

FEMICIDE AFTER PAT LOWTHER

PRESENTATION TO THE FEMINIST CAUCUS, THE LEAGUE OF CANADIAN POETS

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If you've read, *This Difficult Flowring*,¹ you'll recognize these lines:

Last night
we were afraid to talk
You found a penny in the bed
and laid it on my lips.
 I have not yet deciphered
 what you meant.

Pat's man was asserting some kind of control over her body by the gesture. Was he sealing her, pricing her, closing her mouth?

Pat's body, like all women's bodies are the subject of:

- wolf whistles
- put downs
- dress codes
- peep shows
- obsessing on virginity
- obsessing on sexual availability
- pornography

A man seeking control over a woman's body might see that annihilation is the ultimate weapon.

Patricia Louise Lowther was a woman who loved her children; tried to do the best with her husband; and struggled to find the peace to write poetry. Her poetic gift made her an atypical woman but the manner of her death makes her typical of women murdered by their husbands. Pat Lowther was actually bludgeoned to death in her own bed on East 46th Street in Vancouver. For women, most murder happens at home.

My subject is how femicide has and has not changed since 1975, the year Pat was murdered. Here are a few Canadian statistics:

Murder rate is number of murders per 100,000 population

- 1975 was an all-time high for murder in Canada, rate of 3.02 per 100,000
- 1993 rate 2.19, down by more than a quarter²
- Murder rates continue to drop.³ (pass around charts)
- In 2007 - 16% of solved homicides were spousal.

Nonetheless, wife killings outnumber husband killings by more than 3:1. (P. 179 *Dangerous Domains*)

While overall more murder victims are men (1993: 67% men, 33% women)
Men are more likely to be killed by a stranger or by an acquaintance, not by an intimate partner.
Most perpetrators of all murders - men -87% of accused

Between 1991-1993 over half of all solved murders of women were by intimate partners.
Men commit murder as a final act of control.

Murders of intimate partners by women are much less common, and they typically occur only after years of being battered and the violence increases to the point when she fears being killed.

Pat Lowther

Pat was married to Roy Lowther for 11 years. Friends and some family members knew that she was being battered.

Danger of Separation

When the average person hears that a woman is being assaulted by her partner, they say, "Why doesn't she leave?" There is a very good answer to this question. At the time of potential separation, danger increases. Murder of wives does not come out of the blue. Abused women know the danger in trying to leave. Here's the riddle of an abused woman, "I'm in danger; it's too dangerous to leave." Between 1974 -1992, the murder of married women, separated from their husbands, were 6 times as high as the rate for women living with their husbands. Police investigations show a history of battering.⁴

What about transition houses and other community supports?

They have helped but Pat was having her problems in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Transition houses were just getting established in those years. I do not have figures for 1975. However in 1976, Transition House in Vancouver accepted 681 women and had to turn away 774 for lack of space.⁵ Friends say she tried Transition House, but never went. From my experience, I would guess that she tried and they were full.

IMPROVEMENTS

In the 1980s there was a move by police toward mandatory charging in domestic abuse cases. (Mandatory Charging requires the police to lay a charge if they have reasonable/probable grounds that a crime has been committed.⁶) It started because several women had brought lawsuits against American police departments for not protecting them when they called for help.

Mandatory charging has had mixed results.⁷ One criticism is that the word "mandatory" means that the assaulted woman loses control of the situation. I know of cases in which women have not called for police help because they did not want their partner charged. Results are very good in London, Ontario, because services are integrated and coordinated. That means that a number of agencies work together: London Family Court Clinic, women's shelters, counselling services for abused women, as well counselling for abusive men, probation, courts, crown attorneys, victim

assistance programmes.

Mandatory charging has reduced re-offending in some cases. It is effective if the man has something to lose by being sent to jail. However, some studies show that for unemployed men, violence gets worse after arrest.

Another aspect of mandatory charging is that procedures are not universal and each police service has its own interpretation. Police may get an emergency call every Friday night from the same address. In the past repeated calls would be given low priority. Experience and studies now show that repeated calls indicate serious problems and that violence becomes more severe over time. Not every police force has received this message.

Finances

In addition to the safety concerns, there is the wage gap that makes it hard for women, especially women with children, to leave an abusive man. About 60% of single mothers in Canada live in poverty.⁸

There has been a slight improvement in women's wages.

- in 1991 - women earned 69% of what men earned
- in 2003 - women earned 71%⁹

A QUESTION FOR THE FEMINIST CAUCUS OF TLCP

Do we need special women's day's, women's art exhibits, feminist caucuses? A recent study by the US National Endowment for the Arts shows that women in the arts earn 75 cents for every dollar a man earns.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING- MOSTLY WOMEN & CHILDREN

I need to mention one more form of violence that we see in services to women: human trafficking. Trafficking in people is on the rise and Canada is considered a "gateway" country by the RCMP.¹⁰

The main reason for trafficking is sexual exploitation - 79%

The second reason is for forced labor - 18%

Globally, about 20% of people trafficked are children, with much higher rates in West Africa (up to 100%)

A UN protocol against trafficking in persons was started in 2003. Now 125 out of 155 states, including Canada, have signed it. I am pleased to say that Canadian members of Parliament participated in Global Advocacy Day to bring attention to the problem.

Now back to Pat. For the last 12 months of her life, Pat was rising in her profession. Noted critics (such as George Woodcock and Peter Stevens) were praising her work. Her early books had been published by small presses. Then, in 1974, Pat was offered a contract with Oxford University Press to publish *A Stone Diary*. Next, in 1974, she and Frederick Candelaria were elected Co-Chairs of The League of Canadian Poets.

The third thing that happened that year might have led to financial security .In September 1975, although she had no academic credentials, not even a high school diploma, Pat was hired to teach a workshop in creative writing at the University of British Columbia. Roy Lowther wrote in his journal that he feared that the job would give her the means to leave him. He murdered her before she taught the third class.

I'll close with part of a poem by Pat on the centrality of motherhood to her, it's called, "Doing it Over" in *Time Capsule*.¹¹

ENDNOTES

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1. Vancouver: Very Stone House, 1968, p. 9
 2. These figures were compiled in a special survey by Statistics Canada based on a telephone survey of 12,300 women by specially trained interviewers. The survey turned up many more incidences of physical and sexual assaults by both intimate partners and strangers than The General Social Survey or police records. Holly Johnson, *Dangerous Domains*. Toronto: Nelson Canada, 1996, pp. xxii, 46, 205, 210.
 3. Ottawa: Department of Justice, *Juristat*, August 1994, p. 11.
 4. Wilson and Daly (1994). Spousal Homicide. *Juristat Service Bulletin*, vol 14, issue 8.
 5. *Wife Battering: House of Commons Report on Violence in the Family*, Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Social Affairs, May 1982.
 6. Johnson, *op cit.*, note 2.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 212.
 8. Statistics Canada. *Women in Canada*, 3rd ed., Catalogue No. 89-503. 1995
 9. *Measuring Violence Against Women: Statistical Trends 2006*. Cat. No. 85-570-X1E. Table A 1, p. 86.
 10.
<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons.html>
 11. Polestar Book Publishers: Victoria, B.C.,1996. p. 180.