

Cadences

My mother said:

Barrie Kosky used to wear a T-shirt that read:

‘Loud Pushy Jew. Deal With It.’

Neither loud nor pushy I wore one anyway. One out of three would do me.

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Her daughter said:

Today my mother saved a dragonfly. Tiny, it flittered in a shallow mountain pool. At that size dragonflies are called nymphs, and nymphs, they say, can live in water.

This one was drowning.

Palm open, she slid her hand under it, lifting it, easing it onto the dry whorl of her forefinger. Its wings lay limp to one side. Oh Lord, she should have left it. On its own it might have had a chance.

But now the dragonfly shivered in a breeze, rested, shivered again. An infinitesimal tremor. And then, hovering on light-fragmented lacework, it flew.

Her parents had taught her: “Whoever saves a life, it is considered as if she saved an entire world.”

Tonight my mother killed a cockroach. He’d crawled up and out of her washing machine, slick and shiny. A swift slipper crushed him.

‘My house,’ she said. ‘not yours,’ and flushed him.

‘But if you take a life,’ I asked, ‘isn’t it considered as if you had destroyed an entire world?’

She did not answer.

‘Gun control,’ she said at last, just a day after the Columbine High School massacre.

She fell silent but I knew to wait.

‘This disaster wouldn’t have happened if there had been proper gun control.’

I waited some more.

‘But,’ she said, ‘do you think that if every Jewish family had had one gun, only one, that they could have rounded us all up like that? Said my house, not yours? Flushed us?’

She said ‘us’, even though I had been born long after the fact.

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My mother said:

I took Hitler to bed. And even though I knew him well it was still hard-going.

A month for me to read the 221 pages. A month for him to slash and burn 8000 bodies.

Every month.

For six years.

*

Her daughter said:

Every so often, if I’m not careful with my feet, I find that I have clicked my heels together and landed somewhere completely other. Not Berlin, 1939, the Hitler salute. Not that sort of heel-click.

But not Kansas, either.

If they could see me now, that little gang of mine, by this campfire, in this twilight, starving after a day’s hiking, relieved after liberating a day’s worth of piss into my trowel-dug commode—but I know they can’t. See me. Never will. Don’t care to.

The fire flickers. It warps the air above and around and makes the gum leaves hum. Spinifex — the only thing that can tame the sand’s tyranny — holds it down so it may not shift and sting our eyes.

I have just heard the rhythm of the dark-eyed children, fierce freedom streaming from their drumming palms. They help me set up my swag. Their footfall is so light. I think it leaves no mark.

Unlike mine.

I'm a trekker on someone else's land.

One touches my curls and says she likes them. I ask if I may touch too and gently wind her hair through my fingers.

Distinct from the little gang, my mother—missed these past eighteen months— would have understood it all entirely. In her own mirror, she would have seen me struggling over rocks, determined but uncoordinated. Like her. She would have marvelled at the way I had learned to pick Spinifex out of my socks without ripping them.

But her heart would have stopped for an arctic moment when she saw that, without being taught, I also knew how to husband my drinking water until the next rest-stop. Better than most. Having imbibed it somehow. My parents had learned that trick on forced marches. A different country. Another time. No rest stops.

Yet out here, in the fire-lit silence of the land, I know my mother can see me now.

*

My mother said:

I'd had this dream, back in the old country, of performing in front of applauding thousands. So many lessons. So many beautiful lessons.

But.

War.

The reality of the new country saw the ballet master placing my daughter to the far left in the back row of every ensemble.

Fly, I would whisper, but she couldn't.

As a young girl, worshipping at the feet, as it were, of Anna Pavlova, I had ached to fly just as lightly. But I learned that the more Pavlova danced, ghost on gossamer, the more her feet bled, right through to the pale satin of her pointes.

I took my daughter to see Nureyev and Fonteyn. Alive on the stage they were whirlwinds colliding, not answerable to gravity. The Melbourne theatre was sold out but Antipodean restraint decreed that applause must always be tempered by decorum.

Once in London, we went to see them again—feet fast and nimble, their bodies and brains currents in flux. The audience leapt up shouting ‘Bravo!’ tossing roses onto the stage. Some even fell to their knees.

This was how it was supposed to be?

Yes, I said, like this.

*

Her daughter said:

She teaches me that there is music made by deaf composers and that there are blind painters who choose colours of earth and sky. And also, she says, I’ve heard of writers whose hands are so tangled they need someone else to touch the keys. And limping through the park is a thin, old man—look there, she says—and I see he wears Uluru on his T-shirt right above his heart where Uluru really dwells. She shows me there are those called Down who have the gift of smiling and others who roll on wheelchairs as they battle to compete. Still others travel the spectrum, the bright-darkness of their brains taking them on journeys into the gleaming unknown.

But haven’t you heard?

Her voice flicks ice pellets into the humid air.

Haven’t you heard? If no one ever looks at them, it means they don’t exist. So look away. It’s just a quick turn of the head. And that way you need never hear their music, see

their colours, walk with them through Country, roll with them as they shoot for goal or glide with them fast and fine through water to reach that finish line.

It's easy. It's humanity's greatest talent.

Just look away.

*

My mother said:

I went because I needed to find out what might happen if I dared. So now I am trekking north of the Alice towards Black Tank Bore.

Trekkers behind me? I worry I'm delaying them. Ahead of me? I could lose sight of them, be left alone.

We rest against rocks, sucking on oranges laced with red sand. Teeth music.

Far below, tracks of the Ghan across the Nullarbor, like my tracks, irrelevant in the vastness.

God, the silence.

What am I doing? Trying to connect to landsong older than Jerusalem? Trying to see whether the place I sailed to after my camping nightmare (concentration not outback) offers more than synagogue high-holy hymns?

What am I doing? Trying to be like my daughter, who writes pencil-and-paper lyrics anywhere: in the wild; leaning against tree trunks. Me ? I am a rag trader. I need caffeine—sometimes something stronger—to activate my own driven urges; I need street-cacophony, searing synapses to marshal my fingers and hands over fabrics and patterns and designs. It is my city soul, something to do with strands of urban DNA, ghetto blood.

But if I'm already here, I must commit to memory — so I need never return — the eternal canticles of rock and Spinifex rising from ground that only grudgingly allows me to sit on its raw-boned lap.

Songlines shiver. I am an uninvited guest at a party 100,000 years old...

Yet still I trek.

Here, the land is stolen.

Here, tormented painters anoint sun-struck rock: turquoise and purple, scarlet and silver. Here, the land protests my heavy tread. Where is the light brown step of long ago, the nimble footfall that left no mark?

All I have are these booted feet, this endless apology.

Yet sometimes I want to say, I belong here too. I came by boat, the lives of my family forfeit. Can't we share? There's so much...

How is it possible to breathe in the leaves, the earth, the air and say they smell of this or that?

What does eternity smell like?

Or absence?

A heron gliding

A dingo howling?

Yhi, Sun Goddess, created Man after all else was brought into the world. And after all else was brought into the world, Yahweh said, Let us make Man.

Stories written long ago to be read forever.

Some call them fairy tales. Some call them Torah,

Everyone has their dreaming.

Out here I can dream again too...

And yet, I can't sleep.

It's the stars.

Not those nebulous, negligible pin-holes of light dying in the city, but desert stars: fat diamonds, silver-dark genius of the gods.

I can't sleep.

Hydrogen-debris in a cosmos of light. Vapour, white flame, split and glowing. Nuclei fused. Now, let there be woman, showered in stardust, detonated earthward to that deadly Garden. We all of us are children of those starlit parents, those heated shards of heaven's core, the matter of those ruined ones—translucent, bloodless souls—who never knew how to appease God's firestorm and then hold us. Especially when we could not sleep...

And did you know (she tells me), that in the desert language of our people one word does for wind and spirit both. Far from where we all live (she continues), that single, two-pronged word throws out potent lures of restless sand. Mirages. For me. For the city-born.

But no mirage my house, its handsome sandstone bricks, roseate in sunsets, where Truelove spins his warming tales of plenty. Where children immerse me in the endless music of their strife.

And in the ways they say, I love you:

Do you always have to go? How long will you be? It's dangerous out there. Wish you were back (before I've even gone). Wish you were home. Safe. Where we can see touch have hold you.

But they will not hold the part of me that wanders—never that—over fossil rocks, through feral cactus, under an ochre sun that cracks my skin and a white moon that cools it. Sleeping under stars that float on milk.

And yet I know it is at the root of me to have them want me. Have me light the Sabbath candles for them, bless the sweet wine, sing the old songs. I need it as much as they do. It calms the gale that blusters through the freedom seeker, the northward trekker in me.

There is the noisesome welcome of homecoming that dwindles into silence, house dark, secure, all beds filled, Truelove covering my belly with his. Then—exactly then—I miss the desert’s thrumming heat, its night-time chill, its gallant embrace.

And as I lie sated on sheets of Egyptian cotton, my head on ivory down pillows, the spirit-wind whispers: You can’t stay.

*

Her daughter says:

I know she is waiting for the Word to crash upon creation, making ancient stars flare in skies this night. She is waiting for God to confess his frailty, in his world where fraud is extolled and innocence condemned. She is waiting for her leaders to repent the chaos of their devising and hang their prideful heads. Or merely hang. She is waiting for Nobel to cite our surname and for her ruined child to heal and be named too. She is waiting for another chance at childhood if she only had the key to unlock time. And in that swift unlocking she would slay the executioners even if it booked her place in Hell.

She is waiting for the spider spinning silk inside her letterbox to teach her all the ways it might be done. She is waiting for the gecko flicking gold around her bathtub to shed its gleaming scales upon her brow. And in the purgatory of this waiting she hangs helpless in time’s gridlock, in this never-ending wait to stop the waiting...

*

Her daughter says:

Over coffee my friend told me, ‘I let Fieldmarshal off his leash yesterday. Turned my back for one second and he lifts a whole chicken from someone’s picnic hamper. The guy was pretty irate when I suggested that if people were going to leave things unguarded on or around grassy knolls—to wit, a chicken, or possibly even a president —what did they expect?’

I ambled homeward, recalling a childhood train trip taken to Mount Buffalo with my parents. At Wangaratta station we had stopped for a meal and I’d ordered the fried fish. My mother generally forbade all things fried so this was a particular treat. Half-way through the meal, my child’s bladder had felt the call. Answering it caused me to turn my back on my plate for just a few minutes. When I returned I found a waitress had cleared away my plate.

Many years have passed since then and now I find myself at the hospital watching my mother die. I am unable to be there always but when I am I infuriate staff by asking for extra bowls and plates for the chicken soup, sweet buttered pumpkin, watermelon and pineapple cut into cubes, and the odd almond croissant. Once these had been favourites; now I feed them to her slowly, hopefully, hopelessly.

The dietician says she must eat more; the endocrinologist says she must watch her blood-sugar levels; the gerontologist says she must read to stimulate her neurotransmitters. Sure, I think. Neurotransmitters.

I grovel to the nurses, bringing them chocolates, magazines, pretty little bags of toiletries, sweet-talking and humouring them, so they will be kind to my mother—my little mother—when I’m not there, when I have to go home.

When I leave her unguarded.

*

My mother says:

Every painter is born somewhere. Marc Chagall said it.

Every writer must have an address. Isaac Bashevis Singer said it.

Ironic, isn't it? Both were wanderers, fantasists of images and words, surviving the Thousand Year Reich. Both were whisked from home, out of Europe, just in time. They roamed America, birthplaces and addresses extinguished.

I have often wondered what my fate might have been had I been able to paint or write. Perhaps Auschwitz might not have been my destination. In which case I would never have met Truelove and our children would never have been born. Anywhere.

Last night I dreamt—yes, one can still dream in the grave—that I was back, helping my daughter choose an outfit for some elegant occasion. I prized all things beautiful, easily sidestepping the gaudy or ostentatious. With unerring sensibility I could always find the garment best suited to her, a lifetime in the rag-trade having given me an infallible eye for *le vêtement juste*.

But in my eighties, so much of it slipped away: memories plagued me; Parkinson's and Bipolar ruined me. In the camps, I remember, finding some water, trickling it through my cousin's lips but still she died. Where she lay there was no mercy for Jew, Roma, or Gay.

I remember too, how not so long before the end, I cried out, reached out, for the hand of my other daughter, Vivienne—the one I named after my own mother. And as the clouds darkened slowly at the crossroads I would think she *was* my mother.

I know that Vivienne hated her namesake. She could not forgive the grandmother she had never met for risking the lives of her children for a myth, for a God, the curse of the Jews. In the grandmother's pre-war household the non-Jewish housekeeper had begged her mistress to come to her farmhouse, distant from Budapest, to hide herself and her children there.

I will look after you. They won't ever find you. I won't let them. Please, you have always been so good to me.

But the grandmother refused the offer, afraid of the food in the servant's house: it would not be kosher. So she died. The child she would not relinquish—my brother—died with her. Only I survived.

But from inside this forever darkness I know it does not matter too much what the painters or the writers say. It did not matter whether I had quit the earth on a howl or an exhale; I was fragmented by what I had been obliged to witness without art's veneer. So being born somewhere, Mr Chagall, or having an address, Mr Bashevis Singer? Eventually don't we all die somewhere and share the same address?

*

My mother says (in conclusion):

Numbers is the 4th Book of the Pentateuch wherein the Elders take a census, counting every Jew of fighting age: 600,000 of them, or so the story goes. Here I take a different census with different Numbers.

Foreword:

The mathematics of language has always enthralled me, the way it calculates. But the language of mathematics has always eluded me. Still there are those—of genius it is said—who hear in its impenetrable formulae the music of angels. In its infinitude, they maintain, its clarion call to reason is the sweetest music of all.

Herewith—Mathematics of the Dead.

Rollcall of the Numbers of the lost:

in Ghettos: 86,800

in Pogroms: 43,000

by Einsatzgruppen (death squads): 500,000

the Children: 1,000,000

in Camps: 3,333,000

on Death Marches: 250,000

at Liberation: 67,600

13,000 corpses unburied,

10,000 dead from typhus or malnutrition over weeks following liberation.

Death Toll:

5,869,169

Light broken in prisms,

pastel chalk paintings

washed away by rain.

So what if just 1,000 of, say, the six-year-olds had lived till the age of 80? 74,000 more years on earth for them.

Even if each bore only one child. 1,000 more children.

What if even 5,000,000 had, on a sliding scale commensurate with their age, lived another 20,30, 40, 50, or 60 years?

What if all of them had been granted but a fraction of that, say another 20 years each?

100,000,000 years in total.

One hundred million years. Unlived.

I remember we learned that Abraham argued with God about Sodom and Gomorrah.

Would You sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Abraham asked. What if there are fifty righteous people in the city?

There are not, said God.

What if there are forty?

Thirty?

Twenty?

Ten?

'Even for the sake of ten, I would not destroy it,' God promised.

Archaeologists posit there were up to 1,200 people living in those two towns at the time of fire and brimstone, and not ten righteous among them, not even one percent. So God, do You claim that among 6,000,000 souls you could not find one per cent of the righteous in whose name you could have spared them all?

Those first 600,000 Israelites? Millennia later You multiplied them by 10 then made them vanish.

Your 13 attributes of mercy? Another hollow-hearted Number.

You mock us with Your graceless gifts,

Burning each symbol as you go,

Converting them and us

to ash.