

Conversation Pieces

Volume 48

MARGINALIA TO STONE BIRD

by

R.B. Lemberg





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to BT, SN, and ST—with love and gratitude

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Burns at Both Ends

If you burn this fierce, firebird,
you'll finish yourself off,
you'll die young, they said.
I tried slow, sluggishly,
ended up beige and feeling like gruel.
Who cares about tepid? Better the sizzling
feathers of nightmares,
the flesh of desire subjected to torturous time.
Old age doesn't scare me. I'll live as haphazardly as before,
dropping clutter and rubies wherever I walk.

Finding Voice

The Three Immigrations

First immigration – The Strangers of the Glass

in dress of handblown cinnamon and blue
and speaking speckled bubbles in the glass;
Their power is to come and pour a road—
to molt the land for us,
then leave

[The In-between]

with luggage of caramel leather and brass locks—no,
there's no romance in this travel. Only a crumbled
book in Yiddish and a tin
of buttons (*remember the horn one from grandmother's
mustard dress she wore on the train to...*) cut from all the old
dresses, and grandmother's
death certificate is ten days old. A plastic bag
of photographs. A dry salami.
In Hungary, they put us behind bars.

A Mini-Map

There are two waters in my land
bridged by a road of molten glass,
and if you step on it, you'll pass
outside of tenses:
neither past, nor present, nor a future, nor
(first, second, third) a person (singular or plural)
instead, a being on the road of glass

[In Hungary, they put us behind bars]

to wait for the plane. Like rats in a ca- /
people / sheep to the sla- / (*now you cross out*)
My grandmother's ghost
struggled to follow us, but lost her way
somewhere in the fields between point A
and the warehouse. They didn't
let us peek out. My father said
Budapest must be beautiful

**Second Immigration –
The Strangers in Soldiers' Clothing**

*war-tossed in weeping ships
they arrive at Northwater. They left behind
everything,
even the ocean. Brought only the bell
forged by citymakers
by true voice-makers in the old country. The song
tolls the dead into their new earth. They build
a church at Graveyard Island, and hang
their voice there; then on
to the road of glass*

[Arriving, the Gulf War]

is the first thing I remember. Bombs falling, and a gaping
hole in the wall. Sirens. A family of four,
we locked ourselves in the bathroom. The gas mask smelled
like gas, or burnt rubber,
or a language.
Cockroaches ate
my mother's salvaged wedding dress, and I learned
to speak; made up three languages to hide in

Beginnings are endings

When they reached Southwater, the war clothing
seeped into their skins and they as speechless as fish
that clog the glassroad,
fish for the souls of the dead
scraped onto the glass.
They settled by the Southwater,
walled off a city there. Called her Bell,
or perhaps—
nothing.

Third Immigration – The Strangers with Animals

*They come joyfully, bringing only
their most beloved ones—a small city
guarded by white beasts in the heart of one person; another
carries a snake abjad to spell the truth
in blunt consonants. Another's heart
protects the bird of vowels.
Shall they unlock
the larynx of love and longing, or shall they step
onto the road of molten glass?*

[I was so terrified, I don't remember]

a thing of that last journey. I'd packed
two changes of clothing (my mother had bought me
four-inch heels with her last money; I cannot
wear them, but have no other shoes).
Three books—
a battered copy
of the Poetic Edda in Old Norse, Biblia
Hebraica Stuttgartensia, and Ted Hughes' *Crow*.
I do not remember
how they stood—my father speaking
for the last time, or my mother—

before his stroke. I do not remember
how the plane smelled, or the long winding line
at immigration services.

Alone.

In the future of me, the San Francisco Bay Bridge
circles my head like a red dragon crown.

Coda: I made three languages

to hide in. Each within
the only land I've ever called my own
between the waters. I am still the same
or am I? How to know
if all my journeys are translated in the skin
or am I dithering
before the road of glass?

Resh

I have scratched off these cave-walls
the abjad in which the self is transcribed,
that script without vowels, desert-parched, unaware
of oceans—but a sheen of sweat
rises from the walls like dew,
three thousand years after the miners.

I don't need to return here,
where I've toiled these lives and years ago,
a turquoise miner who paid the stone back in tears,
who carved crooked symbols when nobody watched.
I have been here, I have passed,
with only myself to erase me
bending down from future immemorial.

Circumscribed by sweat and turquoise dust, hidden
in folds of the star-embroidered night,
I dreamed myself into this future, not knowing
of perils—of sorrows that constrict me
tighter than collars of blistering stone. I did not think
that I would forget me, and yet grieve
for languages that have been lost between us,
three thousand years of mothers' names gone.

I have erased and reinscribed
both of us onto the stone page of my story.
Easy to say that nothing's been lost,
but I don't know what I am overwriting
when none is here to slap my wrist.

Marginalia to Stone Bird

How can I speak for us even if you're me,
type what it felt to wake in that cave-mine hungry,
to scratch wordselves into the indifferent rock?

But our abjads are almost the same;
I carve resh for my name,
for memory's not the extent of it, not
when the dry desert wind still blows between us.

Odysseus on the war train

My hero, when you left Penelope did you
imagine never stepping off this train? Its every wagon
a Trojan horse that carries soldiers far from home
and every Trojan horse a coffin. You would seek
adventure, but your paramours are rotting
like empty grain-stalks in deserted fields and skulls
of babies smashed against the walls and husbands rotting
in battlefields—you too were eager to depart.
She will remake, you say, the tapestry and bring you home
and wash your feet and make your bed again—but she unravels
your roads each night. Unmakes the language, spreads
the shroud of silence over you, and prays you never
return.

Dybbuk Song

When I hung between heaven and non-existence, tormented by spirits that sputtered white and slender between the worlds gone black, I saw your soul burning to me from beyond the curtain that separates the living from us, that letter by letter presses us out into the void; and I sang, to you, and you to me.

Will you call me an affliction? Me, a sticking spirit that has wheedled back into this world through tiny holes left by letters embroidered upon the veil that separates the living from unliving—me, who squeezed through holes embroidery needles left in the tapestry of the letters of your life—me, who acquired a lettershape to reach you

Which letter will you choose for me, which letter shall you sing—a consonant, a mem, a shape of water—carry it in your palm and spill it, carry it close to your mouth and ask me: why are you here?

To atone for sins, I whisper, an always-answer, an expected answer—to atone for that which I don't hold as sinful; for you, through you, I will fulfill the 613 commandments I have neglected in my life; I will weave tsitsit and tie them to the corners of your clothing, I will weave them from hair of your unborn grandchildren, I will anoint them with dew

and I won't cherish hatred in my heart, I'll plant a vineyard with your hands and leave imperfect grapes ungathered. I will cease from tilling in the seventh year, oh, I'll never start, I'll let the earth between the stars and bitter fields of the wave lie fallow, and fill the land with blackbirds I will launch from your open palms

sing to me, then, sing to me this dew, you who are forbidden to sing before men, you who sang me out of my torment and through the veil of letters—you, who did not hesitate—

through your mouth I will speak, through your mouth I will say my deeds, atone for my sins, with your hands I will carry—this self, this mem, this water, this snow and ice to fill the mikveh in which the world itself will immerse to become purified

once again to see that which is holy and which is unholy, unrestrained by commandments of men, constrained lovingly by truth that shines dewlike from your song, that shines even though you have been forbidden to sing it—

walk away, oh, walk away from those people, these customs, these veils that hold you, walk away from this shame, this solitude, this resignation—even though you're afraid of pain, beloved, between heaven and dissolution pursued by tormentors of white slender fire, like I have been; but know that each of us sticking spirits believes themselves pure, believes themselves holy—and it is holy deeds that return us, again and again, through the veil of letters, to this here, this you—

walk away and sing