio's words, and then for a few seconds the man was walking in sync not just with the song but with the way "the morn, in russet mantle clad, Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill."