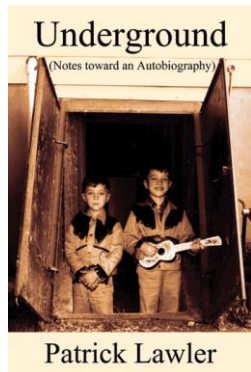


UNDERGROUND (NOTES TOWARD AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY) (Many Mountains Moving, 2012)



SAMPLE FROM *UNDERGROUND (NOTES TOWARD AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY)*

Carmen Basilio

In the fifth round of his championship fight with Lennox Lewis, Oliver McCall has a nervous breakdown. He stands in the middle of the ring, arms at his sides, crying. The crowd is stunned and booing. The announcers are appalled.

When we were kids, my brother and I watched the Saturday Night Fights with my father. He was usually drunk, and my brother and I would fall asleep by the sixth round. It didn't matter. It didn't matter that no one was really there to experience any of it. This was an initiation, and the only thing required was to have the unconsciousness bathed in black and white.

Once my father took me to see Carmen Basilio at the War Memorial. My father said, "See. He just doesn't go down." My father liked that. Determination. Persistence. Tenacity. Balls.

All these men trying to punch holes in each other's heads. I saw boxing as majestic and noble, brutal and savage and pure. Sleazy and sacred. Shamans in sequined rags, intimate with danger-- maybe even intimate with death. Dempsey's punches traveled at 135mph. Ali danced out of Liston's reach as he turned into one animal, and then another. Sugar Ray flickered around the ring. I saw boxing as power and grace-- an elemental beauty sponsored by Gillette. I saw the ethnic roots, the corporeal music. Blood and cigar smoke.

The fighters stood toe to toe. With chipped lips. Banging the buckets of their heads. Fattened

and ripped. Scuffed. Unstoppable. The jabs and hooks.
The bobbed and woven. The dance shuffles.
The fists like sledges breaking the body into dust.
Surgery conducted with hammers and chisels.

Once at our town's Fall Festival they had the kids box,
and I was in the ring against this bigger guy who said
he was going to kick my ass.
But he had no way of knowing that I would never
give up. I came out of my childhood with only a few lessons.
And to tell you the truth, I didn't give a shit about winning.
Anybody could win, I decided. If you had the right family.
If you had the right edge. If you were big enough.
Or rich enough. All I cared about was not giving up--
no matter what. He could have hit me a million times,
and I'd still be standing in front of him.

And there stood Carmen Basilio as if he'd been pounded with rocks.
His brain beaten into beef. Scar tissue on places no one could see;
damage on places where no one would want to.

Years later Carmen Basilio taught gym where I went
to college. After sit ups and squat thrusts, he'd hand out the towels.
I don't think anyone there remembered him the way I did.
Like somebody who was supposed to be somebody.
Like somebody who wouldn't go down for the count.
His brain a little stripped; his mouth unable to get around all of his words.

When I was young I memorized the names of gangsters
for the same reason I learned the names of fighters.
There was an indescribable beauty in the litany of names:
Mohammed and Rocky. Tiger Flowers and Kid McCoy.
Gentleman Jim and the Brown Bomber. Frazier and Foreman and Griffith.
I knew one day I would need them. I would need to call them from the canvas.
I would need to say, "Goddamn it. Help me. I can't do it by myself any longer."

I didn't know how to weigh the heart. I didn't
have a scales that would tell me about courage or vision or skill.
I didn't know about words. I didn't know how not to be afraid.

As if something is terribly short circuited,
as if everything is drenched in grief and bewilderment,
Oliver McCall stands in the middle of the ring crying.
For radiance? For deliverance? Arm weary, brain weary, heart weary,
he is tired of pummeling whoever it is he pummels:
a man, a mirror, a father who is nowhere to be seen.

I even care less about winning, but now I know
there's a different courage--the kind it takes to say ,
even when no one else is around, you can stop hitting me now.

