



**BOOK
OF
THE
MISSING**

Heidi Grunebaum

Book of the Missing

by
Heidi Grunebaum

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for Arielle and Isabel

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Preface: The Poet as Chronicler of Shadows

A chronicle of the shadows of a specific epoch, this slender collection arrives. Its Atlantic mood blows breezes of warmth, salty air, stifled cries, some measure of jubilation, and the chaos of a universe remaking itself from the debris of history. A history of loss, of love, of desire, of atonement for wrongs committed, for lives interrupted, for fires unstoked.

Mornings sipping steaming black coffee when solitude requires sounds from the likes of Dafer Yousseff or Busi Mhlongo, Souad Massi or Susana Baca. Arabica beans permeate the air inside, outside the sparkling songs of the tiniest birds, handfuls of "bone and feather and a thousand thousand miles of flight/ twice yearly through cyclones and blizzards and tropical storms." All of these things Heidi Grunebaum's poetry distills. Between silence and birdsong, eyes closed, head back, the poet remembers: exile, sacrifice, the natural world, the bones of the lost.

The dulling ache of loss that stills her heart for a beat before quickening it recalls a former self once full of ideals and outrage, clawing for hope – for "poets wage the war of hope." When a sad smile on a late winter sprig flutters in the poem's conscience, when calling up obsessed prophets is all that brings succor, language shelters. When improvisations that run out "the back door/ climb up and up then down through the ruts and routes cut by fugitive notes" to soothe the certainty that the terrible, what has drowned history's greatest crimes, may be coming still, from the future, rather than having been chased from the past: which direction, this poetry asks, will the "Angelus Novus" turn?

Its wings singed, its course uncertain, this angel nestles as delicately, as determined, as the tiniest migrant finch does between Grunebaum's lines. Listen, pay heed, enter the shadows of these words and savor their afterlife.

Isabel Balseiro
April 2019

Searching for the Missing

Numb faceless fingers
are signatures no longer,

burns erase the prints
so the shoes will have to do.

Resurrect the memories,
the gestures and glares

of the intimately mundane,
the ordinary buried in words of vision.

Laid to rest in a nameless grave,
private smiles or anti-depressants

forgotten by smart praise
in coffins of myths shiny new.

In the rain

you have gone
it is dark
head in my hands
I am still at the table
between the last whiskey
and uncounted cigarettes
the twilight grey slides into black
gossamer rain insistent
whipping diamond threads
across the window pane
in the thundering cobalt seas
I imagine a tiny cowry shell
curls tightly around
the drop of
emptiness
that is my heart

Wild winds

Be still in the wind as
it proclaims the new season
as its rasping breath
cuts fine the wedges of cliff from coast
whilst it brushes from palettes new
the cobalt of ocean, the ochre of rock
steel of the skies
See how carelessly it tosses the gulls
how the waves crevasse the trodden sands
Its glacial claws tear into my skin
bruising my soft insides
flinging stomach and uterus
against lungs and liver

There is a Navajo story
that tells of first man and first woman
How the first breath
of the winds of life
passed through their bodies prone
inert till then, between two skins
Through their feet and mulchy core
the first winds blew
and out of their fingertips soft as a sigh
This is why we spiral here
our fingerprints trace the memory path
of that first breath
of these wild winds.

Prophecies of Fire

Gale winds blow
insane gods wailing
into the hollow channels of my bones
breathe apocalypse into my sleep
the great Seamountain aflame
the city burns
airplanes vomit tourists
falling like flailing Icarus
burnt offerings to the gods
to children starving
on great feasts of patience
wind howls revolution
in these moonless nights
prophecies of fire
pressed beneath my lids
remain long after
the scorching stillness
of summer's end
gasps in their place.

Sunday drive in the Overberg

To the top of Franschoek pass
we drive and on to the Overberg
Villiersorp and Grabouw.
Only silence speaks through the broken landscape
through quilted miles of its velvet blossom promise,
apples, peaches, apricots, plums.
Until fields greet aching azure mountains,
their early twilight shadows cast purple rays
over waterfalls silvering towards the ground.
There the earth's beauty shrinks,
shiny Landrovers whizz through dust and denial
towards nostalgic architecture,
their Cape Dutch homesteads.

We pass by sardine-can reserves,
backyards of human misery called "labour"
by those whose power to name mutes
from history the late-night hands that work the land,
the moon-filled sadness, wine-dregged longings.
Ever-walking legs trudge water, fire-wood,
children too small to walk, memories too
painful to speak; dreams' chattels
and the enduring backs of ancestors.
Chained across epochs of slavery unbroken
these patchwork acres, an endless death
whose harvest profits only the shameless
hunger of white Wabenzis and captured treats.

Through history, tarred over by the highway,
we drive back towards the obliterating city.
Dunes of unmoored sand roll by,
this emasculated land unseeded of hope
or the promise of orchards, heavy and ripe
or lazy Sunday strolls; past flickering, zinc-chained shacks
-- here board, there cement – this 'development',
"poverty reduction" by those whose power to name
keeps stolen profits in new and old pockets.
Until finally the great mountain, immaculate sentinel
rises up from the misty rays of the last day's sun.

After this

After this West Bank and Jerusalem, war-torn and weary
After conversations till near-dawn, *kahweh arabiya*, *knafe* and too many cigarettes
After the upside-down-inside-out hell that is El Khalil-Hebron
where Hashim's nephew had his teeth crushed by a settler
who put a stone in his mouth and pummeled his face

After God's warriors occupy roofs and roads; minds and metaphor
After checkpoints and walls and crossings and blockings
and tunnels and ditches and bridges
After passing and passing and repassing through Dante's gates
enclosing above and below, closing in, shutting down, shutting up

After the guardians of the gates chew gum, swagger semi-automatics, grind bones
spit on men, look like my daughter, my uncle, my brother
After the grinding winding road up and down through Hell's Valley
inferno of modern trash, ancient curses, human shit
After shape-shifting reality baked hard as the sun

After olive trees ripped from Palestinian lands
replanted at the entrance to Jewish settlements war trophies of colonial masters
After Bassem Al Rahmeh was shot in Bil'in, flying kites beside the Wall
to make a point about freedom,
shot point-blank to the chest with a teargas canister
After rolling the canister in my hand

After thick desert skies, late summer dust, fresh figs waiting, the air exhausted.
After sleep gave way to smiles as I listened in dark nights of morning
to the man walking the streets of Bethlehem,
beating his tabla and chanting the sleeping awake for *suhur*
After short-fuse tempers and long days fasting
After the absence of laughter and children at play, Ramadan in a war zone

After Lubya village beneath decades of pine needles at South Africa Forest
After South Africa Forest, planted over the rubble of Lubya
by South African Jews who remember the Shoah
After Abdallah, steady on his shorter leg, took us deep into the forest
to the *maqam* and the graveyard and well
After Na'eem entered the *maqam* and prayed

After we passed trees of pomegranates and figs and olives that live, still live
After Abu Samiyeh returns to the village each week
for forty years to remember and to pray
After wiping out memory for six years times ten
After the scene of the crime was wiped clear with guns, trees, narratives

After ancient words for modern deeds
and pines bought by a thousand thousand white-blue *pushkas*
from Jewish homes a thousand lands away
After the patient *sabr* cactus stands watch over stones and rubble
and graves and wells
After the *sabr* like a silent wife waits for the return of her beloved

After this, after this, after all this
There is Palestine.

Keyhole

Is the keyhole the absence of a key,
a term defined by its missing other?
Is its speech the deep prick and turn,
the turn click turn click of metal, the fitting key?
Is its silence also its promise?
Right of access, of way, of passage.

The key he carries is a talisman of his loss
He said, 'Write poetry
Politicians make politics
with what there is, not what there can be'
But poets wage the war of hope
embroidering from words the texture of scattered dreams.

Bir As Seb'a is where his home stands
There is an Iraqi family there now
When the wife opened the front door
she knew why he had come; she was the keyhole
She said to her husband, 'Don't let him in'
She said to him, 'Go away from here. This is not your home.'

Is a keyhole, without the key,
but a tiny cipher of the longer shadows of exile?
Can words be keyholes
embracing the absence of what once was?
Or are memories the keyholes and words, the key
and words alone remain
the memorials to unhomed dreams?

Palm Trees

When the palms were
Brought to the place
Beneath the great Seamountain
Their roots took refuge
In the shrouded soil
Burying dreams of home
From the naked sunlight
But their fronds stood tall
As muezzins of ancient memories
Swaying and praying their dirges of remembrance
Of a time before
Their people's enslavement
And the twilight of exile

Crucifix

for T.

On this day after the birth of your Christ
no fortune-teller warned of your coming
blue-eyed man from Ruslare
so we pilfer two nights away from our lives
between Dublin and this African port

Your eyes fix my belly with soft sighs; 'I leave soon', you say
your crucifix quivers at the depression
where throat meets clavicle, baring the fragility of faith
the coal-tip of a slender frankincense
releases the scent of my desire

We sip ruby pinotage, oysters sucked from their jelly cervix
you speak of your brother, too brief a life
how he beckoned strangers with smiles and wicked jokes
how he, all delighted shrieks, would be driven wildly
in his wheelchair around the caravan park

Your eyes shine in the telling of your father
his annual pilgrimage with children of the village
to Lourdes seeking a miracle balm called hope
your blue-eyes burning the color of hellfire's heart
shade of the oceans and merciful gods

We smoke the joint you bring from the Eastern Cape
more wine, speak of our beloved books
and the formulae we summon to explain our worlds
I taste your unmapped flesh, uncircumcised
a shock to the guile of the familiar

Licking arabesques on your skin, I outline the black sun
that flames across your back, then sit astride you
thrusting as my fingers seize the crucifix, its leather thong
tight at your neck, grasping its new strangeness
hands clammy with our sweat, your semen, my milky come

You leave for the airport before dawn
as the gale winds wake the sky
I try to imagine the shades of Dublin mist
that will shroud you as you touch the ground
cross streets of a city veiled for me by books and film

I throw cigarette butts and sticky condoms
into the dustbin, suck cold prawns, butter clotting my fingers
later I find a brown packet in the post-box
your parting gift: poetry, two bookmarks, a tiny beaded angel.

Love notes for our age

True and sharp as the clarity of memory
Your breath bites hot wind into my flesh
On the soft curve beneath my ear
Where neck slopes to nape
Those nights in your arms
When I come across the streets
Of the cold city to be with you
In your backyard shack
Looking straight, nose to nose, touching your breath
And the rushing blood silent in your corpse repose
I lie warm beside you

We uncurl to smoke and dress
Leave to go listen to an economist quote Hegel—
“In this age of Reason, everything can be rationalized”
A meeting of socialists analyze mirages of hope
As if we need scientific principles to know loveless-ness
“Capital flight”, “market deregulation”
The mantras of greed and reason
Of daily prayer intoned with regimes of wellness
Of self-care turning the sods into gold

Love notes blown from a saxophone
Jazz chaos for a different age
The music maker steals me back to you
Exploding furious blues from the brass meniscus
Sparks of a dream and desire sounding over and over
The top notes of your relentless melancholy
No more gifts to redeem white skin and its history, you tell me
But what of the persistence of love and a dreaming heart?
I confuse love and desire

My desire feeds only itself; it has no limit
No end to its desperate yearning
Though we stoke it and feed it, tend it and heat it
Till all is cold, and we are spent and angry
Each faulting the other; recrimination and regret blurring
You could never be what my desire for you promised
For you my desire is the appetite
Of those whose skin is the colorless inhuman color

That became a way of being,
That devours, wants everything, justifies all
You accuse my desire for being that color
The color of lynching

Do not rationalize this, you say
You must refuse, keep refusing, refuse this, refuse to be this
Become an irrational monument to love
Before which all intelligence crumbles
You sculpt words that plot a path between love
And refusal of reason, capital, and the absurd notion
That the earth can be owned and titled; poll taxed and toll-gated
That those who preach compassion, recycling waste, and self-care
Care not for the guards who stand beside their lives, SUVs
Restaurant doors, mall entrances, gateways to their dreams

I come to you when you call, across the damp city
Gridded into its compartments of history
Its lines of madness seep into my eyes
I come to you past a woman streaking through the night streets
Haunted by a ghost slave, drunk she disavows her name
You call and I come, softening into your rejection
Alone as I cross the sleeping city
I alarm the ghosts at their nightly labors
Taunting, they remind the sidewalks of their exile
As ashen as the faded memories of their first forbidden *maghribs*

It must have been a dream
This fury of nothing that marks your place beside me
Where sleeplessness haunts me
Where you are not
So I write to remember
To keep the dreams awake
To dream awake from the sleep of this age
The sleep of indifference
The opposite of love

It gets under the skin

(In my dream)
it was a light-bulb
crushed in his bare hands.
He laughed and said
—This is what we do.
Scream because no-one can hear—
Then he rubbed the gritty shards
inside
and there
in her soft pinkness
he carved his power
for posterity.

Voice on the radio

Shredded pink
inside-out woman
lipstick grimace
labial smiles
around the broken bottle neck
shoved up
rammed in
the wrong way round

Around the fire

That bodies roast is no surprise
We have it on good authority
words of killers
burning lies
politicians deny
smouldering guilt
never again can innocence
be protested around a *braai*

Dreams of healing go wrong

Workshopping memories
in army bases
we sit cross-legged
on the concrete floor
avoiding this demobbed anger
you go into the corner
to write Black Consciousness
dub poetry
I head-rush
short fat cigarettes
called Militant Menthol
colour of the white boy's words
his spittle acid
my stupid smile mute

Silence

You say
that silence
speaks
many tongues
that no-one hears
that claw slate-grey
that pierce your screams
that made you believe
that they were right
that you were guilty
enough
to agree
to make it stop
of that silence
you never
speak

Your silent cartographer

for Y.

Do you remember the road from Laingsburg to Beaufort West
how its curves ran beside the fenced beyond
the crystal rain of desert stars on the windscreen
dub poetry improvised under the roof of night?

Remember the Hanover guesthouse
windmill silhouetted against the coming darkness
you faked a French accent for the purse-lipped aunty
So we could trick her hate into giving a restful bed
Beneath the faded frowns of a *Boer* general?

Remember squinting over the horizon
the road beneath the Little Karoo sun melting
refracted through sheets of steam in the midday sky
your love brandished behind talk of politics, nostalgia?

How you polished the edges of my imagination
recollections of training as political commissar in Moscow
cold that kills malaria, Lenin's mausoleum, strolls in Gorky Park
swearing in Russian, you unfoiled a sandwich, placing it just so
on my thigh, my hands steady on the steering wheel

Do you remember those private silences
infinite as the desert road tapering into lonely scrub
quiet suspended between untuned radio buzz
damp bread, tepid coffee sweet and brown?

Do you remember the hotel in Kimberley
bar-fridge warm and empty, carpet stale
jilted by "world-markets", our desire
didn't mind the sagging bed, my tongue
eager at the glistening edge of your circumcision?

Do you remember puffing early morning dragon breath
the day we slowed in front of the police-station

somewhere that was nowhere, you half-told hand-cuffed torments
mute as the muffled screams of prisoners now forgotten?

Driving into the unbidden road of recollection
I was your silent cartographer
surveying your pain on the lines of this land
private chronicles in a country where the gods forge
beauty from the bones of memory

Sacrifice

These are times of broken generators, power cuts
still-born promises of the new
afire, the great seamountain burns daily
you, my second child, were to be my Isaac
aborted from my burning womb
your absent tombstone
the prophesy of a history still to come
of a revolution that never did
the cloistered blindness of the rich
pierces these times of blood
the seamountain gods demand their sacrifice
angry, vengeful, immense is their fury
that we tarry with false gods
world markets, cement shacks
the famine of our dreams
Al hahet shehatanu lefanaha behonaa rah

These are not times for rambling
nor idle middle-class distractions
to appease these shrieking mountain gods
just this naked darkness, battery-powered voices
that crackle in the lonely hours after midnight,
a portable reading lamp for the friendship of words
when candles no longer pierce the thickness of night
these are not times for mourning
only the ache of unworded lamentation
for aborting you, my child

You: a universe, a grain of sand, a speck of dust
the world entire, a spark, a flame, a soul
the emptiness after mad god-playing
this scraping away of the world
this killing of untimely miracles
cursed by this imperial language
you were called, "organic medical waste"
incinerated, offered, sacrificed, charred
you are my ash, my uterus a hollow tomb
How alike sound the words pebbling
off my tongue: womb, stone, tomb, stone, atone

What merciless god's ledger of penance and piety
beats its litany as a fist against my heart?

Ashamti, bagad'ti, gazalti, dibarti dofi, hamasti

Isaac, named for the sacrificial son
of the great patriarch, Avraham
maddened by some blood-lustful god
or the tormented zealotry of a new convert
prepared to slice and burn the only life
that birthed warm and damp from ancient Sarah's womb
Isaac, named for a sacrifice whose time was yet to come
what blood thirsty god-monster
demanded you, little Isaac of mine?

I did, I did, I did

Al haheyt shehatati lefanehah

Slah li, mahal li, kaper li

I made the choice offered by a monstrous
civilization dressed up in the make-nice words
of freedom and rights
as if the simple, messy reality of
choice and consequence, of love and blood
is not complicated, not human enough
not for this tongue the cozy euphemisms
termination, procedure, medical waste
D and C, dilatation and curettage, dilation of cervix
disease and cure, *damnatio et culpa*
the freedom to kill, this city's great offering
normality, a momentary aberration
The great seamountain burns, burns, burns
its people strike, strike, strike back
in familiar tongues: fire, locusts
charred dreams, boils, hail
night soil buckets upturned
"no go zones", flaming tyres
such rage unspent must seek its pounds of flesh
you were to be my child Isaac
the city's apocalypse
an ancient death-cry long foretold

Songs for Saturday

Those Saturday mornings when I push away the noise of worry
sit on the ageing couch, foam sagging towards the rug, sip thick coffee
fragrant with solitude as it becomes another dimension of sound
tiny finches whirling morning songs from the tangle of vine leaves
songs of bone and feather and a thousand thousand miles of flight
twice yearly through cyclones and blizzards and tropical storms

Those mornings the branches of the mahogany tree
creak heavy, dangling between stillness and bird song
Saturday mornings when solitude rhymes with mahogany and migrant
sounds sipped silently on the sagging couch and coffee freshly brewed
listening mornings when I close my eyes, head back, half-smile
alone on the edge of a tender breeze swaying to songs of worship

Beneath my lids Dafer Youssef's shadows at prayer, wings of string russet gold
or Benjamin Clementine's aching piano fingers linger
on notes of pain and hope, the same keys he touches behind my ribs
or Busi Mhlongo's chain smoker sonnets singing freedom's dreams
sometimes Saturday solitude sounds like Waldemar Bastos, and sometimes
when my body recalls the thud and clunk of loss, it is loud and tuneless

Those Saturday mornings when distance is an old friend and Susana Baca
or Souad Massi cross the currents of winds tumbling and oceans
heaving chests of sacred melodies, lost stories, the cloth and dye of memory
those mornings I recall that self so full of ideals and righteous outrage
finding gifts of poetry and the surprise of song from a beloved friend and muse
sad smiles and nostalgia flutter on brittle sprigs somewhere deep in my belly

Those Saturday mornings when obsessed prophets march past the weary couch
Miles and Coltrane and calm frantic improvisations fly out the back door
climb up and up then down through the ruts and routes cut by fugitive notes
as if the terrible ocean grave that drowned history's greatest crime
returns again and again from the future rather than chased anew
by notes from the past; or is it both?

Those Saturday mornings clear of the clutter of this unremarkable life
the noisy knit of my brow slides onto the rug, the couch heaves, inhales
a short coffee
mahogany solitude, half smiles, a pinch of nostalgia, an ache of regret, all this
sounds that awaken the deep blue notes of a life's brief time
strong as the smallest migrant finch
fierce as her survival song

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Glossary

Al haheyt shehatati lefanehah: Hebrew, from a prayer on the Day of Atonement. It means, for the sin I committed in your sight.

Al hahet shehatanu lefaneha behonaa rah: Hebrew, for the sin we committed in your sight by oppressing a fellow human.

Ashamti, bagad'ti, gazalti, dibarti dofi, hamasti: Hebrew, altered from the first person plural in the confession liturgy on the Day of Atonement. It means, I have trespassed, I have dealt treacherously, I have robbed, I have slandered, I have acted violently.

Braai: Afrikaans, barbeque.

Kahweh arabiya: Arabic, Arabic coffee.

Knafe: Arabic, Palestinian sweet cheese pastry.

Maqam: Arabic, shrine.

Pushkas: Yiddish, charity collection boxes.

Sabr: Prickly pear cactus.

Slah li, mahal li, kaper li. Hebrew, from Day of Atonement prayer. It means, forgive me, pardon me, offer me atonement.

Suhur: Arabic. The pre-dawn meal eaten before fasting during Ramadan.

Biographical Note

Heidi Grunebaum is a writer and scholar at the Centre for Humanities Research, University of the Western Cape in South Africa. She is author of *Memorialising the Past: Everyday Life in South Africa after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, edited collections, and numerous chapters and articles. She has previously published poetry in *Running Towards Us: New Writing from South Africa*, Ed. Isabel Balseiro, *Botsotso Journal for South African Arts and Cultures* as well as *New Contrast*. One of these poems became the script for a documentary film she made with Mark J. Kaplan in 2013 called *The Village Under the Forest*. She is currently working on a new film about memory-seekers and refugees.