

Len Krisak

THE CHANGING OF THE NAMES

Was nothing like the changing of the guard,
Nor was it really needed to protect
The innocent or wretchedly ill-starred.
The care was all for what the lawyers said,
Who never knew the living from the dead—
Those envoys out of time and time's neglect.

Their faces were their names, which were their lives,
And who was I to jettison so much
Of what the world thinks nominal and strives
To strip them of, lest love become a libel?
Our foxing yearbook was my holy Bible;
Their faces are the faces I would touch.

Thinly-disguised, their apparitions haunt
The hand that trafficked in a *nom de plume*
Of sorts, sometimes a *nom de guerre*. They taunt
Me with the alias of who I am
To them. They call me coward for my sham,
My shame at what I thought—once—to exhume.

CRYSTAL LAKE

It's hardly strange that each time I go by
It's not the same; it changes, naturally.
And yet the name becomes a kind of lie
When Crystal Lake's clear physiognomy
Absorbs the moiled light of the morning sky.

Across the surface of the water lies
Scant evidence of any glass but black.
And that is when I come to realize
What presence Crystal Lake is giving back
To mock the witness of my trusting eyes.

The well-dark green of oaks like massing towers
Has proved upon the lake's now wrinkling face
The scope and depth of all its dyeing powers.
The color of the leaves has stained this space,
Yet slicked it, too; it will be black for hours.

A pond upon reflection, Crystal Lake
Is small enough for anyone who sees
It in this scumbled moment not to take
Its waters ruffled by the merest breeze
For troubled depths, compounding a mistake.

Better by far not falling in that trap,
But seeing that such elements as tease
This visage to a film like kitchen wrap
Are nothing so malevolent. The trees
Have only coated metaphor a map.

AUTHORS' CARDS

With four of each of thirteen scribbling men,
“Fish” was the only game that you could play.
“Do you have any Alfred Tennyson?”
We’d ask. Or Cooper, Hawthorne, Irving, Scott
(No Dickinson. No Eliot. No Austen).
Maybe there was a Poe somewhere in there,
But time has written off the years. And then,
The *quaintness* of that pack—so recherché,
So twee. (And honestly, not that much fun.)
Besides their pictures, words were what we got
To edify our forming minds. From Boston,
London, and New York—the places where
Belles lettres throve—rose all these great men, lists
Of works lined up below their cardboard faces.
And yes, their shuffled suits have left their traces,
Though I may well have gotten some things wrong.
Meanwhile, stiff luminaries loom through mists,
And I persist, though I may not belong.

THEOPHILE GAUTIER:
ON THE PROMETHEUS OF THE MADRID MUSEUM

Hélas! Atop the Caucasus, he's crucified—
That Titan who robbed heaven just for us. It's he
Who mocks the gods from high up on his calvary,
Taunting Olympus' king . . . who thunderbolts his pride.

At least nymphs hang upon his rock at eventide,
Down at its base. He writhes for his audacity.
Tears in their eyes, those grieving nymphs come from the sea
To tell Prometheus of the grievous tears they've cried.

Ribeira, cruel as Jove—no, twice as cruel—you make
His gaping flanks, from monstrous gashes, gush with blood.
His guts cascade in scarlet gouts. They spill. They flood.

You chase away the sea-nymph chorus. In their wake,
Alone in deep black shade, he howls, but knows no shame,
And is sublime—that thief who stole the fecund flame!

SUR LE PROMÉTHÉE
DU MUSÉE DE MADRID
—SONNET

Hélas ! il est cloué sur les croix du Caucase,
Le Titan qui, pour nous, dévalisa les cieux !
Du haut de son calvaire il insulte les dieux,
Raillant l'Olympien dont la foudre l'écrase.

Mais du moins, vers le soir, s'accoudant à la base
Du rocher où se tord le grand audacieux,
Les nymphes de la mer, des larmes dans les yeux,
Échangent avec lui quelque plaintive phrase.

Toi, cruel Ribeira, plus dur que Jupiter,
Tu fais de ses flancs creux, par d'affreuses entailles,
Couler à flots de sang des cascades d'entrailles !

Et tu chasses le chœur des filles de la mer ;
Et tu laisses hurler, seul dans l'ombre profonde,
Le sublime voleur de la flamme féconde !

Madrid, 1843.

UNEASY SITS

The Derry farmhouse with its "farm" is fine,
But in Franconia, at that other shrine,
They let you look and touch his Morris chair.
I know, since I did both when I was there.
Yes, you can walk right up and worship it;
It's just that no one is allowed to sit.

We bought a Stickley that was much the same,
And when love called him here, a great man came,
Leaned back, and sat to drink the tea I served.
But that was always backwards, I observed,
For shortly after he had been my guest,
He did what all must do, even the best
Of poets: full of honors, he had died,
And now that chair would be one occupied
By me, and I would never be the likes of him,
As in some lame succession. No synonym
For who and what he was, I'd only ease
Back in "his" seat and write lines much like these.

Forgive me, Dick, for doing what I can.
I try to write, a poetaster fan
Of one who climbed oh, far above Ventoux.

Below, I do the best that I can do
When I sit down, uneasy on a throne
That only you can ever call your own.