

The Changed Name of God · Steven Harvey

SUDDENLY SNOW, a blanching of air, the nearly weightless bodies, blown high in crosswinds or riding dreary, dreamy paths to the ice-rutted, brown-thatched, mudslicked ground, changing the gray scene, the woolen sky, folded mountains, and endless, herringbone thickets of leafless hardwoods to the white of swirled sheets, and plunging the world into brightness.

Before the snow, I had crunched down the gravel path from my house in a sour mood, hoping to tramp away sullenness. Determined and undirected, I trudged beyond my neighbor's upturned wheelbarrow, the handles pointed with abstract and unfocused deliberateness at nothing overhead. Crossing a culvert, I left behind, or tried to leave behind, news reports of chemical warfare and laser-guided weapons ripping into exhausted and wretched bodies. I trudged on, head down.

"Here endless walks circle about around bottomless dams," the Swedish poet Gunnar Ekeloef wrote, describing the deadness of spirit that we do not walk away from. "Here the days all reflect one monotonous day." I tramped through the grass to a dry hump of land at the lake's margin where I stopped and looked long at the uniformly dimpled surface, the windblown waves, the agitated water shirring at my feet.

Less, the water said gathering into waves, *less*, and *less*.

Then, suddenly, snow.

The flakes, tiny at first but turning heavy and wet, rode strong currents the length of open fields in a dizzying, silver buckshot rush, mounted and scattered in the counterwinds, and settled at last among gray-shafted oaks and shaggy, green-skirted pines, covering, surely, silently, the mulch of the wood's floor and the mud along the roads.

Yes—suddenly snow. "Dying flakes," the poet John Logan calls them in "Spring of the Thief," falling "as mana or as wedding rice about the bronze Christ and thieves." The speaker—Logan, himself, no doubt—leaves a Lenten service feeling melancholy and comes upon statues of Christ and the thieves at crucifixion. It is nearly spring, the "ice is gone from the lake," and the air "altered" from what it was a few months before, but he is struck

by his memory of the same statues in winter when they were half-hidden in a whirl of snow, the flakes “blooming in the light.”

Looking at the statues Logan feels guilty, like a thief himself, and what he sees becomes confused with the memory of a bizarre and humiliating night the winter before in which he revelled naked beneath “the howling January moon” and digging his “fist” into “the cold winter sand,” hid his “manhood” under snow. Someone had to take him home that night, and later he felt shame, wondering who dressed him:

Washed up at some ancient or half heroic shore
I was ashamed that I was naked there
Before Nausicaä and the saints. Before myself.
But who took off my coat? Who put it on?
Who drove me home?

Now, looking at the spring statues but remembering winter, he wants to “confess” or “simply talk” but the doors of the “Mammoth Sacred Heart Church” are locked. What is God’s “winter name,” he asks, as Gunnar Ekeloef had asked before him. “Where is his winter home?”

In the late thirties Ekeloef lived in isolation in “The Yellow Cottage” in Hölo, Sweden, a small town south of Stockholm. It was a “trying time,” he wrote in a memoir, the beginning of World War II and of Finland’s Winter War with the Soviets which broke out in November 1939 after Nordic leaders—meeting only a few miles away—refused to come to the aid of the Finns. In the battle, the Finns were “superb, nay sublime,” Winston Churchill said, their troops on skis outflanking and outmaneuvering an enormous Soviet army that was not supplied well or dressed for the frigid climate, but by February the tide turned and the Soviets fought their way across the Finnish frontier, and captured Vyborg. Finnish blood joined Russian blood in the snow. Within a year, the Nazis answered the Soviet victory in Finland by invading and occupying Denmark and Norway. Sweden alone was free.

What do you do if you are a pacifist in Sweden during the Hitler years? What indeed. You reject your enemies and reject your allies and reject and reject and reject. You go deep into yourself in the hope of finding relief from the great human contradiction—the turning of the bloodied cheek, the

glazed look of the doll falling from a hand, the insanity of tanks. You flee the cities and find a landscape as remote and barren as your inner life, doing so in the cold, wild hope of building on emptiness. You visit hospitals when it snows and listen to the mad, waiting for the heavy, white-bodied snow birds to return.

When the war began, Ekeloef decided that God, like the petal, the swan, and the snowflake, does not—in the face and fist of evil—take sides. He, too, felt like a thief, an outlaw beyond morality at a time when good and evil divided the world, and had come to believe that “the impractical is the only thing practical in the long run.” He retreated to the remote town of Dorotea and tried to become a “useless person.”

Poets are thieves. Logan draws on Ekeloef to write his finest poem; Ekeloef himself spent a good deal of time answering Swedish critics who accused him of relying too heavily on T.S. Eliot. “My poems do not express, do not contain the same thing as his,” he complained. Despite his disavowals, Ekeloef was enamored of Eliot, had “long passages by heart,” could produce translations from memory of the originals, and published Swedish versions of Eliot’s “East Coker.”

As for Eliot—“Poets do not borrow,” he wrote, “they steal,” turning the poet’s lonely quarrel with the world into a lovers’ spat.

In the midst of World War II—with Sweden surrounded by occupied countries—T.S. Eliot defied the German blockade of England and flew to Stockholm for a presentation. Ekeloef traveled across the Swedish countryside during the long polar night to see him. Unfortunately, plans were botched and all that could be arranged was a hurried encounter at the train station. “The same day that Eliot arrived,” Ekeloef wrote, “I took the night train back to Lappland and wasn’t able to meet him.” In the margin of this note his wife added, “except five minutes.” Having squandered the moment on little more than a handshake with Eliot, Ekeloef headed back by train gazing out over the backlit terrain of his beleaguered homeland, the land of the midnight sun.

Among the papers he returned to was the poem “The Swan.” In it life is reduced to a hospital grounds of endless walkways leading nowhere. Flowers withdraw from the touch, closing “their strange petals,” and the prophet is a “woman on a nurse’s arm” who screams “Hell, Devil, Hell” without stopping. Here, the “salmon-colored” walls are so bland, a visual

echo of the “anemic blush” of houses in the suburbs beyond, that they cannot be told apart, spring cannot be distinguished from fall (autumn/spring he calls it) and the geese, startled by aimless passersby, fly up in a rush but don’t know where to go—“To the north? To the south?” The destination doesn’t matter as long as it is far from these endless walkways.

“The Swan” is Ekeloef’s picture of the institutionalized terror of our regimented lives, the illness of bureaucratized souls, and the obscenity all real speech eventually turns to when lives are regulated. Created out of the sadness of Finnish heroics and the isolation of one in spiritual exile from his enemies and his people, it contains the ennui of botched encounters and missed connections. It is Ekeloef crossing the barren, Lappland landscape by train, the sun forever low on the horizon. “Hell, Devil, Hell!” it shouts, the words a hollow echo, an empty lament—and yet. . . .

And yet, the poem ends this way:

A freshness lives deep in me
which no one can take from me
not even myself.

“Midwinter spring is its own season,” Eliot wrote.

“*En friskhet*”—a freshness.

We know the fury—fury at nothing, fury at nothingness, fury that the world we look on today, its rocks and stones and trees, its wars and deaths and loves, is the same as yesterday. There is no story behind this anger, no conflict or plot worth mentioning, no reproach from Barbara who was a bride twenty years ago and keeps the colors in my world even now, no hard words between us on this gray day, only the quotidian and its attendant ennui. The tilt of her head, endearing before, is only a tilt of her head this morning and her words, always a surprise, surprise now in the same way.

Endless walks, walks circle, circle around, around bottomless, bottomless dams, dams endless. I pace the floor in front of the computer screen, my tread wearing familiar patterns in the carpet until I notice what I’ve often, uncomprehending, seen, my foot coming down on the silvered print it left only moments before and—that’s it!

I grab a scarf from the tottering coat rack, step into mud shoes, and head out, slamming the back door behind me, aware of Barbara in the picture

window above, cradling her coffee cup in her hands as she does every morning in the manner I know as home and happiness but bear now as a mystifying burden, afraid to look back over my shoulder, stumbling as if drunk, though not drunk enough, down the path away from the maddening comforts of all that I love, past junk and mud and weeds and graves, a vaporous mumbled nonsense—“Hell! Devil! Hell!”—floating behind me in the cold like a scarf and the dog trotting, oblivious, behind, damn tail wagging.

Then lake.

Then darkness.

Then, suddenly, snow.

What is the changed name of God in our time? Sometimes a walk around the lake in spring helps, the surface, locked in opaque glitter all winter yielding at last to water, to the reflective, the passive, the powerful. “Oh I have walked around the lake,” Logan writes,

when I was not alone—
sometimes with my wife have seen these swans
dip down their necks
graceful as a girl . . .

The lake is St. Joseph’s in South Bend where Logan taught, and it is visible over his shoulder in a photo taken in the early sixties, about the time that the poem was written. It is late fall or early spring in the picture, the trees bare, leaves scattered on the ground, and Logan, dressed for teaching in a tweed jacket, tie, dark slacks, and white socks, sits on a stump, his hands folded calmly—almost demurely—in his lap. He looks energetic and tense, more like the scientist he studied to be than the poet he was. Behind him the lake extends implacable and white—like the sky, like his forehead.

During one autumn walk around the lake a student, “found a perfect hickory shell” in the fall leaves and put its “white bread” into Logan’s palm. Most of the time, though, Logan was the teacher that he could not help being. “I have much for which to thank John,” wrote a student who was with him during these years. “He taught us self-amazement.” Self-amazement was, unfortunately, the one lesson that Logan could not teach to himself. He drank too much, lost his family, and eventually lived alone on

a houseboat. “With myself again,” he writes and adds, parenthetically, “we hardly speak.”

What is God’s winter name? The lonely, exiled, war-weary Swedish poet, who had himself gone beyond cynicism, put a hickory shell in Logan’s open hand in answer—the answer to all who find that the unclean spirit has returned to the well-swept house:

Ekelöf said there is a freshness
nothing can destroy in us
—not even we ourselves.
Perhaps, that
Freshness is the changed name of God.

Freshness. On the tape of Logan reading his poem aloud, the word sounds brisk and brittle—all short “e’s” and sibilant “s’s”—all *friskhet*, freshness.

“Hey look!” I shout, peeling off my coat in front of the picture window. I have just finished running up our road, eager to tell Barbara about the snow. “It’s coming—whoa!—its really coming down hard now!” I say, watching the snow dropping in fat wet flakes. I hear Barbara, off in another part of the house, singing. Suddenly the music stops, and I know she is watching too.

They are “bread,” John Logan says, they are “mana,” they are “bodies.” Each flake, born of sky, grows by its clinging design until it is too sluggish to ride the winds and can do nothing but fall on carhood, fence rail, and bicycle seat and skid and dissipate in a rush, or drift dreamily into grass and mulch and puddles and soak in with a sigh. Our window fills with them—a vision of verticals—oaks and pines and endless columns of white as all that rears skyward finds a way back to earth and is remade from the being of God into the image of God, the doily-hexagonal-star shape planted on a hickory stump like a generative kiss of death, a kiss that is first substance, then shape and finally image on the way like us all to something new and something very, very old.

“Look,” Barbara says kneeling beside me, gazing over the sofa back at a window of white. “They’re big as two-by-fours!” I sink back on the pillows and, seeing her there, can’t help smiling. I take in the nap of her sweater, the tilt of her head, and the way her fingers cradle the empty coffee

cup—all the familiar stuff—but see them now as if for the first time. *Two-by-fours!* Where did she get that? I ask myself, in love all over again, the white wonder whirling about us.

When Odysseus washed up on the island of the Phaiakians and confronted the princess Nausicaa and her maidens, he was naked except for “a single branch of olive, whose leaves might shield him.” His hair matted and skin mottled from days and nights asleep in the sand, he delivered his plea to the band of teenage girls, frightening the giddy maidens away. Only Nausicaä remained, and Odysseus had nothing to make her forget his naked body but his speech.

When Odysseus spoke, we are told, his words “poured forth like snowflakes.”

Everywhere the small boats of the yard—acorn caps, flower pots, glider seats and handlebars—carry cups of snow in their hollows. The bird feeder lifts its open face of white to the gray sky, the clothesline hauls snowy lumps across the garden, the stump wears its silly cap, and rhododendron along the bank stand stiffly in their ice epaulettes. The path down the slope to the creek digs a meandering curve of white through gray trunks, and the creek itself—stone-tossed, rock-churned, and foamy—rushes under icicles, like a thief getting away.

En friskhet.

“Statues only serve,” one critic has written, “when their massive, self-contained materiality is denied.” Only when the statue sheds its stone does it awaken. Midwinter spring is its own season. So John Logan—cold, drunk, and weary—takes his place then and forever among the barren statues of thieves awaiting the gratuitous transformation of “the bronze Christ’s brow and cheek.” It is spring. It is winter. It is God’s winter home where—now or never and always—snow blooms.