Bathroom Songs: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as a Poet

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Lost Letter (1974)

1.
My letter cools its heels in a suburb of Paris — there’s a mail strike now — or is lost in some confusion. And rightly:

it was a confused letter anyhow.
I thanked you (in it) for a recommendation (you’ve been writing them since I was a freshman).

“I’m teaching writing now,” I said, “isn’t it uncanny the authoritativeness of puppy genius, and so distant.”

No wonder we’re uncomfortable, I meant. The pain of teaching being so akin the pain of studenting, of envy and arousal at language barely meant for our proper eyes and ears. Both shy, we nowadays wolf down our letters as greedily as if

2.
they might shift everything. And they might, but not toward us. The time I spend writing lost letters!

Weeks, sometimes, for yours, or witness in pages of minute pornographic script a novel in letters, about a man hurrying to the dentist, doctor, or, it may be, shrink, past an open door in a downtown medical building who glimpses in a waiting room a naked girl submitting to something evidently jazzy and frightening in the way of punishment.
He’s appalled, he can’t watch it,  
But he’s recognized her, a student he’s fond of,  
and, once home, writes her a hesitant note.  
“If you ever feel it would help to talk,  
please consider me at your disposal. …

If, though, I’ve completely misunderstood  
the fleeting scene, forgive me, Eve, it just  
seemed you might need something as obvious as this:  
nobody, human, would turn from you for your  
having suffered some sickening discipline. …  
How long do you expect it to continue?”

3.  
What kind of novelistic world is this  
where college women, on their own,  
find their way to offices in downtown medical buildings  
for jazzy, frightening punishment? What crimes  
do college women know how to commit,  
and where, in a college town, is such an authority  
as could force the firm, unspeakably reluctant feet  
up sloping flights of dingy stairs, and in?  
What keeps the face, under punishment, impassive,  
the nude body motionless as ordered  
though trembling? Not, for sure, the individual  
volition, nor yet the school. A shadowy arm  
maybe of Parenthood, mysterious and known to all,  
ramifying in every city  
with conspiratory potency. Of course  
in the real pornography these questions are
— *comment dit-on* — extratextual, moot;
mute, taken obscenely for granted, or part of the *frisson*:

so much so, the mention of them even here is recklessness.
The compulsion in the story’s real;
“There is real violence being done right now,”

4.
he writes back later, “and it’s not to my sensibilities.
Please don’t write nonsense, no outside infliction on you,
I don’t care how messy it is (for it’s messiness you’re talking about,

reading about someone else’s pain isn’t nearly
as assaultive as reading about their mess) could even threaten
my ‘sympathy and identification’ with you now.

I don’t much care about being told these things.
Or more accurately, my reaction to being told
is just what you might guess, in a more lit-critical mood:

i.e, a not unfamiliar mix of pain of anger
and disgust, yes, and furtive arousal, also yes, but so
what? Shit, Eve, we can’t

let our friends withdraw from us, or ourselves withdraw from them,
just because we’ve complicated reasons
for caring about each other,” I’m embarrassed too

at the wishfulness of this, but please remember
the wash of helplessness that’s bringing them together,
everything outside the letters spelling shame and terror.

5.
“The details you’ve mentioned are almost incredibly cruel:
so I can guess I should be understanding ‘every
*conceivable* indignity’ quite literally, and almost
as much so, ‘unspeakable consequences’. But they are speakable, no? some genital assault?
I’m not sure how to feel

about having precipitated a crisis in the room by appearing there at the doorway shattering your enforced composure — aside from sorry:

it’s almost a relief, though this is being selfish, to find my part in the savaging was that direct, acknowledged by you at the time, not just a voyeuristic complicity with the tortures and audience.
I guess I thought you hadn’t seen me, I guess I thought the rigid, sightless gaze was your defense against the nakedness below, the pain to come: I didn’t know they could wipe expression off your face. I didn’t guess you were in pain already, there, and struggling.

Oh yes, I heard someone gossip about ‘a whipping’ over the weekend. Was it of you? I trust not; incidentally it will be hard to stay in school if any of this gets too well known. I can try to muffle it when I hear of it; it would help for you to come to classes again, if you can.

Also, are you really more comfortable writing than talking about this? I don’t mind writing but would just as soon talk if you would.

6.
Try and bear up, anyway.” Unexpectedly, this letter angers her. “A whipping,” she repeats, “some genital assault” — ‘voyeuristic complicity’ —
you express yourself with admirable suaveness. But
that’s me — that naked trunk that’s bent and tied
over the abdomen-high table, waiting for stripes.

Those are my real ankles hobbled by my own panties.
‘Some genital assault’, that will mean my real thighs
with something rough between them. That’s me, all these weary nights

waking to my own screams five and six times before dawn
afraid to fall asleep, afraid to wake and find
a note of summons slipped under the door

to climb the steps again in sober winter daylight
arriving, shaking, at the right floor, for more.
Sorry about the voyeuristic complicity. Of
course there are rumors: there were people there
and cameras, very close.” But later, sorry and frightened,
“Please don’t think I’m angry at you, in fact

I don’t know what I’d do without you. That’s literally true.
My sense of the world is broken and past fixing.
Don’t think I’m angry, either, that you saw me shamed —

the truth is yesterday, under the whip,
it came to me in a thud of longing — or nostalgia —
how much I’d give to see once more that my

naked parts could still embarrass and appall.
It’s a tricky situation. It takes patience
and magnanimity. And I’m astonished

at finding them ready — for me — and in you.
As for talking instead of writing, I’m not sure,
but I mean to be in class tomorrow so we’ll see.
Please, by the way, don’t call on me in class. 
I’ll volunteer if I can talk, but may be struggling 
Just to sit still. I’ll see you soon.

7.
P.S. Forgive the way I began the letter.”
The next letter, from him, next afternoon: 
“I meant to stop you after class but it was clear

it wasn’t going well for you. Every time
one of the boys in class moved or spoke you flinched
and went white. It was awful. I guess

it hadn’t been so present to me, before,
how much you’ve been abused just lately at the hands
of men specifically. It makes me look down at my own”

which he really does, long hairy ones, “terrified.
You don’t seem to mind much when I write,
but I was afraid you’d wince away from me too,

and you shouldn’t have to do that, so let’s write.
If you mean to stay in school though you’ll have to come to class.
And for your good, you need to work

on overcoming the horror of men. And I don’t think
I say that just because I’m a man, certainly not
from not knowing what horrors it’s a response to.

I’m especially sorry if I sounded flippant
about some of your fears; it wasn’t
that I’m not frightened myself at what may happen

but (1) because — that’s language — ‘genital assault’
is words, while parted thighs, ruptured membranes,
pain and rage, and not moving, these things are real;
but also (2) because I wanted you to realize
that you are — if I can put it this way — allowed to talk
about a punishment directed at your parts

as much as about a flogging. My impression is
your style with these words is modest: maybe especially now.
That childish blur makes your state too vivid.

I wanted you to know, these things, if done
might embarrass on paper but could hardly alienate
me. I hope now I haven’t alienated you.

Please, Eve, don’t imagine me unable
to envision the violence being done you.
Partly it’s just the vertigo of language:

say I learn, unexpectedly, you’ve had a flogging,
I don’t receive that very bad news without emotion,
without my mind, my impotence, racing to the aid

of an image of you publicly shamed and in pain:
I could guess from what I’d seen from the door
that you’d have been stripped naked, or nearly so —

the details you mention, the bending, the shivering buttocks, even
the longing, the stripes themselves, it was all there,
but when I write it turns into ‘a whipping’

and you think I’m being casual or debonair
at your expense. But no, I’m not.
Your letter can bring fresh shocks of impotence,

urgency, vicarious humiliation, but even
without a word from you further, I remain yours truly:
the fixed slave of your continuing punishment.”

8.
It’s hard overcoming the horror of men
when almost daily, for a long time, she’ll have to seek out
and penetrate the blank ugly downtown building
to discover subtle and blindingly new
accesses to her of pain, of dread, of
weariness, new forms of nakedness,
and old impassivity fresh and fresh imposed.
They never — the pair of them — learn
to talk it over, so the shrewd
punishing repetitious letters shuttle back and forth
with all the comfort there is;
the shy obsession grows, but never turns,
for them, toward bed. Besides
every orifice in her is so fatigued!
Just twice more, headed for his therapist,
the man takes the slow stairs past the open door,
the first time seeing a boy in a corset
and with stripes, being baited to impermissible tears.
That night the man himself is waked by his own screams
but smothers them to lie in silent tears
trying not to wake his wife with the sheer terror.
The second time his dreadful expectation is rebuked
for there she is. This time he isn’t noticed
since the girl is positioned to front the wall, away from the door,
her face not being, this time, the focus of attention.
He never tells her what he’s seen
nor the therapist, though the therapist is observant
of a particular stiff tenderness as the man sits down
and some semaphore in the brow, and is savvy enough
to be grateful there are things he genuinely can’t interpret.

9.
Like the detective’s gift, or shrink’s, the poet’s gift
is blank fatuity and no hint of anger.
As if this resourceful immobility
could, for more than the riveted instant, assuage
the storms of anger that travel around poets!
I’ve been reading an anthology of recent poets
so as to sound, in conversation, like a poet
so as to get a job teaching young poets
the scopophilic and exhibitionistic transports

that are — no kidding — what makes it beautiful.
I haven’t found any other poems like this one,
neither as risky nor as unnecessary.

In fact the fierceness of my love for these pages,
all these pages, is the least oblique thing going, here.
I haven’t overheard them or hurried past them

or hidden my hand from them for fear
of their flinching from it. Nothing’s without
obliquity, pain itself is not, language

about pain least of all, but the shame itself
of privacy should give place with a thud
of longing to this much, this good, attention.