

LETTERS to LES

Edited by Donata Carrazza & Paul Kane

LETTERS to LES

To the glory of God

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MARK CLADIS

In the Name of the Father, Son, and All Their Ghosts

Hemingway once boasted that he could write a compelling short story in six words: 'For sale. Baby shoes. Never used.' I can do the same. 'Big man. Little casket. Les Murray.'

No, not a story about the death of a poet, but about how greatness cannot be boxed up. Here's the story. A big boy grew into an even bigger man who made his way with words – an honest living with honest words. So, what's the plot, the action, the intrigue? Ah, that's what the little casket is for. There's been a crime. You can stack quite a few words on end. Lots of room in there for words on end. Les gives us poems, and we return the favor by trying to nail them down. I am a criminal. And here are my nails.



Fathers. We all have them. Yours is either alive or dead. Or in between. Fathers. We always have them.

Don't die, Dad –
but they die.

What do you say to a man who comes back from the dead? Hello? Sometimes we say to the ghost, 'stay dead,' but they come back. Sometimes we say, 'come back,' but they stay away. But this time the son brought back the father. Yes, I saw him this morning – the father, that is. I saw him in the two poems. You know, 'Evening Alone at Bunyah' and 'The Last Hellos'. Two poems about father and son. Yes, that's right, I saw the son, too. Two lives and at least one death. But the next thing I knew, the lives and deaths started to multiply. How do you think about one father without the other ones showing up?

Two poems, then, about fathers and sons, about their living and their 'dyin.'

EVENING ALONE AT BUNYAH

My father, widowed, fifty-six years old,
sits washing his feet.

The father gets ready for a dance. He bathes his feet. These are widowed feet, the firm foundation of a laboring man, the tender underside of a man in labor. Widowed feet. They hold steady a stature made heavy by an absence.

I bring him a towel and study his feet afresh:
they make my own feel coarse. They are so small,
so delicate he can scarcely bare to walk
barefoot to his room to find his dancing shoes –
and yet all day he works in hobnailed boots
out in the forest, clearing New South Wales.

The father's feet are a world. The father's feet are the son's poetry. A gritty, taxing, graphic world with much delicacy. A world of work and loss yet also with some dancing (and warm pints and still warmer vindaloo). When our world – yours and mine – becomes anything less, when we fear the work in the forest or the floor of the dance hall (or the fire of the vindaloo), the father's feet make our soft lives seem coarse.

The father invites the son to go with him to the dance. The son declines. The father replies, 'Well, if/ any ghosts come calling, don't let 'em eat my cake.' But the son understands:

No ghosts will come, Dad. I know you dote on cake.
I know how some women who bake it dote on you.
It gets them nowhere.
You are married still.

Married still. Still married. Still life. *Nature morte*, as the French say. Dead nature. A couple of pears, a dead pheasant, a tender gesture or angry word, a vow, a life: slices and cuts from the past can appear, like the ghosts, perfectly preserved – this the artist knows, as does the son, as does the mortician. In the still life, the portrait of a little death, the absence of motion is a mortal's wound.

But the father moves: he goes to the dance. It is the son who stays still, alone at the quiet home. Stays still? Alone? Quiet? Perhaps not. There is motion and company. Even the home stirs,
 the planks of the old house creak,
 making one more adjustment, joist to nail,
 nail to roof, roof to the touch of dew.

One more adjustment, and then another, and another. The earth cools, the house creaks; the father adjusts to going out, the son to being home. And the ghosts – the ghosts *do* come, not for cake but for the son, to haunt and perhaps entertain. Despite all Appearances (or rather because of them) this is not an Evening Alone at Bunyah. The first ghost brings a 13 year-old memory of the father,

at the breakfast table nursing his twelve-gauge
 shotgun, awaiting the doubtful reappearance
 of a snake's head at a crack in the cement
 of the skillion fireplace floor.

A twelve-gauge? Going off in the kitchen? At a snake! I had said the father's *feet* are the son's poetry. But now I wonder. Perhaps the *father* is the son's poetry. The son's poems are a shotgun aimed at a snake's head, going off in a kitchen. No still life here. After thirteen years 'the crack's still there, and the scores the buckshot ripped beside the stove.' The blast of the son's poems resound and haunt.

Yet the son is not his father, I know. Nor is his poetry. The son pauses to consider a stone near the family home. He knows how to clean and hold this 'chunk of milk-seamed quartz' in the 'dry light,'

revealing how
 the specific strength of a stone fits utterly
 into its form and yet reflects the grain
 and tendency of the mother-lode.

The son's poetry is not the father. The poetry is the stone and is shaped like so:

the son and his writing
are
 to the father and his clearing
as
 the single stone is to the father-lode.

The strength of the son and his poetry, then, perfectly fit the son's own form, while still reflecting the grain, tendency, and form of the father. And the father – what does he reflect? He reflects the frame of the house, the one 'built to last':

when windstorms came, and other houses lost
 roofs and verandahs, this gave just enough
 and went unscathed, for all the little rain
 that sifted through cracks, the lamps puffed out by wind
 sucked over the wallplate, and the occasional bat
 silly with fear at having misplaced the dark.

Houses and lives that give just enough, men and poems that adapt, letting in some rain, wind, and bats, but otherwise still standing, standing still. And I wonder: what grain, tendency, and form does the home reflect? The home reflects the land – and, yes, the 'touch of dew' – that holds it. Not the land of the 'three streetlights up along the Gloucester road' that threatens the dark and puts out the stars. The home belongs more comfortably to a different country, an old yet familiar one to father and son. Standing on the verandah the son lifts his face, counts his hills, and lingers over one hill in particular:

Deer's, steep, bare-topped, where eagles nest below
the summit in scrub oaks, and where I take
my city friends to tempt them with my past.

Yet he knows he also tempts himself there. The son knows all about
ghosts and where they are most likely to find him. For up on that hill,

Across the creek and the paddocks of the moon
four perfect firs stand dark beside a field
lost long ago, which holds a map of rooms.
This was the plot from which we transplants sprang.

And burst forth they did! 'The trees grew straight. We burgeoned
and spread far.' Far indeed! Even at home the son is far from it. A
ghost from the 'field lost long ago' brings the apparition of 'doors
and rooms beneath the ground' and 'thin candlelight of days.' In
response to this visitation, the son 'turns quickly.' Perhaps this still
ground – though far on the hill among the four perfect firs – is too
alive, still.

The ghosts abound. They, too, burst forth! The son reflects the
father, the father the home, the home the land. A series of mirrors
that do more than mirror. In these reflections, we meet presence and
we meet loss. Of course we do. This is the very definition of ghost:
the presence of what once was and is no longer.

The father dances at the hall; the son stays home, alone. It's
getting dark now.

Night, and I watch the moonrise through the door.
Sitting alone's a habit of mind with me...
for which I'll pay in full. That has begun.

The price of sitting alone: to learn we are never alone. When we
are most still, most quiet, we hear the most – and sometimes shiver.
To pay in full I suppose is to be visited in due course by all the
spirits, either one by one, or in pairs, or even in multitudes – legion,

I believe, is the Biblical term. There are nights alone when the
whole company appears without warning. These are the vexed
alone-nights when, unaided, we are most tempted to believe in God.
But the father, unlike the son, is not at this moment in the quiet.
'Shining at the waltz,/ spry and stately,' the father hears only the
dance – the music, the clapping, the 'roaring waxed-plank floor.'
Waxed-plank floor roaring. Delicate sturdy feet dancing. Does the
father know the smooth of wax as well as the rough of planks, the
re-creatio-by-dancing as the work-by-clearing? The son's poetry
speaks of the delicate as wax poured out over the course. Over the
rough, under the feet. A veneer, yes, but what would that floor,
those feet, this life be without it?

Alone, the son thinks of the father, while the father, in the
company of others, 'yarns about his son.' And as the moon rises still
another ghost, more mysterious yet, makes an appearance to the son.
This one surfaces from 'the edge of dark country I could not afford to
walk in at night alone from a clearing where no house has ever stood.'
Of all the ghosts that night, this one – 'in the wilderness
– terrifies the most. For this one threatens 'to tell me what I sought.'

Father, come home soon.
Come home alive.

Yes, come home alive and eat cake. Your son has spent the night
protecting it, protecting you. He paid the price, this one night.
He allowed the ghosts – all but one – to visit him, and thereby kept
them from you. You danced tonight, untroubled. Cecil, tonight
come home alive.



THE LAST HELLOS

Don't die, Dad –
but they die.

Yes, this happens. And between the life and the death is the dying:

*Perhaps if I lay down
my head'll come better again.*

It's worth a try. Lay down, Cecil. Rest. Perhaps you'll be better in the morning.

The knob found in his head
was duck-egg size. Never hurt.

Two to six months, Cecil.

We try to defeat it, don't we? And why not? Who's ready to accept easily the living becoming the dead? The dead themselves, I guess. They accept everything with such equanimity. But not the living. The dead bring with them a stillness that shatters us. Only the rarest among us move and rest in stillness. Only the rarest, and sometimes the 'dyin':

*I'll be right, he boomed
to his poor sister on the phone.
I'll do that when I finish dyin.*

Cecil, they say you could 'see death in a face.' They'd call you in 'to look at sick ones and say.' What say you now, Cecil, to the face in the mirror? Whose face do you see? Is the face of death so different from the face of life? Should we hide the looking glass? Yes, hide it. Don't look, Cecil.

Don't die, Cecil.
But they do.

Yes, this happened. And between the life and the death was the dying. Last drives through the bush and forests he once cleared: 'I could chop all day.' Last yarns: 'I could always cash a cheque, in Sydney or anywhere. Any of the shops.' Last meals: 'still at the head/ of the table, he now missed/ food on his knife side.' Last rites:

Sorry, Dad, but like
have you forgiven your enemies?
Your father and all them?
All his lifetime of hurt.

*I must have (grin). I don't
think about that now.*

And then there are the last hellos:

People can't say goodbye
any more. They say last hellos.

Hello, Cecil. Hello. There's '2' I count, how many 'hellos' left? Managing to play host to your mourners? Your voice is still as big as 'the courage of your bluster.'

Hello Cecil, hello (that's '4' how many more in this countdown that heads up?). You're in the hospital now. Two last days. What's that you're saying? 'I'm dyin.' But there's so much to talk about. When I was fourteen and you shot that snake, were you sorry a little it never came back? When you were out late clearing the forests, did you dream of Mom? At the dance that night, when I was twenty-seven and home alone, did you fancy one of those women doting on you? That man in the wilderness, at 'the edge of dark country,' who waited there 'to tell me what I sought' – who was he? What did he have to tell me? Was his face in your mirror? And Dad, the cake. Had a favorite one? Did you even like cake, or just like our thinking you did? Want cake now, Dad?

On the second day:
*You're bustin to talk
but I'm too busy dyin.*

But there is so much to talk about. Remember how you built me that clunky plane of two-by-fours, and on that summer evening you lifted, magically, plane and boy and taught me in my mind to fly? Remember that night I was troubled and you came to my room late

and told me how you met and loved my Mom? Remember when I told you on the phone I wanted to make my living with words, not mathematical formulas, and you – what did you do? – you put in the mail that Synonym Finder to help me on my way? Dad, remember when you taught me to drive? We were returning home late that afternoon from Half Moon Bay, winding among giant redwoods and tall yellow grass. Remember the song playing on the AM radio? I do.

I'm too busy dyin.

Tell me that story, Dad, when you were in the South Pacific theatre – how many lives did you save on that ship? Tell me, Dad, when you were at your Yale – not mine – what did you see and fear most? Tell me again that funny court case, the one about the bailiff who thought he could speak Italian. Tell me, when you asked me to come home for the blessing of the family, I received a blessing and took your daughter, but thought I saw you take, too – was it an absolution? Dad, I still have the gun you gave me. It's a true one, to be sure. The battery in the old scope light still works – how can that be, how old is it, forty years or more? What keeps that small red speck-of-light gleaming?

I'm too busy dyin.

So many fathers! So many sons! So many ghosts! Legion! Focus now, focus: this is Cecil's dyin. Keep you fathers straight! Yours? How to write about one and not summon the others? No, focus now, focus: this is Cecil's 'dyin'.

Grief ended when he died,
the widower like soldiers who
won't live life their mates missed.

Grief ended? How can that be, son, tell us? Ah yes, I get it. *His* grief ended: Cecil's, not ours. Still married, Cecil? Good – go to your wife now. She's waited long enough. So have you. Your grief, though, I guess you'll be leaving that behind. Someone needs to pick it up.

And this is what sons are good for. Grief won't just lie about. Grief won't lie. It can only tell its truth. Speak, then, honest voice of grief:

Good boy, Cecil! No more Bluey dog.
No more cowtime. No more stories.
We're still using your imagination,
it was stronger than all ours.

Yes, it was 'built to last.' But not everything lasts. And so we learn to say goodbye. I recently heard it said,

People can't say goodbye
any more. They say last hellos.

But I wonder. Some sons *can* say goodbye, or at least can begin to. How to start a goodbye? Offer a sincere wish. And so the son begins the goodbye (and ends the poem) with a farewell to the father:

Snobs mind us off religion
nowadays, if they can.
Fuck them. I wish you God.

I don't know about you, but I just heard a shotgun aimed at a snake's head go off in a kitchen.