

Ashtanga

And then there is yoga.

I'm not surprised. You, a singer, would do yoga. To sustain yourself, your body. And in this new land, where you could not sing for supper, you teach yoga.

You invite me to your class. This I do not expect -- nor my reactions.

Venue, the community center: dowdy inside, body odors emanate from lime-washed, palm-smudged walls; pungent, sweat-soaked, sour, leavened with mold. One mirrored wall, its mirrors pock-marked with age, like the liver-spotted skin of elderly hands.

The class, mostly Russian emigre ladies yearning to be beautiful; at least to feel so: corpulence, puckered thighs, cellulitic arms, pendulous webs of flesh slung from upper arms, flapping flesh, like vestigial wings. As if these women are preparing to take off, be removed from their bodies. As they once escaped Russian gulags, they now hoped to escape their bodies. Two men also. Had heard that you would be teaching: the new teacher, shapely, elegant, a Frenchie. To cop a look. Also Russian, these are adorned with so many chains and rings and bracelets, they give new meaning to heavy metal. Latex tights the men wore, the better to show a genital bulge, their best endowment.

A dingy room with overworn carpet, thin Rubbermaid mats or personal shmattes rolled before each neophyte's toes, two rows facing each other, knockkneed. You place me at your left, caution me to be at ease, breathe into each movement, not force the muscles.

Whatever.

Ashtanga yoga, you explain, you teach; pure, no faddish Bikram sauna. As they stand, the women with eyes shut, palms up, fingers touching, they moan "Om,"; the men, eyes peering right, at you, simply moan. You chant the eight limbs of Ashtanga: yama, self-restraint; myama, discipline; asana, posture; pranayama, breath control; pratyana, sense control; dharana, concentration; dhyana, meditation; samadhi, contemplation. I can't absorb all of this. I mumble the phrases to myself, hope to burn them into my memory along with you. How I recall this Hindu-babble, only because it fell from your lips.

After your death. I murmur the words, memorize them, I resurrect you with each breath, the breaths you had taught me in the class. The breath you kept saying you couldn't catch.

Sssaa, with each inhalation. Khhaa with each exhalation.

From the back of the throat you tell us to breathe. Empty the belly; breathe in the lungs, into the hollow of your armpits, down the spine, to the tailbone.

(But, now, your soul, n'shama, I no longer can inhale, n'shima.)

The class is at moments funny, at moments intimate.

The bandhas you teach next. The bandhas precede each movement, the asanas.

Begin from the top.

The jalandhara bhand, the neck lock, you teach. Contract the neck and throat, chin resting on collarbone notch, keeping head level. You assure us: the Kundalini yoga kriyas (those involuntary twitches, tremors as tensions are released) generate vast energy, produce psychic heat, pranic nadis channels are opened. If this bhand is not done, pressure may occur in our eyes, ears, heart.

Proceeding downwards, is the uddiyana bhand, the diaphragm lock: create a cavity to massage the heart muscles, stimulate compassion. Apply on exhale.

Later, you insist I need more uddiyana bhand, more compassion. For you.

In the end, you teach the mul bhand, the root lock, the perineum lock. You recite, "Contract the anal sphincter, draw it up -- also the sex organ." (How quaint.) "Now the naval point drawn in, to invite the the prana, our generative energy, join with the apana, our eliminative energy."

Only then, do you begin the various positions, contortions, body twists, spine arcs: upward dog, downward dog. Then you pour out words whose meanings I don't recall, but whose sounds flutter in my mouth, murmur across my lips, like a stream over smooth rocks, so that I can evoke you; purvatasana, navasana, soopta kurmasana, soopta konasana, upavishtakonasana.

I watch even as I perform (or try to perform). You, recite, breathe, move from student to student (as we all are students of our bodies, our souls, you demur). A touch on her; a shift of his upward reaching hand towards his face; your foot presses another's foot. Brief touches, gentle, without eros.

Then you surprise me. As I try to contort into some sort of lotus -- soles to my inner thighs, knees out and down, elbows on knees, palms inward, upward, fingers touching -- you sit. Before me. You shift into me. Like yin into yang, you fit yourself into me, gracefully. How you do this, I don't understand, but the final position is like key into lock, or like Plato's parable of the original beings -- two-headed, eight-limbed. A woman entering a man -- a wonder. Facing me, your legs cradle my right knee, your left shin presses inside my right, downward, opens me, your right hand on my left arm, shoulder, opens me further. And then, you breathe sotto voce, eyes to my eyes, "Open your chest upwards, open your heart." I am entranced: gentle sensuality without eros, a being held by you for a few moments longer.

Later, a Russian woman, whose face is a hunk of flesh with two eyes embedded, tries to lean forward, sitting, legs and arms extended. You aid her wordlessly. From behind, you make a backwards bridge. (Later, you call it Purvatanasana.) Your legs extend, soles to the mat, arms reach backwards, you cradle her. Your palms to the mat, your back on hers, your face upwards, your head in the nape of her neck and you breathe with her. The two of you breathe as one. As I yearned to do with you; one being, forever.

In yoga, you breathe, outside you could not breathe.

In such manner, I wanted to be held by you, suspended in time.

But, time would not remain suspended for us.