

***Tu B'Shvat: for the Drowned and the Saved***

Melanie Rae Thon

The girl was radiant. I saw her in the shower naked. Glistening with water, she seemed lit from inside, a woman illuminated. I tried not to stare, then simply surrendered.

Alone, I tried not to look in the mirror, tried not to hear my mother: *The old are more naked than the young*. Before the camp, she had never seen an old woman naked.

One day last week the slender girl flickered beneath me. Three lengths she swam, seventy-five yards underwater. She had strength and desire, the discipline to stay down even if her lungs were bursting.

There are others like me at the pool, not that old, but already too fat or too thin, trying to stay fit, but already withered. There are others with scars: the woman with one breast, the man who leaves his left leg, his prosthesis, at the edge of the water.

The long, green-eyed girl gave us hope, a vision of a human being perfected.

My mother weighed seventy-two pounds the last time I dared to weigh her. I fed her puréed peas, strained carrots, tiny spoonfuls of mashed potatoes. I was always afraid. I thought her thin bones might snap as I bathed her.

She no longer spoke out loud, but the voice inside

us said: *Love is stronger than death. Trust me.*

Yesterday, Mother and I bought figs and apples. She was strong, yes, five months dead and still walking. She squeezed a plum. *These aren't ripe*, she said. And, *Who will have pomegranates?*

She wanted carob, coconut, grapes, olives—chestnuts, cherries, pears, almonds—all the fruits of Tu B'Shvat, the new year of the trees, God's Rosh Hashanah. My father said, *God seeks us, this day above all others.*

In Israel, cold winter rains turned to drizzle; sap flowed through myrtle and cedar. Here in Salt Lake City, I woke to see new snow on white aspen, the whole world in pink morning light fractured. I envied my mother, the ease with which she moved, free of her body. She waited for me. She said, *This is something.*

By noon, sun shattered off snow, the day suddenly fierce, the blue sky unbearable. Mother opened her eyes wide, loving the light, able at last to take everything inside her. Only thirty-five degrees, but I was hot in my down coat, sweltering. I believed, yes: in this rage of light, the Tree of Life, *all life*, might be reawakening.

I told myself: *Rejoice.*

I whispered: *For your mother's sake, be thankful.*

And so I was—but more grateful to come home and close the blinds and close my eyes and let my mother go and lie perfectly still in perfect silence until Davia and Seth returned from school, until I heard

Davia in the living room, lightly playing one phrase at a time on piano, then turning to the chair to invent an answer with her cello. She plays as she moves, graceful as water flowing, a girl who sees a mirage of herself shimmering across the desert: as soon as she reaches the place she appeared, she is already changing. My Davia learned piano sitting on my lap, hands resting on my hands, five years old, her whole body trembling. When I put her to bed that night, she lay quivering, near tears, unable to tell me why, unwilling to take comfort. Too much, too soon, a mistake, I was sorry. But the next morning, the trill of the piano woke me, Davia running her fingers up the keys—a ripple of light, the body becoming light, blood clear as rain—then down to the lowest notes, the mind a waterfall plunging. She had moved the bench to walk the full range, to touch every key, to feel the hammers strike wires inside her—Davia finding her first song, Davia in rapture.

Now she plays piano, zither, cello—Gipsy love songs, Bob Dylan, Arvo Pärt, Ludwig van Beethoven. Now she serenades a doll; now the snow is dancing. She conjures the carnival of Saint-Saëns: kangaroos and tortoise, wild asses, people with long ears—pianists, fossils. She plays the songs Dvořák's mother taught him, the cello strand of "Transfigured Night," Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah."

She loves the cello because it vibrates through her bones, and its voice is almost human. She loves

piano because it came first, that night, that morning. She loves the zither because even the wind knows how to play it—as if her gift is not her gift, only the breath passing through her. She lies on her bed in the dark, headphones on, sound searing straight into her skull—she's safe for all time, sheltered by "The Protecting Veil," the voice of the Mother of God in a cello, Yo-Yo Ma playing Tavener. She turns the volume down lower and lower, until sound stops, until she becomes its lingering vibration. Davia, seventeen, and good enough for Juilliard, but she wants to live in the wild, meet the snow leopard face to face, hear its still, small voice high in the Himalayas—she wants to follow caribou across mountains and tundra, record the sounds they hear on their way to the edge of the world—Davia wants to sing as elephants sing when they visit the bones of their ancestors.

Seth already knows he'll be a fireman and a cantor. I see him now, my thin boy with narrow shoulders, small for his age, climbing the ropes at school, proving himself, faster than the other boys and able to squeeze his skinny hips through tight spaces, Seth Betos, unafraid of smoke-filled tunnels—our beautiful savior, bright hazel eyes ablaze with desire, eleven years old, my boy, singing the *Kaddish*, walking into the flames, healing the wailing mothers with a song as he lifts their babies from the embers.

*My children! Let the night begin; let your father come*

*home; let the dead stop speaking.*

My mother died with a crumbling spine, bones too brittle to hold her. *Starvation*, Doctor Lavater said, *all those years ago*. Isaac Lavater, a smart and serious man with blue eyes and soft white hair—my husband's friend—he didn't mean to be cruel. When I bathed my mother, I imagined her as she was, Éva Spier, sixteen years old, thirty-one kilos, my mother in another life, already an orphan though she didn't believe it, an emaciated child stiff and bald as an old woman—Éva, a girl, younger than my daughter—Éva Spier standing thigh deep in the Vistula River with seventy other women just like her, *to even the banks, January 1945, the war lost, our final task, sublime madness*.

The camp sat wedged between the Vistula and the Sola, a swamp, a land of floods, soil impervious to rain and melting snow, marl two hundred feet thick, crumbling clay, impossible to drain and farm—but the Nazis still believed they could make everything in the world useful. Day by day for four years, they sent the women to the fields—hundreds, thousands—marched them five by five out the gate while the band played the rousing March of Triumph from *Aida*, marched them for hours, for miles, past deserted houses and evacuated villages, set them to work uprooting stumps or digging ditches, building roads, dredging fish ponds to spread the muck with their own muck as fertilizer. If a stone was too heavy to lift, a root too deep to dig, your shovel

too dull, the clay too resistant—if you stopped, if you staggered, if you reeled, dizzy from hunger, the Kapo beat you with a stick and you found the strength or died there.

In the end, my mother's captors contented themselves with one simple project: to move the stones, to even the banks, to make the river straight, to force the Vistula to flow more smoothly.

I see her bones, all their bones, glowing white through their skin, washing away in frigid water. *Soup was God*, Éva said. *Thin as He was, God sustained me*. My mother lived because she was strong for her size and not too pretty, because she stood straight, because she believed her sister or her father or one cousin lived as she lived, by faith and will, by chance, somewhere. She lived because life itself was proof of rebellion. One day she collapsed and lay in the cold unconscious. When the whistle blew, she did not rise, and two other women whose faces she did not recall, whose names she never knew, who whispered to her in Czechoslovakian or Polish, used the last of their strength, their love, to drag her back to the camp between them. My mother lived because the river ran cold, because frostbite, because fever, because too weak to march as the Russians approached, because left to die and instead liberated.

Éva Spier became Éva Lok and bore one daughter: my mother lived fifty-eight years after the war, twenty-three without my father—tiny Éva, one

more survivor who never recovered, whose bones carried an irrevocable message: she couldn't walk and then she couldn't sit; one stroke took her desire to eat; another stole her voice in every language.

Night after night, my mother lives and dies. I touch her bones. I smell her. I breathe when she breathes. I count. If I don't stop, she won't stop. Am I awake or dreaming? There are things I know that my mother did not tell me, words I hear in the voice of her violin, Bach's "Chaconne" playing on barbed wire. *When you cried with hunger, I felt my own hunger. I praised God for your noise, your flesh, your fat—for fear I could soothe with a song, and hunger I could satisfy with my body.* Night after night, my husband lies beside me in this unstable darkness. He sleeps as children sleep, in complete surrender. He sleeps blessed, because he deserves comfort. I wake and wake again, and though I know it is unjust, each time I wake, I blame him.

My brilliant husband is famous: famously kind, famously patient. Doctor Liam Betos knows how to slip titanium ribs into the bodies of children with scoliosis so that they can breathe and walk, free of oxygen tanks and wheelchairs. He is not vain. *A man had to build a titanium bike before anyone thought to put ribs in a human.* Liam's children teach one another to do somersaults and cartwheels. They hang by their knees from the monkey bars at school, roll down grassy hills in the park, then charge to the top again, laughing.

If Doctor Betos sleeps in peace, he has earned it.

This morning I kissed them all goodbye, Seth and Davia and Liam, and I forgave him, my good husband, and I was unafraid, calm in the lavender light, no need to shield myself against it.

I walked to the pool alone, but not lonely. Mother comes when she comes. I cannot choose the day or the hour. Birds flew tree to tree, gathering twigs and hair, fur and feathers, hopeful and foolish they were, everywhere building. From a dense hedge, a hundred hidden sparrows sang, and I felt the sound, all their bodies in my body trembling. I smelled damp earth beneath melting snow and heard every seed, shells ready to split, green shoots quivering.

*God, here, in all things: the birds, the song, the silence, the seeds—the snow, the coral clouds, the space between—the old terrier tugging at his chain, the hand with which I touch and sooth him. God immanent, God humble, God who offers Himself as olive, wine, wheat, carob—as the pomegranate we found at last—as sweet pears and nuts and apples. God who restores Himself through us each time we eat with holy intention. Tu B'Shvat, today, tonight, we celebrate this endless wonder.*

I slipped, I almost fell, bedazzled by the thought, as if hearing God's Word, the seed in my heart, rupture for the first time. Mother came, light as light. She caught my arm. She laughed. She said, *Forty-four years old, and still you'd fall on your face without me.*

*Yes, forty-four and so tired, and too weak to walk seven blocks, and fumbling in my body without you.*

I was glad to see the green-eyed girl at the pool. She restored me. Her beauty seemed simple today, almost clear, not hers, merely the glass for God's reflection. I knew her name now, Helen Kinderman. Sweetly she'd given it to me last week when I asked her. She spoke softly, strangely shy, like a child; and though she stood five inches taller than I, though she glowed, blond and pale, a Nordic queen, she looked suddenly small and bewildered.

I loved her for this, the absence of all arrogance.

Today, everyone looked perfect. One leg, one breast—no fat, no hair—what did it matter? Carl Ancelet pulled hard with his left arm to compensate, and his right leg, his one extraordinary leg, kicked up and down and side to side, as he glided down the pool. A dark-skinned woman swam on her back, pregnant and joyful, frightening lush, buoyantly healthy, pink suit clinging to swollen nipples and navel, tight pink cloth exposing her, leaving her more naked.

Louise Doren appeared with two bald women, ones whose hair had fallen out in the grip of chemotherapy, ones healing now with her, their guide, their hope, because she had lost a breast at thirty-three and was not afraid, because she gave them a vision of how they might reclaim their strength in water— Louise, still alive at thirty-seven, and now her hair grew

long and wavy, pale blond, shot with silver.

A tall boy with rippled muscles, one who'd shaved himself on purpose, stroked his smooth head, suddenly ashamed of this indulgence.

We were whole, each one of us, and all of us together.

I remembered my father's blessings: for lightning and thunder, for the beautiful ones, a narrow road through red maples, green dragonflies and white tulips, for lovely girls and strange-looking creatures: *Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha'olam mishaneh hab'riyot*. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who makes the creatures different.

Kristina Everly spoke to her deaf twins from across the pool, hands leaping in light, voice blessedly silent. How lucky they were to speak this way! I watched Ricky and Ryan dive deep to tell secrets underwater. Idris emerged from the tunnel of the dressing room, white towel wrapped like a skirt around him. One day after my mother's first stroke and before her second, Idris gave me a tiny cup of espresso at his coffee shop—warm and delicious it was, bitter and sweet as melted chocolate. I told him I would never need anything again, and he nodded; he understood; he believed me. *But come back*, he said, *free for you, any time, really*.

I didn't come. I was afraid of him, his beauty and his kindness, the way he said my name, *Margalit*, so

lightly, as if it were not my name at all, but the word for his favorite dance, *the Margalit*, and as he spoke, he spun me—*yes*, Margalit whirled with Idris, a sleek Persian man as perfect as Helen Kinderman, elegant and smooth-skinned, but her complete opposite: dark where she was bright, hair black, skin olive. We met only at the pool—he seemed to know why—but I was always glad on days like today when Idris chose the lane beside me.

Two more appeared, the last to join us, Samuel Killian pushing his wife Violette in her wheelchair. I loved to see him: stooped old man, thin skin speckled with dark bruises—dear, faithful husband, delicate and determined, every bone of his sternum visible. Fragile as he might seem, Samuel had the will to wheel his tiny, white-haired wife to the edge of the pool, lift her out of the chair, and ease her down to the water.

I thought what a blessing it was to swim with them, what a gift that they would allow it.

My father taught me to swim before I learned to say *no*, before I knew fear in any language. He could teach anybody to swim: little girls crippled by polio, soldiers with stumps instead of legs, old women terrified of water. My father said: *Why be afraid of the thing that holds us?* My father said: *I'm right here; I'll walk in the water beside you.*

When Helen swam below me today, I found her foolish and splendid, extravagant in her strength, but

not vain, not driven. I loved her blond ponytail, long as a mermaid's hair flowing. When she slowed, when she lay still on the bottom, I thought: some new challenge, some watery meditation, the mind making the body heavy so that she could stay down without a flutter, as if floating. It made no sense, floating twelve feet under, *floating on the bottom*, but this is what I saw, and in my mind how I said it.

I confess: I grew vaguely irritated. She stayed too close to the edge. Despite her depth, she distracted me, and so I blamed her when I missed my flip turn. I forgot how lucky I was, how privileged to swim with these people. I forgot about coconuts and pears and olives, all the fruit at home, waiting to be cracked and sliced, the endless gifts waiting to be opened. I forgot about God as wine and swallowed a mouthful of water. He left me sputtering, separate from all things, trapped in myself, pitifully human.

My awe for the girl grew hard, a pit of shame sharp in my belly.

I swam over her three times before I thought to go down, before I felt her as I'd felt the birds, before my mother said, *She needs you.*

A trick, I thought, this voice in water. I did not believe. I did not trust her.

*Dive*, she said, and I obeyed, but the breath I took was quick and shallow. I had to rise again and gasp, and dive again to reach her. I thought I'd find Helen, green

eyes open, that we would speak in sign, in bliss, that there would be no struggle.

But I touched her arm and I knew; I knew then already.

Limp, the girl, water-logged, heavy, no breath in the lungs and so she floated on the bottom. I took Helen Kinderman in my arms; I wrapped my arms around her. I kicked hard, and we rose like this, not joyfully, together.

Then the others came, *so fast*, as if they'd felt my grief move through the water: Idris, the closest one, already on the deck, taking her in his arms, lifting Helen away from me; Kristina waving furiously at the lifeguard, trying to make that flushed boy comprehend the wild silence of her language; then another guard, a girl with a whistle, blowing hard, a short, thick, red-headed girl with powerful thighs like one of those miniature gymnasts; and Louise Doren touching Helen's feet, believing the one who'd almost died could heal the one not living.

The flustered boy yelled, commanding us to step back, me and Kristina, Louise and Samuel, as if we had no part in it, no place or purpose here, no desire—running now, the guards, telling Idris to set her down, *gently, gently*; scolding us with their voices, not the words themselves, but the tone, the inflection, the implication we'd done her harm, the insinuation our touch was violent.

They knelt beside her—the boy, the girl, these two, these children. The fierce little gymnast pumped Helen's chest, and we saw her: Helen Kinderman exposed, pale skin blotched and blue, supple legs weirdly bloated. *Stop*. I wanted someone to stop this. But nothing stopped. In her chest, tiny bones cracked; from her mouth and nose, water spurted. Then the boy had his mouth on Helen's mouth, and the girl pressed hard with the heels of her hands, and Helen's bones broke and her body surrendered and there was hope the lungs might heave, the heart clench, the love of life return, the delicate pulse throb in her neck again.

Where was the manager?

Out back, smoking a cigarette?

On the phone, scolding her befuddled father?

What did it matter where or why, legitimate or foolish? She'd left us in the care of two teenagers who had done the drill ninety-nine times but never resuscitated an actual not-living, not-breathing person. *Too late, my fault, I'm the one, I saw her*. Or maybe it was Helen's fault for swimming underwater so many times, for teaching me, Idris, the rippled boy, Samuel Killian, the buoyant woman—all of us—how strong she was, how ridiculous we were to worry. I wanted to rage at Helen, God, the manager. *Where are you now? What are you doing that's more important?*

Two firemen and a paramedic descended, dark birds in black jackets, fast and graceful, called by God,

terribly efficient. Helen belonged to them now. They had paddles to jolt her heart and a syringe full of epinephrine. Her body rose and shuddered and stopped and rose and shuddered and stopped and rose and shuddered and stopped, and then these three raised her on their wheeled cot and took her away from us.

*Gone, our beautiful girl, gone all the way over, already on the other shore—I knew it as soon as I touched her.*

Now the jittery manager and her quick guards herded us to the locker rooms, told us not to shower. *Dress and go home. Pool closed for the day. Come back tomorrow.* Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. Violette sat in her chair, cap curled up like a crown, damp red towel like a cape around her. Crippled queen! I wanted to kneel before her.

We didn't go home. We clustered outside, though the day had gone dark, though the wind whipped icy snow into dancing funnels. The pregnant woman sobbed, blaming herself. *I saw her, she said. I didn't even try to go down.* She touched her huge belly. *I can't. I'm too buoyant.* Then she laughed, a high yip that made her gasp until Idris put his arm around her.

She wanted to touch me because I'd touched Helen, because she thought I was good, because she believed I'd tried to save her.

I let her believe; I let them all believe what they wanted.

Carl looked in my direction, but his focus went

far beyond, to the trees, to the snow on the mountains behind us. Louise and her two friends pressed up against me, and only then did I realize how weak I was, that I had almost fallen. I whispered, *She'd be alive if I'd gone sooner.* And Louise said, *It could have been me or Joan or Hannah. It could have been Kristina or Samuel or Violette.* She touched the place where her left breast once was to remind me: anyone can drown or save or fail. *Or you, she said, you might have been the one on the bottom, Idris the one who dove too late, Idris the one who waited.*

She meant to be kind, but her words pierced me.

She drove me home. She unlocked my door. *The guards, she said, their job.*

I nodded. *But we were there, with Helen, in the water.* I didn't say it.

She wrote her phone number on a little scrap of paper. *Call me if you need something later.*

I thought God was here, in this room, still alive but unable to help us, revealing himself to me in Louise Doren. I couldn't bear Him, His grief, His terrible need, pomegranates and grapes, three fat pears, a jar of black olives, all that fruit, *His fruit*, in my kitchen.

And then Louise closed my door, and I was alone, completely, and everything in the house scared me: fruit uncut, wine unopened, Mother's white tablecloth rolled tight, Mother's white on white scroll, the Tree of Life embroidered in satin stitches, a wedding gift from

Datiel, her cousin, Mother's blessed cloth, never once creased, never once folded.

I smelled Helen Kinderman in me—soot of adrenaline, burn of chlorine—we shared this: one scorched body. I wanted to wash her away, the smell, the memory, the thing that had happened but couldn't be, and I tried to climb the stairs, but I was too weak to stand, too light in the head, and I was afraid of the water, my father there, dead of a heart attack at fifty-seven, Leonard Lok crumpled in the shower, alone, two hours—my father who might have survived if Mother had been home, if Mother had heard a cry, if he hadn't hit his head so hard on the tile. Even now, today, he might live—if only I could climb the stairs, if only I could reach him.

*How can this be?*

My mother's sister Edith died because she was too ripe, too beautiful, because her hazel eyes were almost gold, because she scared them. The doctors thought if they could sterilize a girl like this, they could sterilize anyone. Cut without anesthesia, burned with acid, she died barren, bearing only their secrets.

Any day you might be the one, or the one of a thousand chosen. *Because you resisted, because you stumbled, because one cell grew wild, because you spit blood, because you held your breath, because you chose to stay under.* For two hours the water ran cold over my father's cold body. *You died because you*

*were exceptionally kind; you lived because you were spectacularly cruel—because you were wise, because you were foolish—because you didn't hide in time, because you didn't believe, because you couldn't imagine.*

*How can this be?*

My mother said, *Our neighbors turned us out. Our good Christian friends delivered us to the soldiers. The midwife who brought me safe into the world probed me now, deep inside every opening, searching for stashed gold, luminous pearls, glittering rubies. My own mother wept, watching. 'Please, she's just a girl, be careful.' But Katarina's fingers pushed hard. Katarina Szabó pierced me. As if I were nothing to her—goat, dog, Jew, stranger—as if my aunt Lilike had not baked the three-tiered wedding cake for Katarina's daughter, as if my mother had not sewn the white dress and stitched a hundred and twelve glass beads into the bodice.*

*How can this be?*

*The family jewels were inside, it's true, but not in my body—four gold rings, wedding bands, all we'd ever had between us, four thin rings hidden deep in the belly of the doll my father brought me oh-so-long-ago from Budapest. Hidden: as if we would return, as if our house would be our house, the doll uncrushed, Mother's china cups unshattered. Anastasia had porcelain teeth, a red tongue, tiny dimples; she looked ready to speak, thin pink lips lightly parted, the princess Anastasia sweetly smiling. I stared at her on the shelf, and all the while Katarina probed, red-tongued*

*Anastasia kept her silence.*

*How can this be?*

*She had golden hair, silky hair, human hair curled in ringlets. I would crush her now myself to stop remembering.*

My mother's uncle Tamás died because his neck was thin, his beard long, his only gift teaching Hebrew. Her father lived seven months, longer than most, because he was a carver, a craftsman, because for a time, a short time, Bertók Spier's clever hands proved useful. Long ago, he'd carved an altar for a synagogue in Vienna. He carved headboards with vines and flowers, cradles that never tipped, caskets without nails. In silence, in delight, he carved nutcrackers and puppets. Bertók Spier carved the delicate legs of chairs and tables. In Sárvár on the Rába River, no one asked, no one cared, if these legs belonged to Jews or Gentiles. For his son and daughters and nieces and nephews, he carved tiny bats with folded wings, slender does, sweet-smiling camels. Once he carved a tiny whale, a fine filigree of myrtle with a little man inside, a man you could see, a man with a dove, a miniature Yonah.

*How can this be?*

Even Bertók the carver couldn't explain how he'd done it.

In the camp, he extracted gold from the mouths of the dead, found emeralds stashed in the bowel, sapphires the soul didn't need, diamonds his neighbors had swallowed.

My mother's mother Amiela died because she carried Tavi, three years old and always hungry. *Efron, Jozsua, Tzili, Judit*. Her cousin Datiel lived because the sun struck his face and he looked stronger than he was: older, taller, almost fair, almost pale, enough like them, almost a soldier. He wheeled carts of the dead and almost dead. He heaved them into ovens. *On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed: who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled*. Datiel survived the war and hung himself twenty-six years after.

They arrived at night on the train. Work would make them free—if they were quick, if the wolf dogs didn't kill them. Somewhere in the eerie fog, an orchestra played *Hungarian Rhapsodies* to soothe them.

*Are you mad? Is this possible?*

And then they began to see, yes, a piano and a cello, a violin dancing in the air, in the mist, and a woman with a baton, standing very straight, and then forty other women, female shapes shifting behind solid instruments, ghosts gathering themselves from smoke, from soot, from that weird black dust everywhere falling. Music muted the cries of children, and they thought: *If the music doesn't stop, anything—anything at all—is bearable*.

My mother's grandmothers died because they were old; her grandfather because he hobbled behind them. Aunt Lilike took the hand of a child, a little boy lost, a waif abandoned. Lilike and the son of a stranger

died together. *You lived because your shoes almost fit and you found a piece of wire to close them, because you stole a spoon from a dead man, because you tore his shirt to wrap your feet, and your feet didn't freeze and swell and blister, and the sores didn't cripple you; because you pulled the straw from the dead one's pants to stuff your own pants, because you weren't afraid, because the dead were dead and couldn't hurt you.*

*You died because you failed to button your tunic to the top, because you failed to make your bed flat and tuck the corner, because you failed to stand three hours in the freezing rain as the guards called your ridiculous numbers, as their dogs searched for the ones who didn't answer, the ones who failed to rise, the ones whose hearts and minds had failed them.*

One day my mother thought she would run into the buzzing fence and end it. A song, it was, electricity in wire, a sweet, high hum, the *Mephisto Waltz* tenderly tempting. She didn't care about her own life or the fifty women the guards might shoot in retribution. *I dared God to accuse me of murder.* But she stepped outside the barracks into the light and the sun on her bare arm felt warm, and the sun on her skin saved her. Another day, later, near the end though she didn't know it, my mother moving rocks in the river thought, *So easy to go down, so cold, so sweet to slip under,* but twilight came and the sky turned pink and lavender beyond the trees, and a prayer began to pass among the women, a whispered

song between them, as if in a single breath they'd all remembered the day, the hour, *Shabbat*, the holy night, the queen, the bride already here, radiant among them. They had one choice: to live as long as possible, to let God hold them in the river. *Hungarian, Greek, Czech, Polish—Lithuanian, French, German, Italian—suddenly we spoke as one; suddenly we knew one language: Shalom aleichem malachei hasharet malachei elyon mi melech malchei hamlachim Hakadosh Baruch Hu. And the angels came and hovered there, close, though we worked, though we couldn't stop working, and God gave us each an extra soul, a holy spirit for the Sabbath—He gave us five souls; He gave us fifty; He gave us all the dead swirling down this river. Did we sing aloud or only dream this dream together? The guards would have killed us if they'd heard, wounded us one by one, left us face down in the water, silent women, floating Jews, free at last, saved, delivered, but the wind in the trees and the water over rocks were the prayer and the song, and the river and the night and the wind saved us.*

*How can this be?*

You lived because your bones heard *Aida* in your sleep, and the beat of the drums kept your heart beating.

My father said, *Even Moses didn't want to die. Old as he was, Moses feared the Angel of Death. When he climbed Mount Nebo at last, Moses asked God to kiss his mouth and eyelids.*

*Father, did you wait for God? Did He kiss you as you*

*fell? Did you die afraid, or surrender in wonder?*

*Helen, I confess, I kissed you: as Idris lifted you out of my arms, I pressed my lips to your leg—to taste, to know, to love you.*

*I do love you.*

Two hours gone since we lost her. Is love fiercer than death? *Mother, are you with me?* I thought of Helen's mother, the words she might hear, her husband the first to know, the one to tell her, the terrible sound she might make as slowly she understood him. Do the dead die when they die, or only when we believe it? My father lay dead nine hours before I knew it, and all that time, if I imagined him at all, I imagined him walking in the water, in the world, beside me.

The police found Helen's father first, Peter Kinderman, a pharmacist downtown, and when he saw them, he was afraid, but not for Helen—he never thought, *It's her, she's gone, my beautiful daughter*. He thought accidental overdose, a mistake in a prescription, a stranger dead somewhere or in a coma, his fault, or the fault of one of his technicians. He made the stuttering policeman say it three times. *Drowned, today, this morning, Helen*. He walked from the drug store to the library, thirteen blocks in the cold without hat or gloves, and the wind bit and he liked it, the small hurt, the swirling snow, the distraction, the drifting in and out, the seconds when it was still untrue, a terrible mistake, someone else's drowned child, but not his, not

Helen, not possible.

*How Helen would suffer when she heard it!*

She'd hold him, her distraught father, while he wept in relief and terror, grieving now for another man, feeling him, the one he didn't know, the father of a child missing. *Oh, Helen!* She was always the most sensitive of his children, the quiet one, Helen who came from the womb with her eyes wide open, just a few minutes old and already watching. She would understand his sorrow, the hours of pain when she didn't come home, when he began to take it in, when he couldn't breathe, when he had to invent words to tell his wife and somehow find his other children.

Peter Kinderman climbed the winding stairs to the fourth floor of the library because even the glass elevator looked too small, the air inside too close, too much like water—the fourth floor where you can see paintings by Fra Angelico or read the words of Mahatma Gandhi—where you can visit Saigon, Macchu Picchu, Wounded Knee—where you can climb Denali. The copy of John James Audubon's *Birds of America* lies in a glass case, protected. If you took it out, it would stand three feet high and be too heavy to steal. Sixty pounds! *Oh, how Helen loved it.*

Clare Kinderman saw her husband and thought, *What a lovely surprise, not my birthday, not our anniversary, and here he is in the middle of the day, Peter looking handsome and sad, cold and disheveled, but surely*

*he's not sad because he's come in time for lunch, like the days when we were first married, before the children, before Vonda Jean and Helen, before Jay and Karin and Juli, when the day was too long to be apart, when he had to come, sometimes three times a day, just to look, just to see that I was still here, still his, still real.*

He took her outside to say it, so she could wail into the wind, so she wouldn't have to hold it in her body as he held it, so the cry wouldn't splinter her ribs the way his ribs were splintering.

I was not there; I did not hear the sound my mother made when she found my father in the shower, when she understood she'd lost him too, her one, her only one, her love, her Leonard.

A Sunday morning, late summer, and Mother had gone to the hospital to play her violin for the children. Leonard Lok slipped free of his body fast to follow her, to hear her play, to see Éva swaying to the songs inside her—one more time, my love, my darling—before his spirit dispersed, before his holy sparks scattered. She stood with her back to the windows, face in shadow, bright glass blazing behind her—Éva Lok playing her violin for the children, giving them her wild joy, the miracle of survival in these strings, an endless hymn of praise, a vision of their own perfection—Éva playing Kodály's Dances of Galánta and Marosszék, each one a fusion, a rondo and a rhapsody, playing with her beloved Zoltán, imagining him, the teacher who visited

her school, who believed every child could sing, who said every child *must* sing whenever possible. *Hum if you don't have breath; let your body feel it.* And so in his spirit, in his name, Éva taught a simple song to these children in wheelchairs, the ones without hair, the ones without fingers, the ones with fluttery hearts and failing kidneys, the burned boy with a patchwork face, skin sewn from the skin of others. He'd made a collage of himself, a picture pasted together: right ear of a pig and tail of a peacock, open eyes of an owl, closed mouth of a seal. He offered it to my mother when she came, a gift, and she saw who it was before he said it, and she touched his left ear, the ear that was really his, the soft ear, the ear that could still hear and flush and feel, and she said, *It's beautiful, you're beautiful, thank you.*

*How can this be?*

*Because the boy's mother fell asleep, and the boy and his sister torched the drapes, because they wanted to see a wall of fire, because the sister furlled herself inside, and the brother tried to save her.*

My father blazed in the window behind Éva. As light, he fell on bare heads and throats; as light, he warmed naked legs and shoulders; as light, he transfigured all these shattered faces. My mother saw, and almost understood, but couldn't believe it.

And then a cloud passed, and as light leaves, he left them.

*How can a man die so swiftly, without resistance,*

*without a witness? How can anyone die in her own bed, or his own shower? How can a twenty-two-year-old girl who learned to swim before she walked drown in a pool? How can you survive the worst and not live forever?*

*Helen, I can't make sense of it.*

Last week, three deer stood still on our back porch, transfixed by their own reflections. The next day, I saw one struck by a van, and I knew her, I remembered her, lighter and smaller than the other two, hungry like them because of the snow, desperate, and so they'd come down from the hills into the city. She leaped away, a miracle, unharmed by the van, alive in the moment. But later, I was sure I felt her in the snow, hidden in the park by the river. I looked for her; I don't know what I meant to do—lie down with her, as I lay with my mother, float away at last, give myself to the water? I was certain she would die that night, that inside her starved body ruptured organs bled, weak muscles quivered.

*How can this be?* Even now, I hear Helen's mother softly say it.

My mother who lost everyone she loved rocked me in her thin arms one day and said, *I have you and Liam and Seth and Davia.* My mother whispered, *My life for this, God has mercy.*

My father and his sister Antje lived because their mother had a cousin of a cousin in America, a man with a farm and a wife but no children. Miklós Zedek agreed

to take these two if they could learn to milk cows and pluck chickens, if they weren't afraid to twist a neck and break it, if they promised to love mucking stalls, shoveling snow, heaving thirty-pound pumpkins.

His mother said, *We'll come soon; we'll come after.* She meant when they'd saved enough to travel, enough to bribe, enough to secure visas. She packed their finest clothes: Antje's lace blouse with feather stitching, her velvet skirt, Leonard's black wool jacket with sapphire silk lining. Worthless, she knew: they weren't going to wear silk and lace on a farm outside of Buffalo. *Buffalo: what did it mean, and where was it?* She ironed Leonard's trousers and handkerchiefs though Antje begged her to stop, though Antje said: *On the boat, everything you've packed will crumple.* She darned their socks, toes and heels, saving her children's lives with tiny knots and stitches. Their mother sang as she worked, peculiar melodies known only to her, giddy and bright, then suddenly mournful. Ironing was perfect bliss, folding her children's clothes the piercing joy she'd keep forever.

Their father wrote: *There's been an unexpected delay.*

Their mother added: *Just a few more months. Be good, my darlings.*

And they were good, very good, and they slept in one room, in one bed, at the back of the house where the rain came through the roof, and the heat never reached them. Their father wrote: *The American*

*Consulate has not approved our applications to immigrate. We'll try again in four months. Keep your faith in us. We'll be there.* His scrawled note at the bottom of the page sounded like a whisper, a secret sputtered at the last moment before he could scratch it out or regret it: *Better we have to wait. Your mother's been sick, nothing serious, just some fluid in her lungs—she'll be well again when she sees blue sky and the weather's warmer. She sends her love. She says don't worry.*

Their mother died on the train. Their father died in Dachau.

*Soon, after, delay, don't worry.*

*You died because you kept your faith. You lived because you lost it. You sang when you heard how your mother died, because even if God was deaf, you wanted your mother to hear you.*

My father carried three photographs to America: Greta and Hevel Lok six days after they married, a clear alpine lake and snow-covered mountains in the distance; Hevel as a child in short pants, a boy holding a butterfly on his finger; Greta Erhmann walking through a field of poppies, a hopeful girl, conceiving two children in her mind, dreaming her life to come: *I did; I saw you.* Hand-tinted, singular and precious—this photograph held their whole lives: together, apart, before, after. The artist had flushed the girl's lips and shoulders, had revealed heat rising beneath the skin of cheeks and fingers. The poppies glowed, lit from inside,

translucent yellow.

Vivid as these pictures were, they were not as strong as the visions in his mind, the last days, the last hours, Mother ironing perfect creases in his trousers, Mother holding Antje's cape, dancing without music, swirling the long gray cape into a person. My father remembered his father on his knees the day the blond boys of Vienna became Nazi accomplices. They wore swastikas on their armbands and flicked their little dog-whips. They wanted Hevel Lok to scrub the street, to wash away the Austrian cross some rebel nationals had painted. The doctor had known these three in their mothers' wombs, had felt Dieter's appendix before it burst and saved him, set Emil's fractured legs after he leaped from the tree house, listened to Hendrik's heart and lungs, laid his naked ear on the little boy's bare chest when he had whooping cough—because the stethoscope was too cold, because he didn't want to hurt him. *Dieter, Emil, Hendrik!* Hevel Lok wanted to say their names, to call them out of themselves, to remind them who he was, the one they knew, the man who loved them.

My father's mother loved her children enough to let them go, to believe, to trust, to lie: *One day soon we will all be together.*

My father the Austrian orphan became an American soldier, a liberator of Mauthausen who saw the dead—in pits, in the quarry, ones forced to

leap, ones half-burned, ten thousand in one grave, hundreds never buried. He saw how hungry they were, the dead, limbs bent back, impossible angles, humans so thin their spines jabbed up through their bellies. Even now they cried and wasted. *So hungry!* The dead wanted my father to feed them. Each one was his own mother. His broken father lay in the pit, whispering the *Kaddish* ten thousand times, then starting over. Leonard Lok stared across the open grave and saw his unborn child on the other side, his daughter ready to leap, Margalit silently wailing.

He had never loved like this. He thought love might kill him.

How could he go home, and where was it?

Antje wrote: *121 inches of snow in Buffalo this winter and still snowing.* He wanted to be there, under the snow, with her, with them, to sleep without dreams and not be dead but never wake from it. He stayed behind to work in displaced-persons camps in Austria, then Germany. To his sister Antje he wrote: *I think I can be useful.*

He meant nothing else makes sense. Nothing else matters.

Antje wrote: *People go over Niagara Falls in barrels, to say they did, to prove it's possible.* He hated these foolish men who risked their lives on purpose.

The ones returned from the dead told him stories. They lived by chance, by grace, the sacrifice of another.

*Because I lied when they asked if I could play accordion; because the orchestra needed a cellist; because someone else had died in the night; because I spoke German; because I pricked my finger and rubbed blood on my lips and cheeks to look rosy; because I was a chemist; because God filled my lungs and I sang "Un bel di" and this pleased an officer, and he chose me to watch over his children, because his wife was too tired after the baby, and I scrubbed their pots, and I scoured their toilets, and they weren't unkind in their house, and I couldn't hate them, and sometimes I stole the baby's bottle, sometimes I sucked milk pumped from the breast of his mother, and I was always afraid, but she never saw and she never killed me.*

They told of the ones set free who died anyway, hundreds a day, thousands in every camp, because the soldiers, the good ones, their liberators, gave them meat and chocolate and wine and cigarettes, and they ate too much, too fast, and their bowels twisted, and the food that promised life became the poison that killed them.

Sometimes he sat with the children while they ate, teaching them to take a little at a time, to trust that there was more: chicken soup and bread and oranges, carrots and peas and milk and potatoes. And then one day she was there, Éva Spier, an orphan just like him but not destroyed, Éva, a girl who still loved her life, the thin thread of it, who weighed thirty-four kilos, nine pounds more than the day she was liberated, Éva who gave bread to the birds, who said, *Enough to scatter on*

*the ground, enough to share, imagine.* The crumbs on the ground and the birds at this girl's feet were life, all of it, all he needed forever and ever. If she could choose life, who was he to deny it? When the bread was gone, the birds pecked her bare feet, and she laughed, and he laughed with her, these two, these motherless children.

Imagine a love like this, here, after, in this place—  
imagine a life where laughter is possible.

To Antje he wrote: *I'll never leave her.*

But he did leave one bright Sunday morning while Éva played her violin, while light fell on the stunned faces of fifteen children, ones outside of time, ones caught in the rapture. Light was all the weight they could bear, light the only touch tender enough not to hurt them.

If my father had lived, he might have taught some of these children to float, to swim, to walk in water when their legs were too weak to stand, when the frail rigging of their bones wouldn't hold them. Children like these saved him every day, and every day he needed saving.

*How the body loves life! How the body wants to heal!*

On the last day of my mother's life, I saw the sores on her feet closing.

*How can this be?*

I was glad when my mother died. I don't deny it. I thought now she and I can rest, now we can stop hurting. But it doesn't stop. You might be ten or sixteen

or ninety, you might be a hundred and twenty, old as Moses, and still be afraid to leave this earth, still cling to your precious body. At the top of the mountain, you might insist God kiss your eyelids. You might surrender, yes—you might forgive the one who gave you life to lose—but still weep, still wish to touch the body, the face, the mouth of every one taken before you.

Four hours gone, and even I who held Helen Kinderman in my arms can't believe it. She was radiant. Last week, I saw her in the shower naked. Today, she floated on the bottom. She distracted me. I started my flip turn too soon, and my feet missed the wall—no push, no glide, no rest for the weary—and I saw her again, the second time, just moments after the first, and I blamed her. I didn't love her then, not enough to sense despair or know her sudden weakness in that moment. I swam to the shallow end and back, and I was slow, too slow, because I was tired, and I saw her the third time, right where I'd left her, twelve feet down, twelve feet under, and I think I was afraid, but I didn't want to be afraid, so I was angry instead and I sputtered, and my mother said, *Dive*, and my mother said, *She needs you.* And I did dive; I held her in my arms, and I understood how it was, how it will be, and I kissed her leg as she rose, as Idris lifted her away from me, and I loved her as God loves—in helpless grief, in terrible pity—and then the others came, *so fast*: Louise and Violette, the firemen and paramedic, the shaved boy, the swollen

woman, the one-legged man, the unborn child—and I loved them too, and I knew that what had happened to Helen had happened to all of us, and forever.

*How can this be?*

There are a thousand ways to die, any day, any hour—yet one child lives, one little girl devoured by the wolf cuts herself free of his bowel and walks out of the woods into the sunlight. One woman in a pit moves, and another one says, *Can anybody hear me?* A wife pulls her husband from the shower in time, and a doctor makes an incision just big enough to slip his fingers inside, and this man, this doctor, this human being, holds the heart of another man in his hand while he repairs it.

*Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, my daughter. You have seen God face to face. Now all suffering is over. Now it is time to forgive. Now it is time to surrender. Love is fiercer than death. I set myself as a seal upon your heart. Trust me.*

And so I rose. I did as my mother asked. I did everything she'd taught me. *You lived because a woman hungrier than you, one too sick to swallow, gave you her soup and bread, and you saw that she was God, offering herself to you even as she lay dying.* I unrolled the white tablecloth with its white satin stitches, and my mother and father appeared, smelling of rosewater and myrtle, shimmering behind lush white leaves, then hiding themselves again so that I could see dove and goat,

lamb and lion, wolf and weasel, snake and tiger—three fish swimming under roots, one tiny bear growling in the distance—owl and elephant, ram and raven: life everywhere, life abundant.

*Now, this is the hour.*

I imagined Davia walking from Rowland Hall to the McGillis School, five steep blocks, to wait for Seth and then walk two miles home, together. Every day she goes. They could take a bus, but never do. *Time to think*, she says, *and besides, I miss him.* She will not say she's afraid. I know she can't explain it. A child doesn't need to hear a story to feel it. The story is there, trembling in the body and the blood, in the wind through the pines, over rocks in the river. The violin lies in its case, but the zither plays itself, and the song swells unspoken.

*Let me speak now, my children. Let me tell you.*

I saw Karin and Juli Kinderman coming home too, on the same bus, but not together, a kind of agreement they have, to pretend to be strangers, Juli a freshman at West High, Karin a senior. They'll find their parents in the living room, and they'll know their loss before they hear it. All their lives, Helen's sisters will wonder why their father let them stay in school today, why he let Juli dress in drag to play Hamlet, why he let Karin learn to pose questions in Italian. *Are you afraid? Are you hungry? Who is your favorite saint? Shall we go to the opera?* They'll rage. How could their mother

allow Karin to eat her lunch in peace while little Juli, Prince of Denmark, sneaked outside to lie in the bed of a truck, to get buzzed on cigarettes and blow smoke into the mouths of her two boyfriends? Forever and a day, Karin and Juli will blame their parents for these terrible hours, macaroni and cheese, hot ash, complete ignorance.

Peter Kinderman has found Vonda Jean, has called her home from her honeymoon in Hawaii. When she heard her father's voice, she thought: *He knows about the black-footed albatross and the black sand beaches, the orange amaryllis growing so fast I heard it, the pink hibiscus. He knows about the first day, a waterfall with three rainbows, scarlet 'apapane birds blazing through a forest so green it scared me. He knows the sea is bluer than the sky, the world upside down, heaven underwater. My father who loves me too much knows about the tequila and ginger I used to ease the sting of sunburn, the mango daiquiris last night, the flaming sambuccas after dinner.*

And perhaps she is right—perhaps he imagines the tiny red bathing suit she wore, the strapless dress, her near nakedness at this moment, but the words he speaks are soft, and in the breath before the cry, all transgressions past and still to come are by a sister's death forgiven.

*Helen, I don't know why it was our time. I don't know why I didn't save you.*

Eight hours gone and Jay Kinderman, serving

his mission in Hermosillo, walks a dusty road at the edge of the city, hoping to save one soul today, hoping to win one convert. He does not know. He cannot imagine a world, a life, a day without his four sisters. He hears Helen's mocking voice above the others, Helen, three years older, calling him *Elder Kinderman*, and he laughs at himself, at his white shirt, stained with sweat, filthy from dust blowing. He laughs and she's there, watching, his Helen. He loosens his tie at last, as if she has whispered: *It's okay. Do it.* His companion is sick today—heaving, dehydrated, afraid to leave his bed, afraid to drink the water. If Jay liked Elder Mattea better, would they be more successful? Something to overcome—in time, if possible—part of the test, part of the challenge: surrendering to love long before you feel it.

He is forbidden to work alone. All day, he has been disobedient. Not one crime, but a crime committed moment by moment, street to street, hour by hour. It would have been right to stay with Jared, good to care for him today, to watch over him as he slept, change the sheets a third time, fetch the bedpan or a doctor—it would have been generous and just to boil water clean and sit with Elder Mattea as he sipped it. But there will be other days to learn this kindness. Today has been a gift, time apart, his opportunity. All day, he has failed, but now, as twilight comes, he feels calm again and strengthened—and he is not alone:

Helen has come to walk this scrap of earth beside him.

He sees a small Indian woman moving toward him, slowly gathering herself out of the dust until she becomes a shape he recognizes. He counts, he tries to count, all her skinny dogs, all her skinny-legged children, all the mottled chickens that lead this strange procession.

And he thinks, *Now, today, this is the hour*, and for once he won't preach, won't try so hard, won't provoke himself with language. Helen is here. Helen has revealed his mistakes to him, the failure of practiced words, the hopelessness of his precise Spanish.

He knows what his sister would do, knows she would walk in silence with this woman and her seven skinny children and her six scrawny dogs and her multiplying chickens, knows Helen would walk side by side along the tracks to the Rio Sonora. His throat is too parched to speak of God and salvation. Even the chickens refuse to squawk. It is better to go home with the woman and her children, to offer the rice and beans and corn he always carries, to drink their water unafraid, to trust, to keep his faith, to help them cook this food over an open pit, to sit, to eat, to share this meal.

Jay Kinderman knows he will do this—for Helen, with Helen. He will dance with enchanted legs. He will learn every song the children want to teach him.

And he will be the one swayed; he will be the

one converted.

*My children! Let the night begin! May you all forgive me!*

Davia opened the door, and here they were, alive, both of them, home, my precious ones, to help me slice pears and crack coconuts. I touched their faces, and they understood everything had changed, though I dared not tell them what had happened. I imagined how it would be if Helen were their sister, if she'd died today, but they didn't know it, if they'd been conjugating verbs in French or memorizing the names of tribes, learning to spell, to say, to imagine *Hohokam, Tutsi, Zapotek, Yaqui, Eyak, Gwich'in, Kuna, Maasai, Malagasay*—if they'd been watching a film about birds: snow geese in flight, dancing cranes, emperor penguins emerging from the ocean. Oh, if they heard now, how foolish and blessed it would seem, this life, all of it!

Liam returned to us, just in time, just before dusk, in the hour of twilight. We blessed the wine of every season: white, pink, rose, red. We drank it down, the year to come, the year behind us. We blessed each fruit. We ate because God needed us—our human love, our frail bodies—to restore Him, the Tree of Life, to give God life in the world. *Everything I have is yours!* How slow we are to learn it. We ate pomegranates with shells because on this perilous earth we need protection; we ate dates, plums, olives—fruit with pits—because fear makes a stone, sharp in the belly. We ate figs and grapes

and apples—we devoured them whole because God longs to enter us whole, to become one with us.

We sang as trees sing: *Ehyeh asher ehyeh, I am what I am becoming*. And the silence between words, our breath, was the fruit of God unseen, too sweet to taste, the fruit of life, ethereal. Three deer came to the back porch and stared inside and were not afraid of us.

Later, our children passed some secret sign between them. Davia rose and Seth followed. Our daughter began to play the piano, low and soft, in a rhythm impossible to repeat, moonlight through fluttering leaves—the wind, and then the water. I was hearing notes, but Davia was listening to the space between them, hearing the song inside her song, the first words of unborn children. Davia was waiting for the one word, the note before the note where she might join them. I was afraid to lose her, but she trembled with pure joy, the bliss of finally going. And then it came. I don't know how she did it. A single bell rang clear and high as one by one the low notes faded. Davia dove. Davia concealed herself as water.

Imagine the song you would sing if you loved the mud, the weeds, the rocks rippling you. Imagine your joy if you reflected stars, then swallowed them. Imagine if you had no choice as creeks entered you, if you wound slowly through silent woods, then with delight roared down a narrow canyon—imagine the wonder of it all, how you'd laugh and leap as you ceased to be, as

you emptied yourself into the ocean. *Never again, never again I, never will I on this world be walking*. This was Davia's voice, life beyond hope and fear, proof of love, God unfathomable. Seth brought his fingers to the keys in a jubilation of sound, three times Davia's speed, but with astonishing lightness.

Rain, brilliant rain, water bouncing off water.

I looked at my husband's hands, the hand that holds the knife, the hand that slips a rib into a child. I felt them here, the children whose lives he'd saved—Sophie, Joseph, Daniel, Remy—Nina, Dorothy, Matthew, Eric—I saw each one of them and all their children; I saw fathers and mothers spared, sisters and brothers not abandoned.

*You lived because you chopped fallen trees in a nearby forest. One day you prayed as you walked: Please come, please come. You meant God, death, your mother, your father. But instead you saw blue butterflies, a quick fox, three rabbits; instead, white flowers bloomed along the path, white, with scarlet anthers. Everything here seemed kind. Nothing here wanted to kill you. This was how wind through pine answered: If the butterfly survived the night, why can't you live one more day, one more hour? If the clouds are part of God and part of you, why can't they be good? Why can't they be sentient?*

Thirteen hours gone, and Jay Kinderman is learning Yaqui Deer Songs from the children, songs to carry them from here to over there, from this world to

the flower universe.

*The deer looks at a flower.*

*The bush is sitting under a tree and singing.*

*With a cluster of flowers in my antlers I walk.*

*This is the truth you asked for.*

*Dressed in flowers, I am going.*

*Never again I, never will I on this world be walking.*

Somehow he has to get back to Hermosillo.

Surely Elder Mattea has exposed the depth of his betrayal. How will he explain what he saw here in the wilderness?

*I have ears to the wilderness, as I am walking.*

*Whether I turn to the right or to the left, I hear a voice behind me saying, This is the way, walk in it.*

Is this the truth they've asked for?

*Here in the wilderness, I am killed and taken.*

The four boys who have all become little deer brothers laugh at him, his stiff attempts to dance as deer dance. There is a song for his failure: *You who do not have enchanted legs, what are you looking for?* There is sorrow: *The fawn will not make flowers.* There is consolation: *White butterflies in a row are flying.*

*Helen, if the butterflies survived the night, why can't we live one more day, one more hour?*

My children climbed the stairs, and their enchanted father followed. But the music did not cease. The song surged through wood and wire, a wild river of blood, the

throbbing pulse in my skull and pelvis.

I had to rise, or die there.

I came to Seth and Davia in their dark rooms to kiss their mouths and eyelids. They allowed it; they indulged me, my generous ones, my children who are not mine, who do not belong to me, these two who belong to God and rain and river, who saved me with a song, who found the secret chord, who held me even now, floating on the surface of their music.

I kissed them, and I left them; I let them go, my darlings.

I came to my own room, the room where my husband lay on the bed, not undressed, not sleeping. I opened the window to feel snow fall: everywhere, snow—six inches since morning, feathery and light, merciful snow, silent snow, snow that would be fast to melt, snow that in the dark seemed endless. Liam rose and stood behind me, and I leaned back; I let my weight fall against him; I let my husband gently rock me. And in the hour that came at last, in the new day just beginning, I began to speak, and he began to hear me.

*My mother was alive again today, but dying, and my father fell as light on the tree where Datiel is hanging. Edith, Efron, Tzili, Judit. Helen drowned today with Seth and Davia, and I couldn't climb the stairs to save you in the shower. Then you all came home with Amiela and Éva, and three deer stared inside to bless us. Davia played cello and piano while the wind played violin and zither. Seth*

sang Hallelujah as he walked into the fire. Children with metal ribs climbed trees and leaped to the ground without breaking. Samuel eased Violette into the water, and my father walked in the water beside them. God appeared as Louise Doren. God appeared as hidden sparrows. God appeared as a starving woman who offered her soup and bread to my mother. God became wine, and we drank Him. Edith Spier became herself and bore three children. She called them *El Shaddai, El Olom, El Khai*. Bertók Spier made a coffin for himself without wood or grief or nails. Lilike saved the son of a stranger, and Juli Kinderman crowned herself Prince of Denmark. Karin answered every question: *I'm not afraid; I'm not hungry. We ate pomegranates and plums and apples, and God as fruit sustained us. Karin said, Cecilia is my favorite saint. My mother played her violin while a burned boy slipped free of flayed skin to emerge as owl, and pig, and peacock. Vonda Jean lay down naked on a black sand beach so hot her whole body melted, and the 'apapane birds sang her name and the dark-eyed man ate fire. Peter Kinderman saw Clare as she was before she knew, before she imagined, and their daughter Helen came home with open eyes to comfort them. Hevel Lok pressed his ear to a child's chest and heard the boy's blood roaring. All the hungry birds of Europe landed at Éva Spier's feet, and she fed them, and she laughed, and my father swore he'd never leave, and then he left us. My mother's bones washed away in an icy river, but we were not afraid because the twilight came, and the song, and*

*the angels, and we had survived; we had lived through it, and the doll named Anastasia split her own skull to spill her secrets. Our children heard the first word and laughed like God as they became water. They held me, they gave me strength, and I took Helen Kinderman in my arms, and I kissed her leg as she rose, and all her people, all their love and grief, poured into me.*

Now, even now, Jay Kinderman begins his long walk back to Hermosillo. *With a cluster of flowers in my antlers I walk. I hear the wilderness as I am walking.* Late, so late. There will be repercussions and restrictions, the ritual of repentance or even a return home—depending. And if that, how will he explain and who will understand him? Only Helen. He was called to go, and made to follow, and the children taught him a song, and the woman built a fire, and the food they shared gave life to God inside them, and they danced with enchanted legs, deer with flowers in their antlers. Helen will understand when he says: *Nobody wants to die, but sometimes little deer brother offers himself to the people. In the wilderness, I am killed and taken. I am not afraid. I am joyful. The bush under the tree is singing. There is no such thing as "I."* *Oh sweet sister! This is the truth you asked for.*

\* Please note: the translations of lines from Yaqui Deer Songs appear in *Yaqui Deer Songs*, by Larry Evers and Felipe S. Molina, and come from numerous songs.

The phrases have been rearranged and juxtaposed (and occasionally altered) in Jay Kinderman's mind to create his own deer song, a prayer of praise and wonder. He hears the words of the prophet Isaiah too, strikingly in tone with the deer songs.