

**Catherine Chandler**

**On Reading the 40th Statewide Investigating  
Grand Jury Report**

*And pray that I may forget  
These matters that with myself I too much discuss  
Too much explain  
Because I do not hope to turn again  
Let these words answer  
For what is done, not to be done again*

—T.S. Eliot, from “Ash Wednesday”

i.

The lilac’s fallen heart-shaped leaves glissade  
across the crusted snow, on days as thin  
as twigs, and nights when time winds back to when  
it ended. Still, its steadfast little bud,

defending future flowers, future seed,  
in overlapping scales of mauve and green  
and ancient symmetries of fixed design,  
confronts the cold in armored certitude.

Yet next spring, should there come a late hard frost  
or April ice storm, some will blacken, wither,  
promised inflorescence unfulfilled.

I chant a litany of the erased,  
of spirits deadened by a demon father;  
a flock of children cut off from the fold.

ii.

A flock of children cut off from the fold,  
the hijacked souls of Bloomsburg, Bethlehem,  
Wilkes-Barre, Turtle Creek . . . the voiceless, some  
with records of their testimonies called

“sticky situations.” Now unsealed:  
one thousand pages plus of wanton crime  
in basements, boiler rooms, at school, at home,  
in rectories, confessionals . . . the failed

attempts to hold “bad actors” to account.  
Betrayals. Reassignments. Thoughts and prayers.  
Denials. “Little secrets.” Outright lies.

Suicidal trauma. Decades spent  
in counseling. The hell of countless hours  
remembering — unbidden — stolen days.

iii.

Remembering unbidden, stolen days,  
are boys from Saegertown, who underwent  
the “prostate checks” a parish priest from Saint  
Bernadette’s would practice as a ruse.

Despite the broken laws of child abuse,  
the predators, tenacious, nonchalant,  
pursued their prey, rejoicing in the hunt,  
cocksure of those benevolent pooh-poohs

by bishops who would let the clock run out  
on legal action, or OK a “sick  
leave” to restore, they hoped, a state of grace

to crafty pedophiles who’d penetrate  
the first-grade girls at Sacred Heart and fuck  
the altar boys who served at Holy Cross.

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iv.

The altar boys who served at Holy Cross,  
Saint Anthony's, Saint Joseph's, and the ones  
at Holy Guardian Angels School, Saint Ann's,  
Saint Peter's and Our Lady Queen of Peace,

were groomed with flattery, perverse advice,  
expensive gifts from so-called paragons  
of holiness, who'd act as chaperones  
at camps where sodomy was commonplace.

Is this too hard to read? Too hard to hear?  
There's more. "Strawberry-flavored popsicles  
and lollipops" the boys were forced lick;

photo sessions, hoarded pubic hair,  
fondled breasts, vaginas, testicles.  
The carefree childhood they cannot get back.

v.

The carefree childhood they cannot get back  
haunts like an unholy Holy Ghost.  
Some disassemble, burying the past,  
while some dissemble balance, businesslike,

relations and relationships a wreck.  
And so it is I sing of one I lost,  
the first boy that I loved and loved the best,  
and always shall. And though I choose to speak,

I will not name the faithless deviant  
who leered as Sister spanked me on her lap  
for chattering at Sunday Mass; the one

who, after multiple complaints, was sent  
to shepherd yet another flock of sheep.  
Among them was a boy not quite sixteen.

vi.

Among them was a boy not quite sixteen.  
He never told me where or how the sad  
assault — by one who'd consecrated bread  
and wine — occurred. That summer's Thunder Moon,

the first of two that month, was rising when  
he left me. What had caused him to decide  
against our love? I felt confused, betrayed.  
But now I know the truth. This sonnet crown

was destined to be written on a night  
nineteen thousand thirty-seven days  
ago. At last, I understand my loss

pales in comparison with his. Not sweet,  
but bittersweet, this order, as it tries  
to end, as it began, on notes of grace.

vii.

To end, as it began, on notes of grace,  
I sing the beauty of December's bleak  
perspective: Advent Sunday in a week,  
Lake Wallenpaupack's frosted Irish lace,

the silver Cold Moon's old familiar face,  
the Geminids' bright horizontal streak,  
the *pui pui pui* of the pine grosbeak,  
O Antiphons . . . the infinite embrace

of one who's never wavered in her search  
for what was lost those many years ago.  
There is a merciful and righteous God

whose emblem dwells in chapel and in church;  
but also where, across the crusted snow,  
the lilac's fallen heart-shaped leaves glissade.