

Feminist Letters - Context for and letter from Gwendolyn MacEwan to Sasha Saint-Aubin

It's poignant to hear Gwendolyn MacEwan "speak" one more time, long after her death. I want to deeply thank Sasha and to share with you this wise, illuminating letter and its context, something which resonates with us all. Katerina Fretwell, Feminist Letters Editor (508 words total)

Here is Sasha's introduction to the letter, in her own words:

I began writing at age 11. When I was about 16 years old, I met Gwendolyn MacEwan. We became friends and she mentored me. I would visit her at home, at 13 Browning Avenue in Toronto.

We would talk about writing. We would also talk about "poetic interiority," as the philosopher, Jacques Maritain, would call it. We shared insights and perceptions about our interior lives specifically as poets. We spoke about the interior sufferings of being a poet, and how different we felt ourselves to be from those who seem to fit comfortably into the predominant milieu of business and industry.

From time to time, I wrote letters to her and she wrote back to me. Sometimes I sent manuscripts to her and she commented by letter.

In the fall of 1974, I wrote to her. I was 17 years old at the time, and influenced by her example, I was in the process of deciding to leave school after grade 12 to pursue a life as poet and writer. Several years later I discerned that for me, as poet, this was a mistake. I then changed my approach; I went to university and studied philosophy and English literature.

At the time of this 1974 letter, I was worried about whether leaving school was the right decision for me. As I recall, I was troubled by issues facing many poets and writers: how to earn a living; how to keep up my spirits when things are difficult; how to deal with the psychic and spiritual isolation I so often suffered as poet, intellectual, contemplative.

Perhaps these words of Maritain illumine Gwen's letter:

What matters most . . . is inner experience and its deepening into further and further recesses of subjectivity. Since poetic intuition is born in these recesses, where the intellect, the imagination, all the powers of the soul suffer in unity some reality of existence brought to them by intentional emotion, it involves first of all a certain alert receptivity. As the mystic suffers divine things, the poet is here to suffer the things of this world, and to suffer them so much that he is enabled to speak them and himself out. (Jacques Maritain, *Challenges and Renewals* [Cleveland: Meridian, 1968], 274)

Here is her letter to me, as prophetic then as now:

Fretwell/Feminist Letters Page 2

Dear Sasha

Oct. something/74

Many thanks for your letter. The main thing is to hang in (obviously), and know that you are perfectly right in connecting the 'psychic' with the real. It is a difficult thing to relate with many worlds, to see things moving on many levels at the same time, . . . but it's only difficult because you feel that others around you aren't seeing the same thing. I know the loneliness this brings, I know the pain.

My father used to tell me that in times of stress I could move into the secret centre of myself. At the time, (I was about 9 or 10) I didn't know what he meant . . . now I do.

I wish I could say it gets easier as you get older, but I'm afraid it doesn't. I sit here sometimes and gaze at a pile of books I've written and wonder why. The voice, the vision, is there, and if you are sure of it, then follow it.

The price is high, but so is heaven.

Love,
Gwendolyn

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