

Letter to my Daughter

Petruska Clarkson

I am the father in exile whom they call the absent father.

I have wanted to tell you my story, but I could not then, perhaps I cannot even tell it yet.

I never learnt how to tell my own story and so sometimes could not listen to yours my tongue swollen as a gutted fish, my words mute, my gestures clumsy and unwieldy against the creamy white lace of your Sundays and birthdayparties. I shouted when you reached out to me with your little arms, but I had the burden of the traffic and the responsibility of destination for us all and I missed you then as you may miss me now — but I hope not now, simply because it's too late, simply because the words are in another's mouth, simply because we are here together today — on this particular day.

When you were little I told you other men's stories of other men's worlds in other men's words, reading hunched over together with my large blonde forefinger moving slowly under the patterns of black on the white pages until you wrested the meaning from me and the letters and began reading for yourself — and writing too — in time.

I am the father in exile, whom they call the absent father.

I am estranged from the people I love, held in thrall by a bitter Hera who turns the faces of my little ones away from me and shelters in the arms of my sons

saying to me: you the abuser, the enemy the foreigner to our country our country of lilting language and delicate shades of sensitivities in feeling like the blue and green froth of love in a mist in the garden of a morning — the garden which I grew with my green fingers as she yielded to me her fruits and her jewels, her lusciousness of beauty, lasciviousness of lust, the delicacy of her preciousness.

I seeded that garden, planted those trees, pruned these roses and came in for tea and she looked at me in my difference and the distance between us was impossible.

But when you were born, I decked out the hospital in flowers, blue and purple bunches of grapes — Jacaranda flowers in the heat and the fear and the gracelessness as I rushed happy and joyful — a large dog with floppy ears in a white gown — my daughter, I have a daughter, my daughter she who will love me for me for ever and ever as I will love her . . .

I am the father in exile, whom they call the absent father.

They say that I left, but rather I was abandoned. I did try when they played over the dinner table and I was clumsy wanting you to feel my power frightened that you would not and helpless watching the moment spin out —

I got put on a train when I was six years old and she was a shining golden star in my every day, my heart open to her like a window, like a peony, a broken pomegranate and when I cried at night in the dormitory of the silent sullen school, the burning in my eyes bled diamond droplets of shame they laughed and teased and raped me until I shut up and shut down. Finally left her after an endless nightmare of longing and not understanding how she of the golden kisses, the tumbling hair, the secret smells of flowers and fragrant flesh could have done this to me. But since she wanted me to be brave, I was — until they found me shivering behind the barracks

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twenty years later screaming as if hell had gaped as it did when his head, the head of my friend exploded next to me in a brightscarlet carnation being ripped apart and scattered liquidised by the hands of a vicious God. I've never really cried again.

I am the father in exile, whom they call the absent father.

They say I was not there, but rather I was, in a different idiom, a foreign tongue. I held you on my lap like a squirming cloud of life and I wanted to touch you there and there, in all your secret places, lay claim to your being mine, being your first lover, your first love and you jumped into our bed on a Sunday morning, playing on my legs until my hardness hurt me and I shrank inside with loathing for my self, my animal rutting around my princess. I loved your skin, your shoulders in a schoolgirl's uniform, your sudden merriment, your inexplicable enthusiasms, the way you looked at me with such glorious admiration until a new awkwardness came upon us one day — you had been touched by the ancient mothers, the rites of womanhood, red and mysterious, pungent and I was hurt by your breasts budding under my eyes, disturbed and fascinated, too hungry to be allowed near you and I wanted to and I could not, it was forever too far — you would belong to other men or other women even, in this way never to me.

I am the father in exile, whom they call the absent father.

I reached out to you across the gulf of oppositeness, the yearning like a flame-thrower in my heart and missed you somehow when you fell and grazed your knees like speckled eggs of a wild bird, when you came home with your knickers wet because you forgot to go in time, when you first discovered betrayal in the eyes of your friends, the disappointment of a holiday cancelled on an adult's whim — I missed you somehow while being at work with the other men and some women but no children and I got used to their ways of talking and laughing and their ways of being and when I came home you were happy to see me sometimes, but you had made another, separate history.

I am the father in exile, whom they call the absent father.

I am the father flickering in the madness of a war-torn hospital leaving you as a baby.
I am the father whose constant pain needs the insidious anaesthetic of a breastshaped bottle.
I am the father who comes for your nightmare call to comfort you and ends up naked solaced by your sweetness, your compliance, your compassion for my little boy neediness.
I am the father whose face is stern and stone implacable in my authority, being for you as for me, anguished and broken inside, doubt like a corrosive acid eating away at my facade.
I am the father who starves for his children hacking a scrap of living from a barren desert land, cursing myself and your mother for our fleeting and forgettable joys.
I am the father whose bitter marriage spun in barbed vows of custom imprisonment and chafe.
I am the father who travels on business where my value is measured in airmiles and dollars, bringing home presents which can never counterfeit for my daily presence.
I am the father who goes to war or to peace or to preach to other people's children because I have been exiled from the enchanted land and I have forgotten the language of the heart.

Dear daughter, I want you to know that I love you as blossoms love the spring sky, as kingfishers are blue and stars are magical, I love you — mysterious fruit of my body, fragrant flower from my flesh, I love you and have always loved you in the moments of your sadness, your longings, your victories and your laughter. I wish you gentleness and passion, and a good harvest from your ships. I wish you better joy from your sons and your daughters. Sometimes I wanted to reach out to you and my arms were stupid with disuse, my heart quailing with the terrible danger of your close embrace. Look not to the surfaces of me, listen not to the misshapen creature of culture I have become, feel not my anger as against you, my boredom as from your life. You bring me myself in female form. Yet you are you. In truth, you touch me more deeply than any other force on earth, but I do not know how to tell you this. I am the father in exile whom they call the absent father.

I am the first face of the male.

Call me back.