James Lewisohn, 70

Everyone who knew Jim Lewisohn back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when he was a popular, controversial, volatile English professor at the University of Maine in Portland—and a nationally promising poet—knew that he suffered from great frustration. Rejection slips from magazine and book editors decorated the walls of the bathroom of his comfortable bungalow in South Portland. He shared this home with Roslyn, his vivacious wife, who was a junior-high-school guidance counselor, and their four children, along with a parade of students, visiting writers, and members of Portland’s intelligentsia attracted by Lewisohn’s wide-ranging mind, wild energy, wild parties, and by Roslyn’s cooking.

His poems had appeared in Poetry, American Poetry Review, The Saturday
Review, Chelsea, The Hudson Review, Shenandoah, and other prestigious publications of the era, but he couldn't get a book published, and this lack bedeviled him. His frustration also may have come from deeper sources. Those who knew him best felt one source might have been his father, the once-famous novelist, translator, professor, and Zionist lecturer Ludwig Lewisohn, who had fathered James Elias with concert singer Thelma Spear. Ludwig had led a notoriously unsettled life and could be “quite overbearing,” according to Henry Braun, a Maine poet who knew both Ludwig, who died in 1955, and his son when the father taught at Brandeis University.

So, although his crime was one of the most shocking Portland has ever seen, to Jim Lewisohn’s friends it was not entirely astonishing when, in the spring of 1974, after a night of drinking, he shot and killed Roslyn, the bark of the gun waking up two daughters in time to see him turn the 9-millimeter pistol on himself as their mother lay dying on the kitchen floor.

But he survived, and he was convicted of murder. The jury refused to believe his story that the shooting was an accident, believing instead the young daughters who testified against him.

In prison, he taught poetry, self-published several books (one entitled Roslyn), converted to the forgiveness of Catholicism, got married to a Portland woman, and had another daughter by her. Because of jury prejudice, he was granted a new trial; for the second time, he was convicted of murder.

Paroled in 1984, divorced, he spent several years at the Bangor Theological Seminary, obtaining a master’s of divinity. He already had a master’s from the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where as a young man he had studied to be a rabbi.

He couldn’t find a place as a priest or even as a monk.

“They put the mark of Cain on me,” he says in explanation on the phone from his small apartment in Bar Harbor, where he has lived for many years.

“I live alone with a little dog. I have no friends. No work, of course.”

He stopped writing poetry a long time ago. He survives on Social Security and a small pension from the university. He spends his time “walking the dog, meditating, and going to Mass.” He adds: “My faith is weak.”

He has not seen his children by Roslyn since the trial. They were adopted by a family who, he claims, “brainwashed” them. He saw his youngest daughter only twice, years ago. He is still a very frustrated man.

He explains the crime now as “an alcoholic blackout.”

And it cannot be repaired
The way you mend a chair . . .

He wrote those lines before he killed Roslyn, in a poem entitled “The Suffering.”

“I don’t think I could have been more punished,” Jim Lewisohn says, crying.

-Written by James Lewisohn in prison

Surely, This Is Odysseus

I have been away all day
waiting my turn.
Surely, before the winter comes,
which is inevitable the Buddhists say,
I will travel. I will see
the one thing
I have been waiting for
a beginning
not the same unholy unprofane.

And if this were so
I would not wish upon the evening star
or learn the Ugaritic word for love
nor bend the root for the rain in it

like the shepherd of this place
I’d give it up.

My friend the Janitor
who forgets my name
after all these years
polishing the same floors each day
who, after clean up
sleeps till 5
in a land of his own making.

I have seen him sleeping
with his brooms
and said
surely this is Odysseus.

He’s collected centuries of paper
and never kept a word.

Through rows of Plato he goes
as through thin air
speaking only of his need.

Backwards backwards
to the darkened cave
to voyages that gathered by surprise the sun
relinquishing
the myths
the lexicographies
of love.

-Written by James Lewisohn in prison