

Breathless: Unspoken Words After Death

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The Bal Shem Tov, (“owner of the good name”) the eighteenth century rabbi who was also a ritual slaughterer of cattle, would prepare before cutting the throat of each cow. To be certain that the knife was sharp enough, to inflict no pain, the Bal Shem Tov first pricked his finger, then sacrificed the animal, the “Ba’al Chaim,” “owner of life.”

Honing the Knife

The edge I honed. The knife was my bow, my throat its Stradivarius. My ancient violin teacher taught: don't clutch the violin's neck, don't choke it. All these years, I felt choked. Now I am released.

This you don't know, son: why I must breathe. These final words I pray for you to hear after my death. I am suspended in a dream-ether, in Limbo, until you dream my words.

Standing in Kinneret's waves, standing where I make *Shekhita*, ritual slaughter, the waves brought back memories. Four or five waves sway me, followed by one that almost swept me away. The spray, which tasted Ocean, are my tears. The tides' smell; his sweat.

Twelve, my mother sent me, forced me to equestrian camp -- me, Sephardi Jewish girl -- dark, long hair, brown eyes -- among lithe blond, blue-eyed Cote d'Azur *Shiksas*. The sun transformed their skin to a light copper; mine to burnished bronze. My mother, my immigrant mother, insisted that I was Olympic material, forced me to spend the summer doing what I hated -- dressage, *haute école*, wicker hurdles.

My body then was like yours, son --- too tall, rangy -- my ropey muscles showed clearly; coach used this body to demonstrate which muscle groups to tense for exercises. Leather-wrapped riding crop he extended to my legs, articulated the muscles. Clin- ically, he traced them on this leg — mine — enunciating: *gastrocnemius*, *quadriceps*, *hamstrings* and especially

sartorius. He liked sartorius, the longest muscle in humans, coursing from the hip in front, wrapping inwardly around the thigh to the inner tibia. Sartorius, named after tailors, who used this muscle to sit, cross-legged to sew. "Sartorius," he expounded, "rotates the leg outward, releases you from the mount, or the mount from your pressure." He traced his black leather riding crop slowly: lingered along my inner thigh upward, then inward; through my riding pants, tightly stretched jodhpurs. I felt thrice: the tracing on my skin; the unwilling twitching lip muscles inside my privates; the shame.

This happened the third day. We were up at 5:30; huge breakfast so that we could practice until one; lunch to hold us to six. The girls despised me, teased about my accent, resented the coach's adulation, called me "Kikey." Meals, I'm shunned; evenings, I'm tormented.

The assistant coach noticed at dinner: his long ponytail, glistening silk; baritone voice velvet fog. Invited to his table, he said, "I saw what they were doing." Put his arm

around my shoulder, "Everything will be all right." "But something about the day's training I want to discuss, control your canter, restrain from gallop -- use the adductors." He strokes them, the inner thighs. "Stop in my room tonight; I will help."

(Son, there is a pattern to the waves. I count to learn it; perhaps every half dozen are followed by a sweeping wave that near-tumbles me as it recedes, sweeping sand from beneath my feet -- first excavating beneath my toes, then arch, then calcaneus -- I struggle to keep footing. The rippled sand beneath my souls feel like the ridged palate of one's mouth. Memories of time lost also near-tumbles me even now.)

I lost that night. A night lost from my words and mind. What I tell you now (some last words you will hear from me) I remember kaleidoscopically years later. Then, all I knew was a lost night: the head coach found me standing in morning fog, clothed, riding boots missing, knee-deep in the lake, not moving. He screamed at me, "Filthy Jewish slut! You haven't slept in the bed. Where have you been?" Demanded: "Speak!"

I didn't speak. Ponytail's last commandment to me, "Don't speak."
For three decades, I don't speak; I become listener, looker.
The coach called my parents, threw me off the team.
My mother, to prove them wrong, took me to the gynecologist. An archaic
man,

middle European accent, white van Dyke, his thickened red fingers (like a
butcher's) yanked a white curtain that ran on a "U"-rail around the bed.
Metal curtain rings screeched and pealed as he jerked them closed. "For
privacy," this toad croaked. A chilling metal speculum pried open the labia;
cold metal (like the butcher's knife before the sacrificial blood warms it). He
summoned his students to an "Amazing sight, an in- tact hymen!" (I still see
his wagging, van Dyke, trembling with excitement of this "amazing sight."
The reddish tongue jittering between the bristled dry lips.) An "amazing
sight" relieved my mother. His speculum froze my heart.

Time froze. My hands stayed small. (From what they touched?) My feet
also (be- cause I did not run?).

Years, like waves, reveal fragments. When you and I stood on Caesaria's
shore -- I showed you -- the waves, the tides peel back centuries of sand to
reveal the Roman glass, the ruins of the Hippodrome, where chariot races,
blood-letting, battles entertained. As I prepared for my *Shekhita*, honing the
blade's edge-- each pass of blade against the whetstone stripped back
years, sharpened, honed memory -- revealed pictures: the small single
bed, the chenille bed cover, mustardy yellow, with tufts that leave their
impression on your cheek after a nap. (More waves, more picture
memories.) A plastic-rimmed yellowed photo above the narrow twin bed of
Les Halles before its destruction; another of an old resort, wraparound
porch, empty rockers aligned, still, frozen in place.

After thirty years, what I recall seems mundane, quotidienne. He said, "It is
good for a young girl to learn how to love." And, "Dark Jewish girls are good
for loving."

He tried to enter below, but couldn't. I "succeed" with one thing in my life.
The rest is unclear, except my choking, suffocating, breathlessness. Did he

enter my mouth? (I almost say, "Does he enter my mouth," as the past seems too present.) For all my brain struggles, even to the moment of my *Shekhita*, I don't have the words to say it, only decades of suffocation, now relieved.

What happened two years later, what happens seems less, hurts more. My uncle, wealthy, invited us to his summer home in Sausalito, California, U.S.A. (In his French-accented English, he called it "Sow-salito.") His wealth came from scrap metal: twisted car torsos, dismembered organs, sold for parts. At his San Francisco "graveyard," beneath the 280 overpass crossing near a desolate Bay inlet, he made autopsies, squashed remains, made fortunes. The compressed metal carcasses bled oil into Islais Creek Channel, the rainbow greasy slick seeping into, polluting the Bay.

He invited us -- his poorer brother and family -- to spend the month. We slept in the nursery, my brother and sisters. At midday, the Frenchman needs his nap, "*faire un petit somme*." We are ordered, "Leave the pool, go with the nanny for cookies and then to the nursery." Not hungry, I go alone to the nursery.

He appeared; closed the door; said I should come rest with him; I should not be alone.

I was reading Peter Pan; still at fifteen, I was reading children's books. I said, "No." He stiffened, he pronounced, his finger jaggling metronomically with each word, "You are beautiful but stupid (*une becasse!*); you shouldn't speak."

I didn't speak, until now.

(Can you hear my voice, my son?)

I wondered what these men thought was so special down there; went with my cousin to the bathroom with my mother's compact mirror to look. (This compact was fi-lagreed from the Wiener Werkstatte, by Dagobart Peche. Inside, one half is mirrored, the other half soft blue velvet.) It rested on her dressing table by Hugo Hoffman. Above the mirror hung a 1900 Klimt of the

pregnant woman, head bowed right hand raised, her gown embroidered in gold and red chrysanthemums. She too looked down “there,” but in resignation.

What drove them down there? We glimpsed a clitoral bumplet and the glistening redness inside. What did they want with such things?

Older, I learn I am considered beautiful, my dark hair to the waist. Heads turned -- men and women’s -- when I entered restaurants, the opera hall. For a time, I dress “punk,” rags, tatters, massive pins impaling my fabric, hair matted; didn't protect me enough.

You’ve seen the photos of my singing diva days. I abjured equestrian hurdles, gymnastics to sing. I rose quickly to fame by mid-20’s; well-regarded by thirty. Opera: I sang, they looked, they listened, *did not touch*. But, I yearned for you, for a child, for a son. Your sperm-father took lessons in the company, hoped to get in. Young, he looked like a model for Hitler youth, worlds away from my dark Sephardi Jewish men. I tried hard to stay away from the dark haired, dark-eyed, olive skin Sephardim, like my father, my uncle. I commanded myself “Pick opposite!” I find a young “Nazi. You will some day read Shaw’s *Man and Superman*; how a mother, resigned that she cannot improve her husband, bends herself to create a superman of her son.

I tried with your spermfather. I would help with his career, improve his technique, get him jobs, maybe in the company. My director warned against him; eight years younger, a needle addict (reformed, he insisted), missed rehearsals, even performances. Only now, after death, can I see, literally picture him: this blond long-pony-tailed lithe-bodied man reminded me of the assistant coach. Did I try to “cure” that coach by curing your father? I, like some alchemist of men’s souls, would transform the dross of sperm-fuck into the mucousy gold of love.

Wait. I suffocate as I say this; must catch a breath.

You know too much of what happened later. He fucked me. I got you. (I wanted you.) He screamed: “This baby will ruin my career! I will beat him

out of you!” Pregnant, I couldn’t partner him, and my colleagues wouldn’t tolerate his slip-ups.

Uncanny. He began to strangle me as he fucked me; strangle-fuck. I was breathless.

He entered from behind, jerked my head backwards until my breathing stopped. “I’ll ride you like a camel, bitch!” He beat my belly like a tympani until I went to hospital, bleeding from below and you emerged early, but alive.

I escaped with you to the Holy Land, to raise you alone. You would not suffocate women. I would dedicate my life to raising a man who wouldn’t suffocate, my little Superman. I no longer sang. My career was destroyed.

You began to look like him: take on the shape of his face, drawn, like a Modigliani; your eyes, at moments vacant; cheeks hollow; your lips would move as you listened to someone, as if some *golem* were speaking through you; your hair, your step. You danced like Nijinsky, a petite fawn.

I served you breakfast in bed -- *gratinee de pomme de terre*. You sent me to the closet to bring you clothes; you demanded the blue chemise, threw it back into my face angrily, demanding the white. You smashed your alarm clock; I was to awaken you. “It’s your responsibility!” you insisted, articulating all six syllables, “re-spon-si-bil-i-ty.” You failed your fractions and before your teacher, you turned to me, calmly, quietly announced, “It’s your responsibility.” Quietly. It was my responsibility: I chose your father.

You demanded I remain home while you were at school; you would forget your lunch, phone me: bring it immediately, warmed.

Like your sperm-father, you spoke quietly, sweetly, except for episodes of cold fury.

Then, I met Chanan. After twelve years with only you. I loved him.

You refused permission. How dare I see another man? We were a couple. You needed no other man. You disdained your friends with fathers, siblings; they lost moth- er-time.

Suffocation returns in tsunamis. The first when I was 12; next at 15, then a series with your father as he strangle-fucked me. With you, it built gradually, as if I were riding the edge of the wave, which then crested behind, then over, into a spiraling death tube threatening to crush me.

Son, I needed to breathe, once again freely. I needed to feel nothing between the air and my lungs. That is why *Shekhita*. Open the trachea to breathe freedom. Nothing stuffed in my mouth, throat to suffocate me. I planned and practiced, like some Jewish hari-kari, but without an assistant to complete the *coup*. I would outdo Mishima.

Months, I prepared. The *Katzav*, the butcher saw me frequently. (*Katzav*, the word for butcher also comes from the word for beat, the rhythmic beat as the butcher chops flesh on his wood block.) First liver, slices, each shimmering, trembling momentarily (as if trying to remain upright after slaughter, a moment longer), then collapsing, slapping onto the previous slice. Then, chicken necks to feel the skin, then the trachea before the bone. Then, cows' necks. The butcher believed that these were for soups, the marrow first scraped out with delicate, long handled, silver espresso spoons, then, bone pressed against pursed lips, sucked. But, before bones enter into soup, I practice with the knife, feel the skin as the knife's edge catches its edge. Then, through the trachea to release the breath (I imagined), I found the carotids to bring me rest and warmth.

And, I honed, and I honed the bow of death to play against my throat. I chose a Wusthoff, good German steel; I would match their metal with my metal to do the deed.

The Baal Shem Tov, the great scholar, was a *shochet*. Before he sacrificed a cow, he tested the blade's edge with his finger; drew his own blood; shed his own tear -- for the animal about to die.

My last breath, my precious last breath, was the freest breath since I was twelve. I stood in the lake. I shed a tear of joy and sadness. Some pain as the knife drew across the skin, my throat slipping slightly beneath its edge, until the edge could catch, bite. Then through the trachea for that final, but

decades-delayed breath. Then through the carotids to bathe my knife, then my hands in last warmth.

You see, my son, unlike Abraham over Isaac, unlike God over Jesus, I will not sacrifice you. But, through you I, I could breathe again.

I am suspended for now in Limbo so that I can release unspoken words to you, words of how to love a woman. When you receive these — if you receive these — in your dreams, I can be released from this suspension, released to a final freedom. Listen hard.

I can speak to you, from a dream-ether, from Limbo.

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