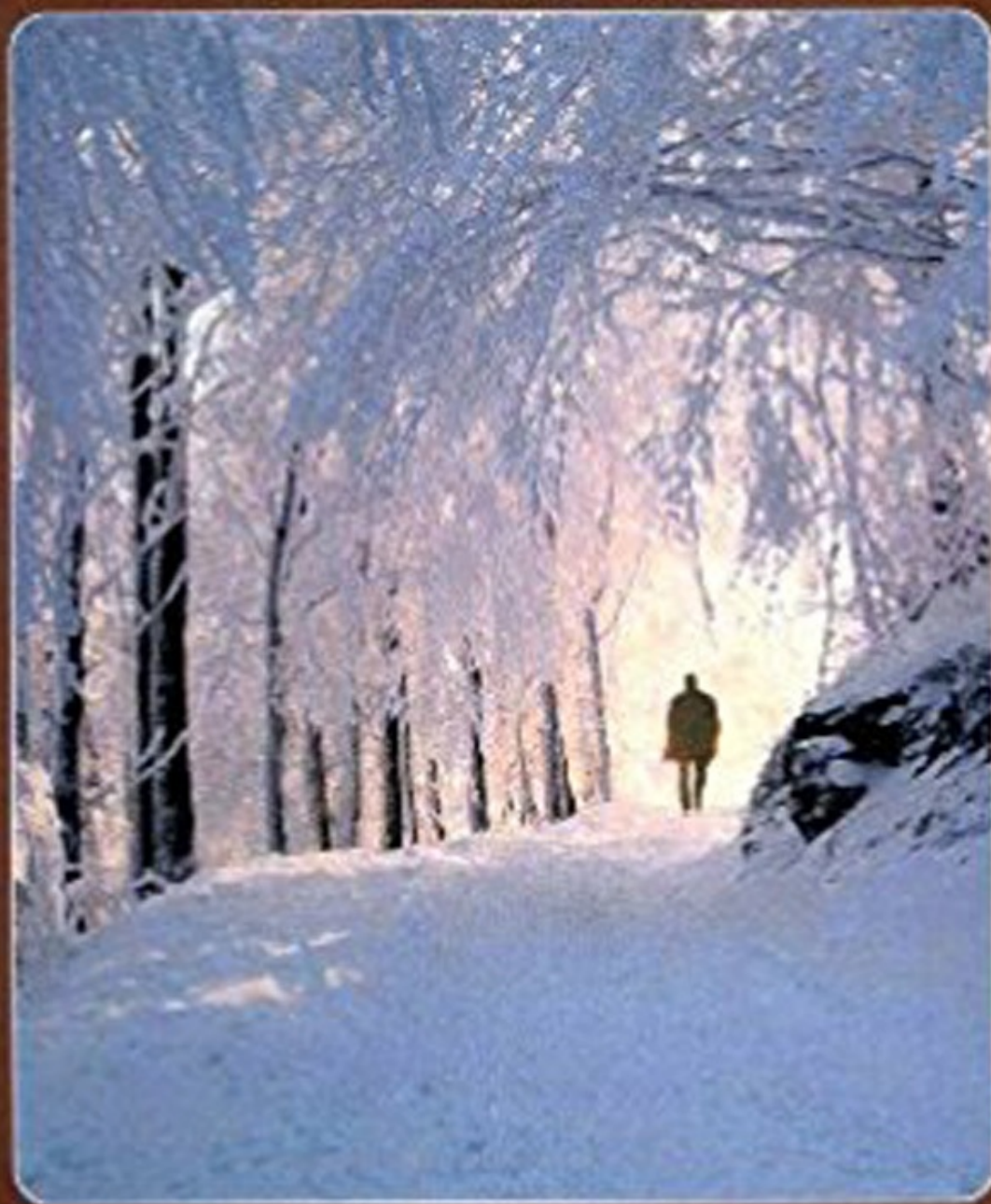


# *For My Father*

AMIRA THORON



*poems*

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One

Two



Water seeks its own level;  
there is a leak I cannot find.

All summer long I watch a horizontal crack  
crawl along the bathroom wall,  
the light blue paint bubble and pock.

I dream of this house again and again;  
dreams of structure, frame, and lintel.

Once, I formed a sleeping porch.

Once, I formed a door.

What secrets lie in hollows and out buildings beyond the hill?

Moths lie dead between the window and sill.

In Grandmother's bedroom  
mildew crawls  
across chipped paint,  
peeled plaster.  
Her horsehair mattress  
lies exposed  
on bare springs.

I loved her violet scent, the cool  
smoothness of her palms  
when she took my hand  
to cross the street.  
It was the only touch.

Carefully I step between rolled rugs  
and sheet draped furniture  
to pull out favorite books  
whose brittle faded spines  
come apart in my hands.

I have not set foot here before except  
to lay clean laundry on her bed  
or pass through to her bathroom where  
she dressed an oozing poison ivy wound  
or removed a tick from my inner thigh.  
Standing at the threshold I still long  
for a tenderness she could only express  
in the order of things, in the regularity  
of meals, in the rows of pressed sheets  
stacked in the linen cupboard.

I submitted to both her order and her wisdom:  
how to lay a breakfast tray, make a bed, address  
an envelope. How to dry dishes, shine silver,  
arrange cookies on a plate. How to dress,  
how to stand, how to pronounce the words,  
the accents, the syllables. She adjusted  
the intonation of my voice, the cadence  
of my walk, the level of my eyes.

From her I learned the names  
of authors, of plants, trees and birds.  
Together we observed spiders no smaller  
than a pin head swarm from a punctured  
egg sac. We noted the flight of a ruby-  
throated hummingbird as it darted  
from an orange daylily.

I stand at the threshold. I look down,  
I look away. I cannot hold my gaze.  
Again I am cowed. Again I am captured,  
pinned on red velvet, my palms sweating  
beside her as she reads out loud to me.  
A sea wind brushes past my face; white

curtains rise and billow. I cross the room  
to her chest of drawers to find unopened  
packages of silver hairnets beside gauzy  
pressed handkerchiefs smelling of mildew.  
I finger a green tube of red lipstick and a jar  
of face powder. I lift a grey mohair shawl  
sheer as a spider's web and wrap it around  
my shoulders. In the mirror, I catch  
my startled face, *Am I a ghost or a thief?*  
And in the final drawer, laid carefully in the corner,  
a plastic bag filled with all the notes I wrote  
and tucked under her pillow: rows and rows  
of magic marker drawn hearts, rainbow balloons.  
All my love letters until I stopped speaking to her.

Today, she tried to kill me with the meat cleaver.  
Left me slumped over the sink  
with only two more potatoes to peel  
and the lamb still roasting in the oven.  
She did not like the changes I made  
in the dining room. The paintings moved,  
the china disturbed, the table hacked to pieces.  
Thankfully, I came to when the timer rang.  
With little loss of blood (just a nick above my right eye)  
I removed the sizzling mass  
and placed it on the counter to harden and cool.  
I found her in the living room,  
the air above her chair seething and thick.  
Tonight, as I lie in my childhood room  
my horsehair mattress crunches and sags.  
I hear her downstairs calling and calling.  
I've left the kitchen door open  
for the raccoons to have their feast:  
their little clawed hands, little sharp teeth  
devouring the pink-grey meat.

In sleep I hear  
her crying teeth  
to knees. Spine  
rattles against mine.  
I cannot reach her.  
We know  
the viscous breath  
of moles, the furtive  
diggings of skunk,  
grubs coiled  
in moonlight.  
Night presses.  
Behind the wall  
tiny jaws  
seek succor  
from paper, from dust.

*June 4th, 1945*

*St. Paul's School*

*Concord, NH*

*Dear Mum,*

*I can only stand a certain number of shocks, what with dogs and Daddies I am not going to live much longer, I am fine. Anniversary was tons of fun, our team won 1, 4, 5 (mine), 6, 7 races.*

*Tell Daddy I am very glad I took rowing. There is nothing like it and I will always take it. I am very busy these days.*

*Love—*

I kneel and pull  
onion-scented snowdrop  
bulbs from soil  
Grandmother sifted  
through cool hands  
that rarely touched me.  
I fill holes  
with water and press  
seedlings hard to earth.  
Here we planted impatiens.  
Here we staked platycodon.  
This was Grandfather's rose garden.  
Forty years later  
one peach rose remains.  
What did Grandmother do with his roses?  
Was it too much work  
to wrap them each fall  
in burlap and string?  
Could she not protect  
them from frost,  
aphids and rot?  
Did she let them die  
or did she snip  
each branch, each twig  
before unearthing roots  
with a rusted pitchfork?

In the woods  
I find remains.  
Several yards from the dirt road  
ferns protrude: little whiskers growing out of moss.  
Mosquitoes swarm and the mound  
beneath my feet  
heaves and crunches.  
A young sassafras has taken root.  
Here, layers of the discarded:  
broken jam jars and milk bottles,  
white enameled chamber pots,  
and cans rusted to a dark brown lace.  
Are you here, too? Her beloved son?  
Forty years your boat lies  
raised on saw-horses in the barn.  
Mice have gnawed the straps,  
the centerboard is gone.  
I asked her once to tell me  
stories of her boy:  
I had opened a picture book  
to your child-crooked scrawl.  
Rising from her chair,  
the glass of bourbon swayed.  
*No, she hissed, I will not.*

Listen:

the silence is murderous.

It startles my tongue.

I taste metal. I taste wood.

In this house,

sacred to mice and wasps,

I raise the blade.

This time I'm a savage.

This time I wield it

clean above my head

and slam it into wood.

The dining table shudders and splits.

We speak of faith.

We speak of resurrection.

But I remember,

my plump child hands before you

how metal turned to rust.

Downstairs I find a box:  
condolence letters  
with answer dates  
written across the corners  
in blue ink.

As she finishes each letter,  
she places it  
along the table's edge  
as if to sort a seating plan  
or the invitations to a lunch.

For what else is there to do  
but apply order  
and make lists?

To mark corners with notations,

*Letter Flowers Donation*

January 9, 1974

Dear Violet, dear Ben—

*At dusk tonight I went out and walked in the beautiful fresh snow around your house and thought of you and of ——.*

*What a splendid man he must have been! I hardly knew him directly, having only barely met a couple of times but from all the things said about him I knew he was just great. You must have been very proud to have such a son.*

*The spirit has its own qualities and its own way of going on. I am sure there is a Peace— but that it is a very active thing. Alfred North Whitehead expressed it well, “Peace is a quality of mind, steady in its reliance that fine action is treasured in the Nature of Things” I deeply believe that and its consequences are tremendous.*

A host of ghostly white Indian pipes  
unfurls out of moss.

Mushrooms red-bulbous and sliding.

My sheets are damp:

the wind a constant ache

in my spine, in my finger joints.

I yearn for easing.

Upstairs, the rooms stifle with air so still  
I hear the ocean, or is that the wind  
in my copper beech tree?  
Massive creature, it rises high above the house  
with branches that extend far over roots,  
over moss, over lichen stone walls.  
Its trunk holds pools of rainwater,  
pools where I dip my fingers as I climb  
the grey-blue branches with their thin-  
skinned bark smooth to my bare feet.  
From there I can see my bedroom  
and her bedroom beside mine.  
I can see the tops of the oak trees  
and the rooster weather vane  
swinging in the wind. Such swaying  
in the purple-brown leaves yet where I perch  
the woods are still but for the screech  
of the red-tail hawk circling the sky above me.

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