

# She and I



Natania Rosenfeld

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# SHE AND I

NATANIA ROSENFELD



#103

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For Lynette Lombard, my vital *she*

## LIFE AND DEATH

### LATE SPRING

LITERATURE, I observe to my mother, tends not to take the old seriously, except as tragic figures. As protagonists, they are virtually absent from the novel, perhaps because “novel” means new and the are—old. Muriel Spark’s *Memento Mori* treats its group of old and dying friends and family as absurd, sinful creatures, with the exception of one retainer, living out her last days in a nursing home, who sees with clear eyes what a sorry business it all is. Recently, I read Stanley Elkin’s *Mrs. Ted Bliss*, which takes that figure of fun, the Jewish grandma living out her final years in Florida, and humanizes her. I was moved, but the novel was sometimes hard going. As, I suppose, old age is.

At the height of June, Neil and I have come to Ohio to visit my parents in the old-age home—or rather, the “senior community”—where they moved a year ago. Surrounded by ponds, woods and fields, with a group of intelligent people desirous of spending their last years close to a college town, the place is surprisingly vibrant. While the moribund are kept in their own facility, everyone else is engaged in a buzz of hobbies, conversation, good works, exercise, and artistic creation. The only unsettling about it all is the absence of young people. Otherwise, we say to each other, one could get used to living here, as on a kibbutz that makes such good money no one needs to work very hard—a Quaker kibbutz.

Between the time of year and the absence of youth, the people here are finely tuned to new life. A bog turtle crawled ashore from the pond—

a great distance—the other night, dug a deep hole near someone’s cottage, laid her eggs, and covered them assiduously. The neighbors put sticks around the area and called Maintenance to make sure the lawn-care people stay away. The babies should hatch in a month or two, and they are the talk of the dining hall. Will they make it though—through their eggs and then the earth above them? How will they know to crawl towards the pond? Will their mother recognize them? There is a great deal of Googling going on in the quiet cottages, and suspense over the fates of these and other quadrupeds: baby rabbits, fawns, all the living effluvia of a bucolic setting.

A fabric artist has gallery space in town; one of her colleagues has created an exhibit of live silkworms spinning their cocoons. We went to see the fat, white caterpillars hanging and crawling in leaves of mulberry. They are chalk-white, have segmented bodies and a strange, brown, protruding proboscis. They lift their front bodies away from the leaf like cobras and feel around in space with that mobile nose. The creatures are both repulsive and beautiful. I want to touch them and, at the same time, to look away.

The fabric artist collects kittens in the back room and puts them up for adoption. I sit down in their enclosure and let the mewling babies crawl over me. They try to climb my pants legs and I lift them in the air to frighten them a little, then set them down on my thigh, where they look down in terror as if from a mountaintop. Too late, I notice that one kitten has had diarrhea and her paws are filthy. I get out of the enclosure and wash my hands.

When we emerge from the gallery, we find Bella and Jack, also from the senior community, sitting outside on the edge of a large stone flowerpot. Bella is eighty five, Jack, ninety three. They are licking ice cream cones, each with one eye closed, squinting up at the blue sky. “Aren’t they wonderful?” says Bella, who used to own a crafts gallery herself.

“Ice cream cones?” I ask.

“Well, yes, they’re wonderful, but I meant the silkworms.”

She explains silkworms to me: how they emerge as white moths from

their cocoons, mate and reproduce, and die within four days, their life’s work finished.

Since January, twenty of the community’s residents have died—most recently, my father’s former boss. I used to hear this man’s name throughout years of my childhood, and day-before-yesterday, he died over his dinner: out like a light in the midst of soup. “That’s the way to go,” says my mother. My father is helping the widow translate a German poem she wants read at the memorial service. It, the poem, is not his style. It expresses a full belief in the existence of a benevolent God, but he engages nonetheless, working to help her get it right. The widow is exhausted, and seems ready to follow her husband before long; then again, perhaps she’ll perk up, as some women do, when the burial is over.

AS YET, I know nothing of my parents’ funeral or burial plans; it’s early still. I’m fairly sure that my mother wants to be cremated, but my father, as a Jew, is required to lay his intact body in the earth. Do the two of them want to lie side-by-side? Then they can’t be buried in a Jewish graveyard, where goyim are forbidden. Perhaps my father would like his body taken to Philadelphia, where he grew up, to be buried with his family members, and my mother would like her ashes . . . but what would she want done with her ashes? Perhaps she would like them strewn by his headstone, as my grandmother—her mother—had half hers strewn by Opa’s headstone. My mother kept the other half, and I will probably keep half of hers. But I don’t like to think about all this. I want to think about life.

A number of people here, it is said, have, or plan to, put themselves to sleep when they know the end is coming. Some with fatal diagnoses put a bag over their heads and fill it with helium they obtain from a whispered source. Some starve themselves, supposedly a painless death if you no longer have the strength to be hungry. The obituary says *died of natural causes*, or names the diagnosed disease. And shouldn’t they have the right, as animals do, to depart with minimal agony? Next to a book on dog care,

by the bed, my mother keeps Derek Humphry's *Final Exit*. Children have teddy bears for nighttime comfort; the old have *Final Exit*.

"During their short lives," the writer W.G. Sebald tells us, "which last only six or seven weeks, [silkworms] are overcome by sleep on four occasions and, after shedding their old skin, emerge from each one re-made, always whiter, smoother and larger . . . . And then, constantly moving its head back and forth and reeling out an uninterrupted thread almost a thousand yards long, [the silkworm] constructs the egg-shaped casing around itself. In this shell, which admits neither air nor moisture, the caterpillar changes into a nymph by sloughing off its skin for one last time. It remains in this state for two to three weeks in all, until the [moth] . . . emerges." The moth itself is chalk-white and can neither eat nor fly; still capable of reproduction, it is in every other way very old, its wings like the powdery skin of the dying.

The process of sloughing off is one all the elderly have gone through. They've come to this home with their most precious possessions. With bravado, they invite one another into their apartments, go on long walks, take care of their ailing spouses, enlist for volunteer jobs and mini-courses. Bella tells me, after a particularly grueling day at the ophthalmologist's office with Jack, who has cataracts in both eyes, "Getting old is hell." Yet she licks her ice cream, looks at the sky. As for my parents, they have just adopted a puppy—a very young dog who burrows in every night beneath the covers beside my mother, nudging *Final Exit* out of her hand.

I nudge in on the other side.

## EARLY AUTUMN

I'VE COME AGAIN to visit for a quick weekend. The widow of my father's former boss has, indeed, perked up. Bella is now having trouble with *her* eyes, but is determined not to dwell on it; Jack's bad leg is in a great deal of pain. My father is recovering at an infinitesimal rate from a sprained ankle,

and my mother has stenosis of the lower spine. "Mortality stinks," a friend of mine once said; she herself is seventy-seven now, and has an unspecified problem that makes walking difficult.

What *would* the true novel about old people look like, and what would it teach the reader? Would its author have to be old in order to truly render ageing and the confrontation with imminent death? The surgeon-writer Atul Gawande (himself still young) has written with painful precision, as well as compassion, about what happens to the body as it ages—but he doesn't talk about what it feels like. You would want, as the author of such a novel, to avoid the cliché of backward reflection; the true novel of age, rather than giving an account of the hero's life story, replete with nostalgia and regret, will describe the period from, say, sixty-five or seventy to eighty-five or ninety as virtuosically as so many great *Bildungsromans* have described childhood, youth, and early adulthood. Jane Eyre would find herself in a nursing home with Rochester returned to full blindness, crippled and dependent on her, or a victim of Alzheimer's. Each day would be the same, with minor worsening: she would take her own set of pills, then give him his, then answer the questions he's asked her a thousand times in the past week, or deal with his mistaking her for his first wife, the madwoman, who, it now emerges, was his only great love.

But Alzheimer's has been written about, and is its own case, apart from the banal experience of the body's deterioration and the mind's odd but composed forays. Perhaps no one has written the old-age novel because old age is quite simply prosaic, the most prosaic thing there is.

Yet I know from Bella, and even from my mother—I say "even" because my mother is a great deal less mobile than Bella—that the sense of wonder, the delight in beauty, the appreciation of nature, persists well into the fog of weak eyesight, growing deafness, and sadness as the world around becomes more alien and hard to navigate and one's contemporaries get ill and die. Lovely Bella—so perfectly named—is



still riding her bike and walking miles every day, and she and I go out together on a perfect autumn Sunday afternoon to stroll the periphery of the grounds. The leaves are sunrise-yellow and sunset-orange, small birds rustle, geese gather at the edge of the pond, the warm air of Indian summer is tinged with the slightest nip. If youth is the capacity for wonder, then old age is, indeed, a second childhood, but in a positive, not just a tragic sense. Bella appreciates it all; her smile is beatific, her laugh a delightful combination of mischief and discovery. We talk and talk; we are half in love, in that wonderful way that two beings from different cultures or in vastly different phases of life can suddenly discover one another and tumble straight into a deep understanding.

I wish with all my heart that my mother were as mobile as Bella. A dozen years younger, she is hobbled by arthritis, weight, and a long habit of being sedentary; and so, instead of going for walks together, we go on drives, we sit in separate armchairs, or we lie and cuddle on the bed. Close as we are, there is so much I don't know about her inner life, there is so much I wish I could *wrest* from her, for her own sake as well as mine. I think she could write the novel of ageing—there is a great deal she could write if she put her mind to it, but all the charming notebooks I buy for her and all the encouragement I give won't budge her in the conviction of having little to say, or too few words to say it.

But maybe the novel in question doesn't exist for the same reason that so few fully rendered accounts of childbirth exist: it doesn't bear writing about, because no reader, if they knew what it was really like, would want to go through it. And what old person, going through it, would want to write about it as well? Exhausting enough just to deal with age's ailments and slowness; to have to represent them, too?

In my sadness about my mother's physical deterioration, I find myself thinking an illogical thought and have to laugh when I realize it: that perhaps after my mother is gone, I'll still have Bella. If matters proceed naturally, I'll be losing Bella before I do my mother, so the desire to soak

in Bella's thoughts, her aura, and as much wisdom as she can impart to me on our mile-long walk around the grounds is that much stronger. We talk, therefore, about marriage, love, children—the ones she had, my pleasure in being childless. Beyond that, we talk about dreams, thoughts, fears, inchoate feelings. As we pass the pond a second time—she is tireless!—I notice the large stone protruding from its middle that reminds me of a stone in the town reservoir that gave me bad dreams in childhood. In fact, there was no such stone in the reservoir, but there was an ice-age boulder in the town square that people used to paint with images, slogans, and announcements, and that boulder somehow turned, in my dream, into a monstrous head with streaming hair that rose from the reservoir to menace me. I had not thought of the dream, or the waking terror it engendered, in forty years, when suddenly the exact feeling from childhood came back to me, seeing that stone in the pond. I told Bella about it, and she seemed not only to understand, but to empathize with my fear of a monster.

If, in my childhood, a stone turned into a person—a fearful fairy-tale giant, but nonetheless an animated being—my fear now is of the reverse. To be *petrified* is, after all, to be turned to stone, to become rigid and never move again. The stone is a gravestone, the end of relationship. I frighten myself with this image and prefer not to think of what lies, inevitably, ahead. At the same time, there is a feeling that I need to practice facing the truth. There is no practicing for loss and pain, but perhaps one can practice for recognition? Perhaps one can practice knowing, *This is it, this is unavoidable?*

## EARLY WINTER

IN DECEMBER I find myself in another artificial but nurturing setting, an artists' retreat in the foothills of Virginia. I miss my mother, who did not pay us a promised visit last month because her arthritis and a minor heart condition were causing constant pain and anxiety. She feels better



now, and I hope to see her soon. Meanwhile, I'm in my studio looking out on the bare trees and green hillsides. There are a couple of horses here I love to watch. The other morning, they were frisking in the mud, kicking up their heels, chasing each other in circles while I sat and drank my morning coffee with my feet up on my desk. There are cows, too, soon to be free-range beef; one morning a few of them are rounded up and prodded onto a truck by two men whose spindliness doesn't keep them from dominating the great creatures. Afterward, one inconsolable calf keeps running nervously to the fence, emitting desolate moans. I don't think she can see me past the fence, behind my screen and my pane, and in any case I can do nothing for her, but she makes me feel responsible for her fear and misery.

In this place, poets and artists are inspired to do what they can with the materials at hand. Walking in the woods, one stumbles across marvelous constructions made from sticks and bent branches, subtle alterations that pay homage to nature. Someone finds a rabbit skeleton and photographs it; someone else makes a pile of fallen green pods that mimics the ancient pyramids in shape and perfection. On a day of quietly falling snow, I enter the woods and startle a group of wild turkeys. They are so large and dark, I don't at first realize they're birds; I mistake them for some unknown mammal and feel frightened. A minute later, I have an overwhelming sensation of peace and joy, hearing no sound but the snow's whisper, my own breath, and the rustle of the retreating flock.

When I return to my studio, which has windows on three sides—a melancholic's perfect room—I lay out the books I've brought for inspiration and consolation, and it occurs to me that perhaps the texts of age are produced by artists rather than by writers. Think of Rembrandt's late self-portraits, and Goya's, the unflinching gaze at the wrinkled self, with its assertion: *Time has made me great*. Theirs, of course, is genius defiance, but behind it is the recognition that time, which builds us, also breaks us down. The process of entropy, an eating-away, has its own aesthetic.

On a sunny day, an old friend comes to visit me here—a man I've loved but not seen for years. He is my mother's age, and when he gets out of the car, I notice the effects of the intervening years. It is hard to see a sexy person grow old—suppleness lost, a slight hesitancy dominating movement. He is still a fine, handsome, youthful man; his smile full of fun, his voice that of a thirty-year old, his sense of humor gratifyingly silly despite—or because of—the tinge of rue that comes with many years. Though generally age seems to me to be a prison, the body an increasingly narrow cell, it is also liberating in certain ways; having nothing to prove any more, one can indulge in goofiness and vulgarity without fear of judgment, and knowing the things one took seriously as a young adult are largely meaningless. This sense of freedom makes me enjoy the company of the old.

Rosamund Purcell is an artist who deals with ageing and decay by representing it, paradoxically, as a form of creativity. She observes the effects of termites on books, and sets them a-chewing on purpose so that she can photograph the results. There is something in this of the perversity of a child with a magnifying glass setting fire to an ant, but here it's not the emmett (Beckett's word in *Happy Days*) who's destroyed by a human but the works of man that are ruined by insects. Insects have, literally! the last word. They swallow and excrete immortal tomes, and what they leave could be meaningless or might spawn a whole new set of words—the latter being Purcell's idea, in that she accompanies her photos with finely-written essays, and sees her bookworms as creative assistants, midwives of a kind.

It will be deepest winter when I return to icy Illinois from Virginia, where the sun seems closer to the earth. Winter in Illinois is a long state of suspended animation, in which the soul squirrels into the hiddenmost recesses of the body and goes to sleep. The body shivers and huddles and retreats under blankets whenever possible. But it must emerge and drive down ice-coated streets to appear in classrooms and committee meetings, which—the latter—come to seem more and more absurd the clearer it is

that the world has frozen into a chunk that will never resolve again, and that one's own mind is in a state of deep hibernation. Still, one keeps it up: the pretense. This winter I will be teaching my favorite Beckett play, *Happy Days*, whose heroine, Winnie, finds herself buried in earth first to the waist, then to the neck. When I read bits of it to my mother, she says, "That's it exactly. That's what it's like." Meaning, life; meaning, the loss of mobility and control that comes with age; meaning, the bravado necessary to arise every morning despite the approaching end. You pick up your toothbrush, you pick up your comb, you read that day's obituaries, you try to remember your classics. The possibility of a final exit determined entirely by you recedes as you weaken; soon, the revolver is out of reach, the book unreadable.

## ART APPRECIATION

### A Florentine Week

I LOST MY MOTHER, briefly, in November 2001 in the Uffizi Gallery. She had gone to look for the bathroom, as her resectioned colon is only two thirds its previous size and makes more frequent demands since the cancer surgery in 1999. I sat in the museum shop and waited for her to return so we could explore the galleries. It was a long time and I began to worry slightly, until I discovered the bathroom was on the second floor of that enormous ducal office building, up some vast flights of stairs. I went looking for her and worried a little more, as there was no elevator for the non-handicapped and the stairs were demanding. After I'd been up twice and she'd come down, we found each other. She was slightly the worse for wear, but on deciding to deem herself handicapped and take the elevator, she had regained her energy.

We are both a little damaged, my mother and I. A few years ago, my mother got colon cancer, and seven months later, I had emergency surgery for what was initially thought to be a precancerous ovarian cyst—on the ultrasound it was ragged like a squid, and very large—but turned out to be a burst endometrioma: backed-up blood had accumulated on my ovary until it exploded, and I had to be cleared out. So my mother and I had both quite recently faced the possibility of death, and held each other's hand when surgery was over and anesthesia wearing off. Then came September 11, and

the visions of bodies falling through air as well as the invisible deaths of thousands by fire and by crushing. Our trip was inexpensive partly because of the general fear of travel that autumn. We tensed and clutched each other when our plane took off from Chicago to Milan.

But the trip was uneventful, and Florence mostly tourist-free, bright with the sunshine of a protracted late fall. On our first evening, we ate at a restaurant near the train station. A businessman of about sixty or seventy sat down at the next table, dressed in a handsome suit; all his actions—entrance, sitting down, ordering—were performed with an easy grace that pleased us. He set his cell phone down by his napkin, ordered an appetizer and wine; the waitress brought him a small bottle, popped the cork, and poured him three sips to taste. When he murmured approval, she poured him the rest of the glass. They seemed to understand each other, the waitress and the elderly traveling businessman relishing his well-deserved, modest wine and food and the satisfactions of temporary solitude. His cell phone turned off, no obligations at all this time of evening, away from home. She left him in peace, as American waitresses seldom do with guests.

The next day, comparing notes, my mother and I discovered that each of us had thought of him afterward, perhaps because he seemed to embody the pleasures of the solitary, cosmopolitan traveler, perhaps because his ease of manner seemed to belie his age. My mother, I suppose, was feeling hers. She fell in the bathtub that morning, and heaved herself up behind the closed door with a lot of groaning and cursing. Enormous bruises plagued her afterward, and her back was sore. We're both insomniacs, and the night before, to get a good night's sleep, we had each swallowed a whole Ambien (rather than the more judicious half). This made us grumpy and groggy the next morning as we went searching for coffee. After that, I was able to lead us to the Baptistry. I had been in Florence for a short time in the summer of 1989 and remembered the landmarks. My mother looked up at the Baptistry ceiling in awe and delight. There was the enormous

Christ with his long dangling toes, looking austere and Byzantine. Our journey had begun.

Looking at art with my mother has been one of the pleasures of my life. She is neither an artist nor an art historian, but we share a capacity to be naively moved by painting, as well as some degree of sophistication from our lifetimes of museum-going. We proceeded to the galleries devoted to Botticelli. It was my mother who had first introduced me to the enchantments of Botticelli, returning from a trip to Venice in my childhood with numerous reproductions.

"But what is it exactly?" I said to her in the room full of his works. "What enthralls us in these pictures?"

My mother opined it was their sadness, a kind of lyric melancholy. I said, "And an elegance yet simplicity in the line." Whereupon I thought to myself, "Real companionship is being able to add your sentence to the other person's and state a whole vision."

We stood in front of an Annunciation. My father would have disapproved, but my love affair with Christian art is not negotiable. As preposterous as I may find the notion of a virgin birth, Annunciations move me, for all the reasons that secular art lovers have been moved by them over the centuries. Here is Mary, so young, and here is this angel suddenly alighting, with his burden of news to be broken ever-so-gently. The young woman at her reading, the androgynous angel: to me, it's an image of literary seduction, of the figures who arrive, magically, with such surprising concreteness despite their ethereality—they are nothing but letters on a page—when you're absorbed in a vivid novel. But it's also a tragic image: the end of young womanhood, the beginning of responsibility and suffering. The angel seems to recognize this; his face is carefully composed, yet sad.

In the Annunciation we were looking at, Mary stands in a beautiful, exaggerated *contrapposto* with both hands raised, perpendicular to her wrists, as if she were shrinking away from the angel, even fending him off. At the

same time, she reaches out to him, her head bowed as if the halo were a yoke; her outstretched right hand and his imploring, apprehending one are six inches apart: so close, so far, suggesting a contact both impossible and inevitable. He kneels on the floor as if he's just landed somewhat heavily there; he looks up at her with such stern pity, such a look of apology and awe, and—the most piquant detail of all—the tip of his nose is slightly red and swollen. Has he been weeping? Is he about to weep? Does he have a cold?

What a long distance he's traveled, with his extraordinarily thick and heavy stem of lilies in his left hand—it looks like a quill with which he is about to write on the geometrically patterned floor, the instrument of a death sentence—and what heavy news he must impart! Yet all is lightness, delicacy. The whole composition—including the window which is not a real window but a piece of chopped-away wall, and the landscape outside, and the angel's wings, still raised, just ceasing their muscular flutter—is a combination of S's and I's, straight lines and sinuous ones, the harsh and the soft, the sensual and the austere, the human and the inexorable divine. I saw all this later on the postcard, but then I only felt the pathos that Walter Pater characterizes as Botticelli's ultimate sympathy with the fallible, the fleshy and susceptible, eminently bruisable human body. All this before Savonarola, of course: it is as if the S's stood for the younger Botticelli and the I's for his mind after he fell under the influence of that brutal religious fanatic.

We stood there, enchanted, and so happy to be with one another in this place, with good cappuccino in our stomachs, harmonious, *seeing*. To see, to see: it is what we're both, hungry women that we are, most hungry for! We hated the small, flat town where I grew up, where she felt, for decades, exiled and virtually imprisoned, where I felt misplaced and eager to escape; I dislike the only somewhat larger, drab town where I live now—because there is no food there for the eyes. Now we had rooms upon Uffizi rooms of such food, more than we could possibly take in.

From Botticelli we proceeded to admiration of Bronzino, similarly fluid but so worldly, so smooth and aristocratic and loftily cold. I wanted to lay my cheek against his fabrics, icy as they might feel, and to fondle their textures. In college, I wrote a term paper on Bronzino, and was told it was admirable but more like highly literary art appreciation than art history; the rhapsodic tendency has always been my weakness. Alone with my mother, I can indulge it as much as I like. *Girl Holding a Missal* (again, the virgin with the book!) stared at us in all her superb, unhappy hauteur, and I thought I saw in her mouth something of my mother's labile expression when she is about to cry, particularly when she was a young woman and prone to self-torment.

A great many pleasures followed that afternoon in the Uffizi: lunch next to elegant, befurred ladies with tiny, beribboned dogs in their handbags, eye contact with shopkeepers and waiters, mild flirtations, *pasti, chianti, gelati*, dinner on the piazza at Fiesole, a tiny, ancient nun walking down the street chatting and chuckling with a burly, uniformed soldier, his collar open on thickets of virile chest hair. And in Siena, the late afternoon promenade with the citizens down their main shopping street!

Nor was all the art transcendent: in the Pitti Palace, in rooms filled with a hodgepodge of mediocre paintings, one atop the other, we were bemused by an image of Mary Magdalene borne up to heaven by an angel. The angel is lying on his back, and she is sitting on his abdomen. His legs, feminine and shapely, hang down in front. It's hard to tell how much effort this act of elevation is costing him. His head is thrown back, but he may just be reporting up to God on the progress of the journey. Mary M. is, of course, intent on heaven, too; but her long red hair just happens to be arranged across her breasts in such a way that each nipple shows through very bright and pink. The clouds immediately around the couple are brown and dirty, suggesting something gritty and polluted that must be pushed through before they burst into the light. Indeed.

For whatever reason, we saved Michelangelo's David for our final day. Through a line of bound slaves, we made our way toward him. The metaphor is irresistible: bound slaves ourselves, with long, fresh scars in our abdomens, we'd spent eight days levitating, only to be brought down again each night by the news on CNN and the clamor of insomnia. We approached the god-man at the end of the room with bated breath. A little tired of Christianity—all those mournful madonnas regarding the agony of their son started to depress me, though my mother, raised Catholic, was less susceptible and simply became bored—we were glad to be meeting up with the quintessential Jewish boy. And there he was: ingenious defeater of the ur-goy, homosexual idol, emblem of the admirable secular spirit that infused the Florentine Renaissance.

We sat before him, staring. My mother pointed out the sheer *chutzpah* of creating a colossal upright figure standing on so small a ground. I thought about the Illinois town I was returning to and wished that I could tuck David behind my ribs and take him home with me, to gaze at and caress whenever I needed to. We walked around and looked at him from every angle: the curls of his thick hair, the inscrutable expression, the buttocks—oh, the buttocks!—the muscular but surprisingly narrow thighs, and last but not least: “Have you ever seen such *perfectly* round balls in real life?” my mother said to me.

Indeed, David's balls were unreal. They looked like figs, the green kind, the ones you want to look at for a long, long time before you bite into them. Thus with the fruit of life. If you only look, you can't taste; if you eat, you lose what you've eaten. Life is short and uncertain, and I will never visit Florence with my mother again.

## PRIVACY AND HUNGER

### Looking at Lucian Freud

That . . . package of love and revulsion, that “glad it's not me”  
layered over with . . . tenderness.

—Lia Purpura, “On Form”

FOR SEVERAL WEEKS IN THE SUMMER OF 2003, in searching discussions with family and friends, I pondered the painter Lucian Freud's Tate retrospective catalogue. It became my “pillow book,” a phrase used in the exhibition for Freud's own favorite book, a collection of Egyptian portraits. He has paid those portraits homage by painting the book propped open in front of a pillow, which looks like other things besides a pillow: two conical breasts, for instance; but particularly, thighs from which the portrait book emerges like a twin birth. I am sure the pun is deliberate. Pregnancy and birth are constant themes of Freud's work. I bet if he could paint a woman giving birth, he would; but his sitters need to be there long hours and days, unmoving. Still, the messiness of birth seems implicit in all his paintings—or in all except those that suggest the approaching dryness of death.

Freud's people are eating, starving, shitting, bearing people. They get and spend; they sleep uncouthly, with their mouths open and nostrils showing. He himself has begot nine children by my count, fairly widely scattered. He learns to know them as adults by painting them naked. His

daughter's vulvar folds show clearly, pink in the thicket of her pubic hair. Her hand is behind her head, her nose-holes are on plain display. We have holes, and shouldn't pretend otherwise. His whippets are un-castrated and un-pedicured; they sleep in the crook of a sitter's arm with balls bulging and toenails protruding, dangling like the toes of the great figure on the Baptistery ceiling in Florence. There are no pieties in Freud's world; there is only the flesh, and the flesh is the person. A final truth.

My visit to his retrospective was bracketed by time spent with two ageing sets of parents. One set, my in-laws, are small, gray and compact, English gentiles of the kind my father calls "irredeemably goyish." They are reluctant to speak on matters of the body, feeling, belief, response, and we do not tell each other what we really mean. Because they seem to turn away from me and my enthusiasms or condemnations, my ideas, and sometimes even my simplest questions, I think they judge me excessive and slightly histrionic. But it is just as likely all the judgment is on my side: in condemning them for aridity and inexpressiveness, I leave them too little space to be human. Finally, though we seem exposed to one another for days on end, each side is hermetic, unassailable, and unknown to the other. This depresses me, and leads to a sort of ravenousness that makes me even more avid for honesty and exposure. It may be the reason Freud's retrospective in the heart of London—a city I associate with them, though they don't live there, and misconstrue as chillier than it is—excited me so much that summer that I could not stop gazing at the reproductions.

My own parents spend much of their time talking; sedentary for the most part, they employ their minds ceaselessly. He passes parts of the day asleep in an armchair. For years, sleeping, he has looked like a corpse: a painful preparation. She is as round, as fleshly, as he is gaunt. She has a great, wide mouth and a nose shaped, though not colored or mottled, like a strawberry. Her feet are still dainty, and she can dance around the room with extraordinary lightness. When I was little, she used to come out suddenly with bursts of song—"Que sera, sera!" or, "Pardon me, but you

see, back in old Napoli, that's amore!" One of my favorites, to a tune from Carmen, was "Oh, Theodoré, don't spit on da flooré, use da cuspidoré, dat's what it's foré!" Instead of singing, sometimes she made a grand declaration: "Après moi, le deluge!"; "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark!"

As for me, I'm possessed of a perpetual hunger, which manifests itself in my eating and my sleeping and my relations with other people. I eat at top speed, gulping down my food; I sleep restlessly, as if afraid to lose an hour of possible insight; I pepper people with questions to find out what they think and feel. This tendency makes me, as an English professor, good at the Socratic method—as long as my students are willing to be responsive. My penchant for interrogation is partly a way of damming my own inclination to evacuate; confession has gotten me into trouble, so has loss of temper accompanied by verbal excess, and in order to try to gain some control, I take a vivid interest in other people. I'm glad I've come this far: it's the most I'll ever manage to grow up, I think. Being childless, with a very indulgent spouse, I'm not otherwise required to behave like a grownup.

My parents and I look at Freud's book together. My father is honest—"I wouldn't want these in my house"—but admits he sees genius in the works. Some of the paintings move them; others repel. "This is not beauty," my mother counters me, looking at Big Sue in her chair, the breasts like great loaves, the belly like a sofa cushion hanging over huge thighs, the sleeping face crushed into one hand—"ugly!" "But look," I say, "see how he painted himself naked." I can tell she thinks he looks pretty good for a man of seventy; this is forgivable. We do agree it would be foolish to pronounce judgment on the idea of a grown daughter posing naked for her father, and that those portraits suggest much love. I say, "He is tender toward his sitters—never unkind." My mother disagrees, thinks some of the paintings approach caricature with their floppy scrotums and thick calves. "No, no, ugly flesh should be kept covered." She admits this is a gut response, but I know how doctrinaire she can sometimes be: feminist, rebel, she refers to



my father as “the man I live with” and had two abortions, the first before abortion was legal—but “Yeeach! I hate the sight of women breastfeeding! They shouldn’t do it in public.” On my study wall is a postcard of Freud’s painting of a baby suckling; the white, pendulous breast is traversed by a jagged blue vein like an estuary that branches off toward the nipple and disconcerts the sentimental eye. I recognize my own semi-transparent flesh, of which I am often un-fond: it ripples, wobbles, stretches and shows me long, azure veins that remind me just how I’m put together.

Our conversation is broken off by a phone call from my ninety-three-year old Lithuanian grandmother, who lives alone two blocks away. She has run out of a particular medicine, and my mother must haul herself out of a chair—“Oy!”—to bring it to her. I go to wash, and see in the mirror that I have recently lost weight. This is supposed to be good news for a woman, no matter what, but I notice that my chest is ribby and my belly still protrudes. Would I be more “beautiful” than Big Sue if he painted me? Since my surgery for endometriosis and the subsequent hormonal treatment, I am always partially menstruating, and the stringy blood slithers down the shower drain. I feel more than a little squeamish about such things.

We pick up Oma and take her to a lakeside for a picnic. She is a bit more tuned out each time I see her. I am shocked to observe she has no breasts left. Where have they gone? Did they slip all the way down her torso, where I can see a small hill? Her ankles are twin plinths, deadly white and mottled by broken capillaries. We all know “old woman ankles,” but my mother’s mother isn’t—she mustn’t be!—that object, “old woman.” Though her beautiful mouth droops slightly, it’s still pink as an anemone, living and touchable. She enjoys her food (though it nearly drips out), her irises in the backyard (though she must stoop over a stick to go outside the several steps), her affectionate cat, but she is going, going . . . . And she is less and less available to me, entrapped behind flesh.

Back home, we return to the catalogue. We agree on the portraits of Freud’s mother: so compassionate, full of human vulnerability and dignity. There is a series, begun after the father’s death—the mother reading, the mother reclining, mother sleeping. She is not an easy object to contemplate—less easy, to me, than the nudes. There is a face to deal with here: a face expressive of disappointment, loss, disillusion, loneliness and—finally—of nothing at all. Freud likes his faces “expressing” as little as possible. He says, “The head is a limb, of course.” Of course?! Inverted, this does mean bodies can be as expressive, as individual as heads—and as inviolable. As “cruel” as Freud can seem to be, his exposure of his subjects is an exposure of their humanity.

He has painted his mother twice in a certain paisley dress, but the second time, he was lazy and left a good part of the dress blank (according to him, the detail was distracting, but I call the painting “Lazy about Paisley”). She lies on a narrow, off-white bed, head on a dirty pillow, arms bent at the elbow, hands on either side of her head in a gesture of surrender or final helplessness. This second image is almost unutterably sad; the face sinks into the pillow, the eyes haven’t the strength to stay open, one hand is on her stomach in a loose fist, the other at her shoulder, open, in a gesture that either fends off, bids farewell, or says, “Oh, the hell with it.” Something in this gesture is familiar to me from my own Jewish grandmother, my father’s mother, who was a long time deteriorating and dying, and who became resentful at death’s delay. In her last, hospital agony, she cried out “God help me!” The series of images of Freud’s mother on a bed ends with *The Painter’s Mother Resting* from 1982-4; here the coverlet is black, the pillow is clean, the mother is more gaunt than previously and is dressed in a matching white loose blouse and skirt—bridal outfit or shroud, no more restless paisley—brilliantly pure against the dark bedcover. Perhaps, even as she has aged, she has recovered some energy after grief. One knee is bent, and the leg is supple as a young woman’s; next to the bed is a folding chair with red wood slats, the paint half flaked off. Red, white, and black:



essential colors, insisting on the life that has been, even as they herald the coming death. One arthritic hand lies elegantly on her belly; the other must be by her left side, but isn't revealed in the picture. She gazes straight ahead, eyes open and alert, the mouth both grim and humorous. She seems to have come to grips. The last picture of her is an engraving of the face in death, mouth a sagging, toothless cavity, eyes shut—all expression gone, only the high, wise forehead to remind the viewer of a memorable strength of character.

Several pages further on is a picture that gives *me* the shudders: *Woman in a Butterfly Jersey* from 1990-1. This is an elderly woman of a certain British type: horsefaced, unforgiving, aggressively badly dressed. How could Freud possibly be intimate with such a person? One nobbled hand rests on the other, with pointed, lacquered, pink nails. Everything about her fends off inquiry, curiosity, human fallibility. Her severity seems to pronounce judgment on me. Here is the schoolmarm I have always feared, calling me a silly fool; the sarcastic mother-in-law of my insecure reactions, who thinks her son's American wife an overgrown, ethnically loud, hypochondriacal child. But my father finds this woman's expression philosophical, and feels she has mellowed and improved since Freud first painted her thirty years before. Myself, I'm horrified to discover these two are the same person! The early portraits, *Figure with Bare Arms* and *Head on a Green Sofa*, show a muscular, androgynous blonde with a face and torso almost unnaturally elongated—one of the few instances where I must agree that the painter does seem unkind to his sitter. Perhaps, then, the later portrait represents a rebuke: thirty years after these two people came together, perhaps clashed, then parted, it is she who criticizes him with her gaze—she who has the last word. If she has become a woman who will no longer bare her arms and chest for him, who insists on her unattractive jersey and the absurd, rubber-colored scarf tied round the neck like a noose, who won't face him head on but stares downward like someone sick and tired of looking up, then it serves him right. And me, too, for making assumptions about her!

Because, in early middle age, my stake is still in life and vigor—I have been ill and disappointed, but I want a great deal—I'm inclined to end my pillow-book survey with the man named Guy whom Freud painted twice between 1980 and 1982. He wears a business suit, with a spotted silk kerchief in the breast pocket; his thinning black hair, graying at the temples, is pomaded and sleekly combed back; his little finger bears a heavy signet ring. He is nothing if not the natty, impeccably dressed, shrewd businessman, a hard bargainer pleased with his own success. Because he is fully dressed, the face and hands must tell us a great deal. As always, the latter are heavy, ropily veined and mottled; but vigorous, vigorous! Guy makes me think of the expression British Jews coined for one who got ahead in business in the new country: the alrightnik. But Guy is more than an alrightnik, he is a force to contend with. In repose, he can let himself nearly fall asleep; he has no concerns about his power. In "Guy and Speck," he holds a half-sleeping bull terrier. Both faces are bullish, but Guy's is decidedly the dangerous one. Finally, though, I am sure he is benign, a philanthropist. By now, he must be seventy—or dead. He will leave his money to good causes, having provided amply for his dear ones, whoever they are.

So much I have written here is projection. I know a few facts from the catalogue, and some are fairly clearly inscribed in the paintings. But there is everything one can't know, that remains private even—especially—when the sitter's genitals, her loneliness or exhaustion or desire for recognition, seem so obviously on display. Partly because the faces almost always are closed off by sleep or torpor, the viewer, in the end, is forced to wonder: who is this I look at, who has no regard for me?

I FIND I AM RELUCTANT to leave off writing until I have described one more image, *Naked Portrait II* from 1980-1—the reclining woman who suggests a melon nearly exploding with its own flesh and juice. Apparently, the model gave birth the day after the picture was finished, but you

wouldn't necessarily know she is pregnant. More notable than her slightly bulging belly are her breasts, like sacs stretched with liquid, purple, almost raw around the edges where they've been rubbing against her body; the areolas, spread out, nearly dissolving into the breasts themselves, are edged by raised bumps, painful excrescences. The woman lies on her back asleep or lost in fantasy, her head on one shoulder, her cheek bunched, the chin pushing the lower lip into the upper so the mouth folds over itself. She's as hefty as a peasant, with a shiny, bulbous peasant's nose. The vulva is darkly etched in her dark pubic hair; the beige-brown sofa she lies on is ragged and torn, its stuffing spilling out—the torn parts red, the innards a dirty white. Her body, too, will soon spill, her privates will open like an envelope and give forth a slimy fat bundle, messy, red-and-mottled, puling. A loud, slippery life, demanding and definite.

It's the breasts I can't stop looking at. They swell with such intensity yet lie so static against her chest, they seem like balloons stuck onto her. A tiny poke, I can't help imagining, would bring the fluid spurting forth. How can she sustain these things, carry them about with her, be patient with their chafing, aching, their readiness to leak and bleed; how can she let herself be taken over this way? The left hand in a loose fist on her thigh, the right half curled against her hip, intelligent and sensitive, are ready for a battle of will against force. She waits, and the artist has rendered her in perfect poise. The moment seems nearly impossible, like that moment at the end of Chapter 1 in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, where drops of water fall continuously into a brimming bowl yet the vessel does not run over. Stillness on the verge of the body's hurricane, one being soon to burst into two.

Because, for reasons of both health and choice, I don't have children myself, I may be excessively focused on the bodies of my parents. My mother—I have not said this outright—is fat. And I wish she were thinner, and I often wonder if this is love. I am angry at her for becoming obese; she ages, and her body burdens her, and like a child I imagine that my

anger, which becomes palpable in my moments of impatience or criticism, damages her further. How can a loving child be so unkind?

AND YET, I know she finds herself ugly, and sometimes that's the only thing I'd wish to change. "Look at Big Sue!" I want to say; "isn't she human; isn't she, in the bend of her calves and the curve of her neck, still humanly beautiful? And isn't that what Freud wishes to show? He doesn't hate her as you hate yourself! He is impressed, even amazed, by her ability to reach out to others from within the massive, enveloping blanket of that flesh. She is sensual, not moribund." But I don't come out and say this, because in families, certain things can seem unspeakable.

I have recently been to visit the other set of parents. To my astonishment, for the first time in a dozen years of knowing one another, we were able to coexist in mutual liking and respect for a full two days. The mood was almost buoyant: success had been achieved in this life. I asked for nothing more than harmony, going in; I didn't ask for curiosity about my thoughts and feelings, or a chance to express myself, or lively discussion about art and politics. I barely asked to feel interested. And I did my best to convey recognition of the others' radically different appetites and needs, their acute sense of privacy. I did, at one point, slice off the end rather than the flank from a neat triangular hunk of blue-veined, white-fleshed Stilton, but no one faulted me out loud for this *gaucherie* arising from *gusto*. We all meant well in those forty-eight hours. None of us is so very young any more.

But several weeks later, I ruined it. This is the fault of my uncontrollable hunger: I ask for more than I'm getting. To my father-in-law, I expressed my yearning that he show real interest in me. I noted that he never asked me any questions. "That's ridiculous," he said; to which I responded that in thirteen years, I couldn't remember a single question he'd asked me. Why did I do this? I merely bruised us both. He is as closed off as a portrait—a talking portrait—yet I wanted him to be other than he is. I always think

I know better: really, *you* would be happier if you showed an interest in me! We would both be happier, because we would truly communicate, and communication is always a good thing. If you are intensely private, at least please tell me, *why* are you that way? The question is self-contradictory, and I feel like a child in asking it: a child who compulsively repeats her question, even though—*because*—the parent clearly has no reply. I can't take mere no for an answer.

Perhaps this is why Freud's paintings mean what they do to me. When I am closed out of them, I know why: the sitter is asleep, or dying, or about to give birth. And I see all that the person might wish to cover up, to hide from me—even her *desire* to hide from me is on display. That is enough to satisfy my hunger.

## OPERA, OR LONGING

Opera has the power to warn you that you have wasted your life. You haven't acted on your desires. You've suffered a stunted, vicarious existence. You've silenced your passions. . . . [Y]ou have used only a fraction of your bodily endowment, and your throat is closed.

—Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire*

FROM THE TIME I WAS TWELVE, my father took a group of students to Germany every three years for the spring semester, and my mother and I stayed behind in Ohio. My mother was too big, too inwardly alive and desirous, for our small town, and I was filled with the itchiness of puberty. Two restless females, we entertained ourselves together as best we could. Sometimes we drove out into the country, just to get away from home. We'd leave our little town to coast through the landscape of cornstalks and flat brown fields. We talked about life. Sometimes we drove past a collapsing gray barn that said "Ma ouch obacc" in faded letters. On a bright day you could make out the missing "il" and "P" from "Mail Pouch Tobacco." A boy I was in love with lived on the same road as the Ma ouch barn. His father was an air-traffic controller and his mother was an Asian war bride, and Phil was a pimply beautiful boy with a sad face, who trapped animals on the weekend and shot them. When I gazed at him

in the school hallway, I felt he was meant for some other destiny, and I wanted to rescue him from his life of dreariness and violence. The problem was that he ignored me completely, was only dimly aware of my existence, my great longing.

On Saturday afternoons, my mother and I always listened to the live Metropolitan opera broadcast on the radio. We'd turn it on in the car and continue listening when we got home. We hated to miss any parts of the program, and were particularly fond of the quizzes and synopses between acts. "I remember the opera in Vienna when Papa and I were students," my mother told me more than once. "He wouldn't spend a *schilling* on seats, and we had to stand the whole time. Afterward I wanted to buy *marroni*—roast chestnuts—from one of the old men selling them in the winter streets, but he always said we couldn't afford them." My mother was ashamed of having given in to my father, and couldn't stop resenting him for making her feel like a beggar. In my mind, I saw him with a long, unhappy face, unable to splurge even a little after watching Mimi die of tuberculosis for two hours. "Let's try to guess the answers to the quiz," I said, to cheer her up; and I was amazed at how many of them she got right.

Most of all, I remember the applause at the end of the final act, the continuous shouts of "Bravo!" or "Brava!" with a long, triumphant, trailing emphasis on the second syllable—and the announcer saying, "Now Dame Sutherland has picked up a bouquet of roses. Smiling, she holds her arms out to the adoring audience." The diva blew kisses, and the applause went on and on like a great dark sea. My mother and I quivered and turned up the radio just for the applause; we were still weeping for the noble, self-sacrificing, gorgeous lady who had just died—who had gone down singing, her very sobs sublime music—and now we wept for the singer, and for the joy of the audience. Singer and audience merged together, their satiety filling our car those gray Ohio Saturdays.

Thirty years later, my mother and I finally attended the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. We were such different people by then! No longer girl and frustrated grown woman, now two women, one elderly, the other verging on middle age. Both of us had brushed against death; we'd been laid open and operated on within six months of one another, each visiting the other's bedside. We'd traveled to Italy in December of 2001, when no other Americans were traveling, and reveled in the artistic and culinary offerings of Florence. Now we were going to realize a long-held dream. Because my mother's plane was late—she was coming from Ohio, I from Illinois—we missed the first act of *The Marriage of Figaro*. We watched what was left of it on the little television downstairs, drank champagne and toasted one another. When we got into the hall at last, we squeezed hands in frissons of delight. Cherubino singing of his multiple loves—poor polymorphic, adolescent Cherubino, who cannot go near a woman without trembling all over—made us laugh and cry at once. The duchess singing "Dove Sono": oh, we'd been there! The opera's triumphant finale, with its reconciliation of all opposing parties, filled us with joy—yes, it can be that simple, joy! Afterward, we walked up Broadway in a light, warm rain, sharing an umbrella, looking up at the lights, gazing at the people who passed us, planning our next days in the city.

TWO NIGHTS LATER, we went to see the bizarre French opera *La Juive*, cited in Proust whenever Marcel encounters his friend Saint-Loup's mistress, the Jewish prostitute Rachel. Produced by a Viennese company, the piece was staged awkwardly, tendentiously, and rather stupidly. The bizarrerie of that opera and that production deserves its own chapter, which perhaps someone has written elsewhere. My mother and I were a little tired, and I was annoyed by her strong breath and her continual uncomfortable shifting in her seat; it is quite possible she was annoyed by me, as well. I am well past supposing children aren't as irritating to

parents as parents can be to children, and adult love is often an exercise in toleration. In short, it was an unromantic night at the opera. Instead of a sublime eighteenth-century fol-de-rol, we had nineteenth-century Jewish self-hatred in all its knotty mess, and we felt messy ourselves. The audience around us, at least a third Jewish I'm sure, was confounded. As far as we could tell, Vienna's black-and-white notions about staging the Gentile-Jewish conflict were not appealing to anyone. The music was pretty, but lacked depth. Only one aria bowled us over, the famous "Rachel, quand du seigneur," in which the father, a Barrabas figure, sings of his mixed feelings toward his daughter: should she die as a Jewish martyr, or should he reveal her true identity as his adopted Gentile daughter and thereby save her from the burning cauldron? Diva-like, Neil Shicoff had let it be known at the start of the performance that he had a slight cold and would not be singing up to par—and succeeded in making the entire audience feel: *If this is singing below par . . . !* We fulfilled our ultimate fantasy then: shouting "Bravo!" with full throats, weeping with excitement, surrounded by a sea of ecstatic listeners. Not cut off, not insulated in a car in the cornfields, or lonely in a Midwestern house; not far, far away from the world, but *in* the world, at last. Again, we walked home in the rain, talking this time about all the thorny questions the opera had raised—and again, planning the full days and nights in the week that remained to us.

It seems to me that if opera is about anything, it is about longing—longing for the place where life truly happens ("Moscow!"), for the exotic lover, the husband who will bring us the golden fleece, or at least pour *marroni* in our laps; or for possession of a singular talent. My mother and I are divas disguised as professors at provincial colleges. When we stand—in her case, stood—before the classroom, sometimes an eloquence pours from our mouths that disconcerts the students. They sit in silence, and I can see on their faces, *Where did this come from?*

Unappeasable longing.

## NEFERTITI AND THE *HAMMAM*, OR THE COMPANY OF WOMEN

For there she was.

—Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

I HAVE BEEN WAITING to meet her for most of the forty-seven years of my life, and in a darkened room in the museum in Berlin, I find her at last. It was my mother who first told me about her: *She's the most beautiful woman in the world* or, *It's the most beautiful sculpture I have ever seen, anywhere*. From her periodic forays to visit friends in Berlin and escape our confining midwestern small town, my mother brought back postcards of the Egyptian royal consort and hung them in her study. They may have helped inspire her to finish the dissertation that was broken off with her pregnancy, and which she had to complete in order to be given the same salary her PhD-less male colleagues were receiving. (Eventually, she threatened to sue, but that's another story.) Under Klimt's Judith and Thutmose's Nefertiti, smoking pack after pack of Kents, she finally made it.

The minute I encounter her, I feel as though she knows me. Perhaps because, like Walter Pater's *Gioconda*, she has "been a diver in deep seas" and comprehended all things already, she knew me before I existed. I suspect, however, that I don't interest her in the least. Nor do I feel she can

see me, even though, unlike Rilke's faceless, armless, legless bust of Apollo, she has eyes. And I feel small, and awed, as you do in the presence of a mountain or a roaring ocean. Nefertiti doesn't say to me what Apollo does in Rilke's poem: "You must change your life." Although she is imperious, her presence is not about imperatives. And yet . . .

Like these forces of nature, she communes with the eternal and seems deeply *inward*. I feel, definitely, that this person was not one to dispense her energies freely, but rather to keep them for what she knew mattered. *This deserves my attention. That, on the other hand, is paltry.* That she had an iron-clad sense of priorities, of hierarchies, although she was not of aristocratic blood and thus married upward and, in a sense, outward. I imagine her affectionate with her children but impatient with foolishness. Almost certainly indulgent toward her husband as toward no one else.

I picture conversations at bedtime, serious counsel. His head on her chest before they sleep, fingers interlaced, or his hand just resting on her small breast like a bird on its egg. His austere face with the pendulous lip, the sharp, elongated chin. Discussion of decisions to be made the next day. Agreement on the rationality and wisdom of henotheism. The sun is God—who could doubt that? How to convince the populace? How to raise six daughters who will be wise and find good husbands?

I stand before her image like a daughter or a yearning sister. Down a long hallway with rooms on either side, her gaze meets that of the Greco-Roman sun god Helios. He is all male muscle to her high-cheekboned, delicate intelligence. In the encounter between Rome and Egypt, something fertile and rich is defeated. I decide to skip the Romans, to keep her torch burning in my breast. I do not want, here in the museum in Berlin, to think of Empire, Caesar, pomp and power. I do not want to think too much about the city's past.

That night, tumbling down the corridor of sleep, I hear and see her vividly. She is disagreeing with a court physician over an unguent or drug to be administered to one of her daughters. I remember that one of the

six died, and was elaborately mourned. In my dream, I take Nefertiti's part and am, at the same time, the unfortunate physician, sure of his own knowledge but afraid to resist imperial orders.

What does she want from me? What do *I* want from *her*?

On the second visit, I begin my approach underneath Helios. He is clearly a prototype for Michelangelo's David, but how vapid by comparison! The gaze beneath his brows is one of a stupid man trying to look intelligent. I don't like the angle, or his expression. I proceed down the corridor, unable to discern her until I have passed through many rooms of papyri and urns. A small, silent crowd in headphones surrounds her like a group of acolytes at a priestess' feet. I study her face, head, and neck until I feel I have memorized all the details:

THE CHIN WITH ITS TWO PROMINENT BONES, one on either side, that give her a slightly masculine look.

The groove between nose and mouth, so finely downturned.

The lines of concern that frame her full but fine lips, contradicted by the very slight upturn that suggests she is about to smile (is it something that the sculptor has just said?). The repose of her face and the hint of humor in it suggest they were comfortable in one another's company, the empress and the artist.

The slender, long neck that leans forward, its two tendons prominent, as if the headress were almost too heavy to sustain.

The headress itself, extending her head to double its height.

The pale temples, as if the hair had been pulled from them to rest beneath the headress.

The perfectly curved eyebrows and kohled eyes, with their elusive expression, a tiny bit sardonic?

The delicate, slightly flared nose.

The achingly sharp line of the jaw (agencies would compete to make her a supermodel if she lived today—thank goodness she doesn't).

The difference between the face from the front and in profile: she is less severe, more feminine, and even more beautiful in profile. Few noses could compete with hers for proportion and fineness.

Her name means “the beautiful one is come,” and indeed, one has the sense of being privileged by a sudden arrival, an apotheosis. She is at one and the same time eternal and fleeting; at any moment she may disappear, lifted through the roof and into the heavens by invisible threads. Behave in her presence! (“Mother has a headache today,” I can imagine Akhnaten telling the children—for if her headgear and jewelry weren’t sometimes too much for her, her thoughts must have been—and if the kids made too much noise, she disappeared through a door with the barest rustle of translucent fabric, leaving her daughters longing as I long.)

The long neck, her elusive gaze: the embodiment of longing. On neither visit do I notice that one eye is unpainted, left entirely white. Why don’t I observe this? Have I unconsciously filled in the missing eye, unable to bear that someone so beautiful could be marred? Do I feel the need to protect her, as though she were the child and I the ancient mother?

Apotheosis: those Greeks with their Zeus always coming down to penetrate some unwitting female mortal, did they have no idea about the loves of women? In my dream later that day—I have a fever, am lying on the sofa—she embraces me, I embrace her, my hands are lost in her fluted white shift, my cheek rubs her smooth, brown face. Then she disappears down a long hallway, arm in arm with Akhnaten, no longer my lover but my parent, always ahead of me, always farther down the darkened hall. Or she is myself and my husband is Akhnaten, the intellectual, the iconoclast, my equal, our fingers intertwined like theirs.

In the long nights, her delta was the Nile’s and he immersed himself and was reborn. If she is weary, with one eye elsewhere, it is because she gave of herself as deeply as a river. As deeply as a river, she still gives to gaping viewers.

I leave her and follow my nose through other parts of the museum. In a dreamy state, I take in some images acutely, others hardly at all. I find my way to various bas-reliefs, Greco-Roman ones in which naked male soldiers are fighting nude or semi-clothed Amazons, and Egyptian ones in which men slaughter oxen. In the latter, the men all assume similar, stereotyped positions, their feet high-arched, legs long and slender with muscular thighs, bending over the creatures with knives, while the bound beasts are differently presented, some with their slender legs in impossible configurations, one on his back with his tail curling sinuously away from the neat round hole of his anus. So beautiful, and so vulnerable to the men’s weapons.

LEAVING THE MUSEUM, I notice the huge statues flanking the stairs to the Altes Museum: on one side, a naked man on a horse that rears upward from a lion the man is spearing; on the other, a woman rider trying to spear a lion that has leapt onto her horse and is clinging, toadlike, to the equine chest and neck, ready to sink its teeth into flesh. Man dominant, woman nearly defeated but still dominant, horse the unfortunate serving-beast in the middle, and then wild beast, to be defeated in proof of the glory of Man. The horse’s lips pull back from its teeth in an agony of fear and anger. Hard not to think of all those horses used in war through the centuries.

My petite, lovely friend, a Jewish literary scholar and feminist, comes to visit me from London. We spend a lot of time lying in the grass of parks, talking; I have no strength, but her talk, and her beautiful features and long black hair—like those of a heroine in one of the nineteenth-century novels she studies, where the beautiful Jewess converts for her Gentile lover—refresh me. During her visit, I am diagnosed with anemia and hypothyroidism and finally know what is wrong with me. We take a curative day apart from husbands and small boys, with an afternoon at the women’s *hammam* in Kreuzberg. The bath complex contains several



different spaces and services, and after we've lain on the heated octagonal tile platform in the center of the actual *hammam*, itself an octagon with a domed, mosaic ceiling and a skylight, we go for massages. Or rather, Nadia goes for a massage and I go to be "peeled and scrubbed" by a strapping middle-aged woman with a smoker's cough and Turkish disco playing in her wet room. While I lie on a raised slab she sluices me with buckets of warm water, then scrubs and massages me in special liquid soap with a harsh mitten all over my body. I am at once a baby being bathed and a lover caressed. The watery soap smells like flowers and feels amniotic, slippery.

"IS IT GOOD?" asks my attendant, and I hum and moan. She shows me the grey caterpillars of dead skin she's raised all over my body. My limbs are white and translucent. I am cleansed and sybaritic. For a while, I enter the sauna, where I sit alone until I can't stand it any more. I take a quick cool shower and go back to the magic room to lie on the tiles, flat, exposed, glorious. While I wait for Nadia's return from the masseuse, I get talking to a young black woman with a slender body like a willow leaf, here in Berlin on a study program for the summer. We agree on the open-mindedness of contemporary Berlin. I half watch two women, lovers seemingly, who sit beside one of the eight copper basins along the wall and scrub one another's backs and feet with the same rough mitt my washer used. Three Englishwomen enter, one of them massively fat, and lie down with me on the dais, settling in, chatting. I am fascinated by the fat one's body and indeed, by all the bodies I see around me. It feels natural to be naked among other naked women. There is no show-off, American gym atmosphere here, nor is this like a "spa" with rarefied pseudo-Japanese motifs and piped-in flute music. I go upstairs in a little towel to buy a Turkish yoghurt drink and sit for a while in a cooler room sipping it, thinking about the oppressiveness of idealized bodies, wondering if liberation is possible. How obscene it is, especially at my age, to feel contempt for the fat on my own torso and thighs. With a mother

whose frustrations in life drove her to smoking and drinking and finally, overeating and obesity, I am particularly nervous about my body's changes.

When Nadia comes back, we lie a long while on the dais talking, looking and not looking at each other's breasts and bellies. Though she is only four-foot-nine, hers are proportionally bigger than mine; on the other hand, her tush is tiny. We don't talk about these mental comparisons, however, and because I idealize her, I assume she is too highminded to be making them. Besides, there is so much to discuss, after a year without each other's company! We speak quietly, not to disturb the others. I can talk to her about concerns I share with no one else: Jewishness, how it plays into what I write, and the books I've been reading. My words leave my lips and seem to blossom in the slightly steamy air between us. There is a particular joy in this togetherness, a sensual and intellectual joy—for Nadia is the most articulate person I know; she forms her sentences with great care and thought, analyzing events, sensations, and situations; she is ready on the one hand to broach all topics, on the other to subject each one to an intense cerebral scrutiny. The proximity of brains and bodies is heady, and I would gladly stay here well into the evening.

If there is a heaven for the likes of us, it will resemble this *hammam*. Men will be present, but only on certain days. The women will come and go like queens with their attendants. Under a spangled purple ceiling, Nefertiti will make the occasional appearance, condescending to hear our strange intercourse, lifting her head on its stemlike neck, swaying like a lily in incomprehension or amusement. We'll engage her in discussions of monotheism and music and ask her how she keeps her complexion so clear or how she and Akhnaten resolve their philosophical disagreements. Just as we begin to feel a real intimacy, she'll float from the room, trailing wet muslin. Breathless, we'll rub our eyes, and wonder.

I want to have her blessing. Because I have stood before her long enough to think of her as human, I believe that I *do* have her blessing. She

says to me, letting me off the hook, “Yes, burn with a hard gemlike flame. But when you can’t, you can’t. Sometimes I didn’t even want Akhnaten’s wise, tyrannical, loving hand on my breast. Sometimes the Nile water was *bad*. My stomach hurt, or my head.” I am not dainty like a borzoi, but neither, in the imperial *hammam* with her attendants, was she. I know—I just know—there were times when she slapped her thigh and roared with laughter, and all the women, fat and thin, roared with her, rollicking in the steam.

## SHE AND I

IT’S DECEMBER, winter break from the small Illinois college where I teach English. I’m visiting my parents in Ohio, five hundred miles across the cornfields. On any break from the grind, I tend, first, to celebrate, then to ruminate on the nature of that grind. How bad is it, really; what is it I’d have liked to have instead? Having pondered psychoanalysis quite a bit in the past year—to the point of considering, at fifty, retraining at a psychoanalytic institute and becoming an analyst—I’ve been thinking about work and love, those two vital necessities according to Freud. I’ve been considering the two poles of human existence sometimes described as immanence and transcendence, contemplating my fear of the one—being mired in the quotidian—and my desire for the other: rising to heights of inspiration and achievement. I’ve been wondering if the heights to which I once aspired are in fact unattainable. What do I want? Have I reached my peak, or do I aspire to something new and different? Who in my life embodies my aspiration, my desire? Who embodies what I fear?

An answer comes to mind, but like all stark answers to big questions, it bears questioning. The answer is: A. my friend and former student Leila, the famous violinist; B. my mother. In fact, with some unerring perversity or else an instinct for illustrative juxtaposition, I am bringing the two together. My husband and I will be here all month, and we plan a road trip to Detroit, three hours away, to hear Leila solo with the symphony. We’re persuading my mother to come with us, though she has a cold and is feeling arthritic and possibly has unspoken, other reservations. We know

she'd have a great time if she came, and we want to give her this gift, which includes a night in an upscale hotel's ample white cotton bedding. I like to spoil my mother, and to share with her, when possible, the boons my life has given me. I also don't like her to feel old, to feel like she's out of the picture now, and so I insist that she come with us.

You do a lot of counting at mid-life; indeed, the mid-life crisis is largely about counting and comparing, and it peaks when the numbers finally fall away to be replaced by a feeling of plenitude, amorphous compared to the sense of being haunted by lists. And I do, most of the time, have that feeling of plenitude: of being cushioned by marriage, friends, family, beds, and books; of being not just loved, but *well* loved. I realize this is extraordinary. I have an adoring husband who inspires and delights me, and loving parents who are fully compos mentis and *kineh bureh* as the Jews say, not yet decrepit.

So what is it I want, and what is the relationship between digits versus plenitude or transcendence versus immanence, a dichotomy first absorbed by my adolescent brain from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*—a book over which I swore to myself to lead a vocationally meaningful life as my mother had not? "Transcendence" I had gleaned from Emerson and Thoreau as a state of rising above the quotidian which, somewhat paradoxically from the Beauvoirean point of view, these writers, like their Romantic cousins in Britain, experienced through an immersion in the natural world. (That immersion, however, was never fully physical and certainly not tedious or effortful. William appropriated Dorothy's daffodil poem while she was washing his under-garments and cooking the dinner gruel.)

Like many things once novel when one first played at being, then became, a bona-fide grownup, possessing a job and a house, shopping, and cooking dinner have lost some of their cachet. I do it, I even throw myself into shopping for new recipes and experience tiny spurts of home-decoration fervor, but I am not a serious cook, nor am I house-proud. I'd almost always rather be reading or writing, cuddling or listening to music.

Even travel has lost some of its allure (hence the challenge of tempting my mother to come on an overnight trip): lately I keep remembering my poet friend in Tel Aviv who, at sixty, said "I'd just as soon be eating fish and writing on my balcony" than going to other countries to see museums and meet new people—although he admitted that when pushed to do the latter, he always enjoys himself.

I suppose one just needs more pushing in middle age: pushing out of bed in the morning, pushing to work, pushing to look up from the book in one's lap. As with sex, the will is still there but the energy sometimes fails. In the absence of sufficient energy, even the will has a habit of exhausting itself. There are all sorts of things I still imagine achieving, learning, discovering, but at day's end I pour myself the first glass of wine and sink back in animal satisfaction to the softness of the armchair, the warmth and scent of the fire in the fireplace, the countertenor on the stereo, the nearness of my beloved: note all the prepositions—"into," "into," "in," "of," "on," "of"—signifying emplacement, immanence, rather than movement, transcendence. I count, or rather, clump, my blessings: friends galore, parents still engaged with the world, handsome, affectionate pets.

"Shall we watch a movie tonight?" I ask the beloved on a given weekday evening.

"I think I need to work this evening," he says.

Ah, there's the rub. I should work, too; there are papers to grade, classes to prepare, magazines to be submitted to, memos to read, and countless emails to respond to. Faced with all this, I procrastinate in the morass of Facebook and lose any get-up-and-go I had that day, or sense of possible novelty—except when watching the video of the dolphin kissing the cat or the schnauzer learning to drive a car. Those much-loved videos have a sinister way of allowing you to continue in your traces. They provide momentary reassurance that the beautiful is possible, inter-species tenderness exists, the world is not going to hell in a handbasket, and your

own marriage is a reflection of an essential harmony in the universe. Now to grade that pile of papers. After all, we do have to make a living.

The problem is that any job that doesn't somehow refresh itself or change becomes, primarily, a way of putting food on the table. I'd like to feel I'm making something besides a living.

My mother has never made anything besides a living, or so she seems to feel. In fact, my mother has "made" three translations of important German books in cooperation with my father. She makes fanciful, lovely gardens, and she "made" me, though I am not, of course, wholly her creation. Still, I like to think that in my relative way, I've done her proud. I say relative because my young friend has done her own parents proud ten times over. She went on stage at the age of ten, won a McArthur at thirty or so, and has a face that could launch a thousand ships and a body that—well, the woman is mighty hot as well as a musical genius. I used to envy, and in some ways, try to live through her so that her triumphs could be mine: when she performed Beethoven in the Royal Albert Hall, she was expressing something I felt, aspired to, dreamed of, but could not give to the world.

I'VE KNOWN LEILA SINCE SHE WAS FIFTEEN, we've been talking on the phone and seeing each other once or twice, sometimes three times a year, since she was twenty-one, and it's been fascinating—and often worrying and exhausting—to watch her grow up, all the while growing up further myself. Sometimes, it's pained me to witness her achievement, her adventures, the adulation of crowds, while going through very much the opposite sorts of experiences in my not-so-brilliant career. Sometimes, our breakdowns or crises have coincided, so that we have not been able to respond to the other's emotional needs but only, at best, to compare notes, at worst to put each other off due to excessive busyness. Which, in her case, has usually been more pressing than in mine. The student papers don't have to be handed back tomorrow, but the show at the Concertgebouw must go on.

Now, however, our crises have broken at once: both of us realizing certain truths about life and contemplating the decades ahead. It makes

sense that her mid-life moment has come fifteen years earlier than mine, since she's been performing on the world's stages since she wore ribbons in her hair, having had her first micro-violin pushed into her pudgy arms by a demanding father at the age of three. Have I mentioned the phenomenon of parents living through their children? A phenomenon meaning that one day you look at your career and think: *Did I choose or was I pushed? Do I still have a chance, not to be the grown-up child my parents seemed to want, but to be more fully true to what rises up in me?* Leila's mother still sometimes accompanies her on her concert tours; a dozen years ago it was to take care of the child of Leila's first marriage, now it's for the new baby of her second.

We persuaded my mother, at last, to come to Detroit, and met up with the entourage. The mothers, being at different phases in their own lives—L's in late middle age, mine elderly—did not connect, and in any case the baby made conversation between them nearly impossible. Had they spoken, though—spoken deeply, I mean—Leila's mother would have admitted entering a new phase of her own life in which she hopes to fulfill her long-suspended potential; mine would have conceded giving up on a great deal, subsiding into age and impending mortality, thanking the gods for not saddling her with grandchildren to help take care of, and expressing pleasure in her daughter's fundamental well-being.

The four of us—the two mothers, my friend, and I—are currently plump in various degrees: immanence, plenitude, ripeness. If I listed the degrees more precisely, that would return us to numbers and their misery—the sort of thing that keeps women lying awake at night while men, presumably, think about their salaries or their goal-scoring capacity. For years, I deplored my weight gain, and my mother deplored and worried over it: "Don't become like me or you'll end up hating yourself," she warned. Meanwhile, though she couldn't keep from lamenting the departure of my lanky former self, I felt oddly affirmed by my greater fleshiness, as though I'd become a person of substance, or one whose substance was at last visible to the world.

At any rate, we are juicy, L and I, fully alive. It remains my fear that I will become dessicated if I don't find a way to be true to myself—an inversion of the fear of becoming obese like my mother, whose own career was painfully unfulfilling. At the symphony, Leila strode on stage in flowing silks like Nike descending and played in her uniquely demoniac way, with a deeper, steadier, and more substantial something now that she's been at it for so many years, under the baton of a slender woman in her forties who conducted lithely and balletically, the two of them together coaxing sound out of dumb matter, transcendence out of immanence. After intermission, I sat back (I always sit forward a bit tensely watching L. play, feeling she's on a tightrope even while I know her balance is perfect) and immersed myself in the bright noise of the orchestra playing Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. This, too, was animal pleasure: the warmth and colors of the hall, the lushness and intensity of the music, its instants of humor and danger. Above all, I relished riding on the composer's imagination, as on a vessel bravely tacking through great waves.

What is the nature of imagination that it can spawn so much, I wondered? Often it's fed through inspiration by another: Shakespeare was to Prokofiev as L is, perhaps, to me, suggesting possibilities previously unheard of, making me want to realize in my own medium what excites me in the work of great artists. Then, too, it—that rollicking imagination—depends on an inner freedom, a dependence complicated, in Prokofiev's case, by the looming presence of Stalin. Presence or no, I felt something that thrilled me, an exuberance and fluidity I wanted for myself.

A psychoanalyst might say that we all have our own Stalins, though some of us have him worse than others—some have had the real thing. I sometimes joke that I live in Siberia and work under a Stalinist regime. I don't think you can call a small, economically depressed town whose nearest metropolitan hub is Peoria, Siberia, exactly, nor a system that requires regular submission to processes of review during which one must present narratives not just of accomplishment but of self-abasement,

Stalinist—but there are resemblances. Part of that system are student evaluations of one's teaching; these evaluations can condemn a person whose dedication to the students' complete satisfaction is less than marrow-deep to a pillorying by one's colleagues that wounds—to the marrow. Not quite the Cultural Revolution, but at the far end of the same spectrum.

Both Leila and I are in the process of figuring out how our parents have directed the paths of our lives, and how to stray from those paths without cutting off that part of ourselves which is a true and meaningful offshoot of those parents, as opposed to the part or parts force-fed through their cajolery, their threatened disappointment, their anxieties and desires. I love to watch her mingling of opposites: the transcendent music she produces from a wooden object improbably perched on her collarbone; the prodigy's hickey in such stark contrast to creamy neck and silken gown; her genius for finding both the intellectual, mathematical heart of a piece of music and its subversive, rollicking soul, helping current composers revise their works through her acute readings; and the appetitive, fleshly, unashamedly carnal person who orates about sex at any opportunity and attacks a post-concert meal like a famished lion.

*ROMEO AND JULIET*, in all its iterations, is about *carpe diem*, the green force of the young against the gray staidness of the old families; but it is also about the hope for a different future which, however often defeated, still springs eternal: the hope that we might realize our souls' desires in this world rather than some imagined next. It is the hope of all revolutionaries, all vibrant political movements, and the hope of artists, who renew themselves with each act of creation—even, I daresay, those artists in the shadow of a harsh regime or the employ of an exacting patron.

I am looking—waiting—for immanence-in-transcendence. I believe, perhaps deludedly, that the will inside me can turn itself, in my last few decades, into renewed energy. At the end of the day, I am hoping to be like the painter Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, who lays down her brush and

says, “I have had my vision”—and not like my mother, who destroyed her canvases and threw away her paint for lack of a room of her own or belief in herself. I want to stride onto my own stage, whatever it might look like, a fleshly goddess in full bloom.

A year or so after the concert in Detroit, I realize the space between the two poles. As usual, I’ve measured myself against extremes—my mother’s frustration, Leila’s charisma—as if those were the only possibilities. I have been on sabbatical for two-thirds of the year, have returned to teaching with relish and exhaustion, and now live, on weekends, in an apartment in Chicago. This alone has given me great riches and a feeling of freedom. On a cold night in the coldest May in memory, I go with Neil and friends to hear the Israeli-born jazz clarinetist Anat Cohen perform at the legendary Green Mill. The club is filled to bursting and a festive atmosphere prevails; during the first interval, when we manage to squeeze in the door and halfway toward the stage, Cohen is circulating like a hostess at her own party, greeting, laughing, kibbitzing. She is so sociable the break lasts an hour. Then begins the second set, and the clarinet lets loose. I stand as near as I can and jump on board the vessel of her performance; I’m rocking, tapping, grinning, at moments almost crying. What this woman can do! She has baby fat on her cheeks, a little tire around her waist, she is not glamorous, but she is full of life and completely without inhibition or self-consciousness. A lock tumbles over her brow, she smiles whenever she pauses; when the guys play their solos, she leans against a post and throws her head back in joy, swaying, nodding. When she talks to the audience, she addresses us as equals, flirts without coyness or subterfuge, invites us in. Both her playing and her affect are pure delight.

I turn to my husband and say, surprising myself with what feels like the absolute truth of what I’ve just realized, “That’s what I’m like in the classroom.”

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