

Red Guard

Revolution is everywhere, in everything...

—Yevgeny Zamyatin

READING LATE, falling asleep over a manuscript that tells a good story badly (the way we lead our lives), the night fallen over this good-enough borough as silently as assent withheld, I get to thinking (because the book I'm reading is trying to survive the Cultural Revolution—a good idea, like all pure and reckless enterprises, at the time)—I get thinking that now and then (and now is such a time), someone decides to make themselves the Chairman and we contrive to let them, and they sprout some dogmas from the ends of what they would have us believe are not their guns, and then some of the others hand-pick themselves to be the red guard, callow and petulant and aggrieved, and they storm the libraries and occupy the houses of those who've laboured hard at a kind of justice the young—in the rapture of their sanctimony—cannot begin to imagine a use for. They are the brute squad, and they defame all the dead, *and they deface all the furniture and they paint* longwinded slogans on the walls and trash every kitchen and steal all the food and burn all the books and declare the accomplishments of all the centuries *bourgeois* and beauty extinct, and all art passe—except the tone-deaf karaoke of the revolutionary moment, for which only the mandated thoughts are required. Some good folks, poets and painters and thinkers, elders and doers of kind deeds, die fast. Some bad poets, too. Others are sent—already weary with the thankless work toward a greater good than the red guards want to start to fathom—to camps in cold places to master the ugly new idioms or die in the attempt. The red guard, for a while, take charge of all that can be said, practising violence of thought as if it were freedom, and prejudice as if it were lore. And, for a time, it looks like the guards will win. But they will not. They only know how to damage the decor and fashion famine where wisdom, imperfect but sustaining, once grew. The Chairperson goes mad; all his plastic flowers fail. And the red guards are remembered as one remembers a bad suit, or an illness, an affair you wish you hadn't had. And in time, as sure as morning wakes most days, humanity walks free again from the wreckage ideology makes of actual lives, *and what was wise and well said* once—the way Sappho and Langston and Li Qingzhao and Emily and Hafez set it down—is heard again, as radical as it ever was, and the songbirds return to the forests, the shorebirds to the shores, a lot of fences are razed, and the rivers return to their banks, debts are forgiven and many prisoners are freed, and heads are shaken at the madness that comes, periodically, and at the red guards of our nature, so sure each time *this* is the revolution we had to have. And I write this late-night letter to you, my friend, because perhaps all times feel like these, rank with rectitude, to those who burn old flames late into the night, hoping to shape from all they've failed fully to understand one true thing, and to pluck from the fire, *with fingers already burned, some flowers worth putting in a vase.*