

## *Introductions and Initiations (August 2002)*

Phyllis Webb's "To Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide" is a deceptive poem. Rather than a dedication to those who have already considered suicide, it is instead a rite of passage, an initiation ritual conducted by an experienced master, who would have us share her enlightened state. The process is painful, and the rewards, mixed. We ascend at the expense of others. Our western heritage, our leaders, our institutions, are made to seem banal, tired. But she herself conveys so much urgency, so passionate a desire to show us the way, and displays an imagination so formidable it not only knocks down old worlds but conjures up colorful new vistas, that, in the end, we finish the poem excited, even grateful, despite her trickery.

After reading the title, we begin the poem wondering if she means for *us* to be reading it. Are *we* her friends? Does she mean to speak only to those she is intimate with and are in the know? While our status is uncertain, we know that we are attending to someone who pretends, at least, to be a master: she begins with a confident, didactic, "It [is]" (1). And by the way she chooses to introduce the poem, we soon decide that the poem is actually written for those who might be anxious about exploring a poem about suicide, the uninitiated—*us*. The first two lines are kept short, as if giving us time to prepare ourselves. Each line is well balanced both visually and in syllabic weight, before and after "a" in the first line and "is" in the second line. When we consider what follows, these two lines seem a sturdy space to ready ourselves before crossing an obvious threshold.

The colon at the end of the second line, and a beckoning mystery, propels us onward. The first two lines are enigmatic. What is a "good idea" (1)—to consider committing suicide, or simply to consider the concept of suicide? What does exercise or discipline have to do with suicide? Isn't suicide impulsive? Our master, by harnessing our curiosity, pulls us through a threshold—a succession of lines that begin with the words "to remember," which momentarily confine us. We, too, in sympathetic response to this four-line structure, imagine ourselves as confined, our body as inflexible, as paralyzed, as is this sequence of the poem.

The movement in these lines is of something or someone else—perhaps death, perhaps suicide, perhaps the poet—who comes with each successive line closer and closer to us. From "street" (3) to "car" (4) to "clothes" (5) to "eat" (6), something

moves from being distant and external to ourselves to the cusp of being within us. And, as if in through the mouth, into the blood, and into our brain, this presence acts like a virus, which, now controlling our nervous system, has us use our musculature to kill ourselves. We are now initiated. The presence was that of our master, preparing us with bodily mutilations for our new spiritual ascension; and we are now most certainly amongst those who have considered suicide.

But as with all painful initiations, there is the promise of a reward. As if we now possess new powers, new capacities, she has us survey friends, family, philosophers, politicians, financiers—those we have formerly peopled our world with—and with advantage: we cause “emotions” (14), we cause “embarrass[ment]” (17), and we avoid the meaninglessness of lives which consist of setting up pointless activities, whether the “swim[ming] of lakes” (24) or the “climb[ing] [of] flagpoles” (24). In contrast, our “daily walk” (26), she argues, is no routine, no exercise, no contrivance that wastes life. It is instead an opportunity to live in such a way that our life fills with so much spirit it becomes almost—like “sand in the teeth” (32)—an irritant to death.

But how rewarding is mockery? A new brethren of those whose daily occupation is to contemplate the sins of others is too much like that of a monastic brotherhood to be broadly appealing. Fortunately, our master would have us spend little time contemplating our “western fact” (35), our past, our collective waste of a heritage. We should now, like postmoderns, look eastwards.

Despite her manipulative—perhaps rude—introduction to us, we likely appreciate our time with someone with such a passionate desire to take us places, to show and tell us things, and who declares over and over again with certainty and a life-affirming tone—“it is.” She doesn’t tell us what we can expect eastwards; but if there there are “bright crustaceans of the oversky”—such an evocative image—or if we might somehow fashion them there, we have cause to think ourselves newly enlightened and inspired by our poet, our enigmatic master, who walks with death.

#### Work Cited

Webb, Phyllis. “To Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide.” *15 Canadian Poets X3*. Ed. Gary Geddes. Toronto: Oxford UP, 2001. 142-43. Print.