

Two Poems
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7,295 Days Since We Buried Our Mother
June, 2016

and

The Orthodoxy of Remembrance
September, 2018

with
Artist Statement
and
Work Statement

as prepared for the New York Foundation for the Arts,
November 2019

7,295 Days Since We Buried Our Mother

She sent a Christmas card a few winters ago,
it was the kind with a photograph.

I wrote her back and asked:

“What does this mean?”

The next winter, no card came, then a year later, another did.

I responded again with a few words.

Perhaps more politely, but no less confused.

Now, she has been liking my Facebook posts
and writing the occasional message.

But it didn't take her long.

Of course, she wanted something.

This one, this woman,
the only other female to live in the same womb,
cross the same cervix,
and come screaming
into the same hellish world we were each born into,

25 months between us.

A universe between us.

When we were kids, we were just “very different” from each other.

Now, she is more a stranger to me than if

I were meeting her on a subway platform,

or in a grocery store.

Some things never change.

Her favorite form of abuse:

The manipulative manner in which she demands assistance, attention, affection.

Over two decades ago I told her:

“Don't phone me again if you can't inquire as to how I am,
don't call me again if all you can do is ask for something.”

Then our Mom died.

I really tried to be the best kid sister to the entire crop of siblings,
but one is as bad as another,
and in the end, all I got for my labors, my mediating, my truths –
Was her fist in my face.

No longer a child,
long since “out from under” the curse of their traumas and bad behaviors –
I walked away.
No one followed to nurture, inquire, support me.

That’s okay.

What I’ve learned since then is that as each day passes,
and the distance in time becomes greater than the distance from “home”
is this:
I own my own joy.

They can’t have any,
I won’t share it with any of them.

Now she has come back again,
like a stalker, always wanting, wanting,
A hungry ghost from a past that is best left where it was –
In the dark room of memory.

The Orthodoxy of Remembrance

Sometimes, they really piss me off,
Those who define identity narrowly
With these and those rituals
Or pieces of paper they rely on As proof.
Thinking these things give them the right
To define identity
For others.

My great-great-auntie Esther was raped
During the Ukrainian Pogroms.
She broke.
She never spoke another word.
She sat at the kitchen table
In my great-grandmother's Williamsburg apartment
And twiddled her thumbs.

I know this,
Not because there was some formal declaration
Or even a Third Reich type
Numbered tattoo.

I know this because my mother,
In her girlhood,
Knew Esther
And gave her the dignity of
Blessed memory
By telling me
Her story.

On another day
My mother told me something else
That I later read about
In one of the near daily letters
My dad wrote her --
Newly in love
Separated by war
As he served upon the USS Bon Homme Richard.
He wrote of a day beyond the Panama Canal
Not yet arrived at Leyte Island
Where he witnessed an ocean of floating dead.

A memory from which
He never full recovered.

In his letters
He also wrote
Of his struggle to understand
My mom's family's difficulty
Because he was not Jewish
To his mind, it was the love that mattered --
Not the fact that he was Wyandotte.

Now having put in forty years of research,
Thousands of pages read, written, saved:
Twenty-five generations, 151 pages
Are the content of my genealogical record.
A neatly typed catalog of names, dates, births, marriages and burials
Still, nowhere have I found
Other than my father's boat-weary handwritten message
Proof (or disproof) that he was Indigenous.

Now, I know a man
Who says he has proof of being a direct descendant
Of the "Great Chief"
Yes, the one who, if you ask me,
sold the Wyandotte out At Greenville.

He says:
"Strangers must prove themselves if they want to be accepted.
It may seem harsh, but it's for the health of "Indian Country."

He says: "If you have family evidence just show your brothers and sisters
That you are one of them.
If you can't present the proof,
You likely will not be allowed in the ceremonial circle."

I've heard that one before....
On the day some so-called friends said:
"You aren't Jewish enough."
And unceremoniously uninvited me
From their Sabbath Circle.

The thing about genocidal trauma is –

It is a dirty little secret.
The perpetrators do not document it
The victims cannot document it.
A resilient few who manage to survive
To reproduce
Likely only have the words
Their parents told them.
There is no proof.

I am aging.
Taking time to enumerate
Ceremonial Circles where I have never been invited
Or been uninvited:
No birth certificates No bris, census records, tattoo No tribal roll --

Because my Wyandotte Ancestors were rebels,
Of the (so called) "Heathen Party"
They and refused to be removed from Ohio;

Because my Jewish Ancestors fled the
Pale of Jewish Settlement
Having been ghettoized,
And terrorized,
For generations.

I say:
"It's your party do what you want to do."
Speaking only for myself I declare:
I am so sick and tired of people who believe
They have the right
To define identity for anyone other than themselves.
The only proof I have is the
Orthodoxy of Remembrance

It is my story and I will courageously tell it.
I will sing it
I will dance it
I will sway as I pray in languages I never learned
And call out all the names I know:
Ollie, Sarah,
Rose, Joseph,
Susan, Joshua,

Dora, Abraham,
Carrie, James
William, and Cornelia.
Keziah of no known last name.
My many, many generations ago great grandmother
I laugh and call to you:
“Keziah! Ancestor of my desire...”
I will speak out, on Esther’s behalf.

I invite all to celebrate with me,
Whoever you are --
No proof required.

Artist Statement

Poetry is to other ways of writing as sweetened condensed milk is to 2%. It is consolidated and distilled, with something added in the lessening of it, by its intensity and immediacy. Someone once said to me “poets cry ink instead of tears on paper instead of cheeks.” Anger, an emotion I much prefer not to act upon but which calls out for expression, is the cyclogenesis of my inky tears.

Work Statement

I am a life long pacifist. In the occasional war of words that are the stuff of human relationships I strive to find positive solutions to conflict resolution. When my opponent has their brains locked in a metal box of toxicity, and solutions seem impossible, I turn to poetry. There I can dangerously pour out raw language, and over time, tease the words and phraseology until my thoughts are honed to a glistening smoothness. These two poems are representative examples of this technique for harnessing my own inner demons.