



THE LANDSCAPE OF DISLOCATION

There are no troops marching along our borders. I do not hear the sounds of German or Russian or Czech, of French, Italian, or Polish. Only the inexact rendering of the language into which I was born: English. The language my mother, the daughter of immigrants, so cherished. She would be dismayed to learn how uncommunicative it has become, how abstract and full of jargon.

So unlike the flavor of the language of the old Greek woman whose house I once lived in. Yiayia peering down at me from an upper-story window of a century-old Boston house as I carried my infant son about. Yiayia, saying in Greek with her index finger curled in front of her face: *Ta pouli, Mira, ta pouli*, referring to his tiny penis as a little bird, her finger mocking, her voice sharp, the face wicked, teasing—a village face. *Ta pouli*, her fingers fly the little bird away. Yiayia had raised eight children in a Greek mountain village while her husband, roaming America to make his fortune, didn't, and hadn't the courage or money to return to Greece. Finally, the eldest son left Greece and came to find his father, to bring his old parents together again.

Yiayia liked to tell how she stayed at home with the roosters while her husband in America played around with the

chickens. Sometimes she would squat by the kitchen table to show us how she had given birth to each child, grunting and smiling to reassure us, then shaking her head at the memory she had stirred inside herself. Though neither she nor her husband Pappou could read, they knew history and remembered with great precision all they had lived through, from the Turkish occupation to their own civil war in which brother fought against brother and children walked past dead and familiar bodies on the way to school.

Yiayia and Pappou relished their reconciliation. In an attic apartment at the top of the house, they resided like aging royalty, cheating each other at cards and generally interfering in the lives of their children. The eldest son and his wife took care of them as was the absolute custom, and the old woman cooked in her daughter-in-law's kitchen, spoiling the children and contradicting all the rules the younger woman set while the eldest son worked his long hours in a restaurant downtown. They always waited up for him to come home, all of them. Waited to have their strong Turkish coffee—one of the few Turkish influences they acceded to—at one in the morning. Afterward, Yiayia would turn the little cups over in order to read our fortunes in the thick grounds which hardened on the inside curve of the cup. For her unmarried son Dimitri she saw a comely *yunaika*, a woman; for her married son *lepta*, money; for her daughter-in-law, who had already produced four children, she saw *paidia*, more children. Her predictions seldom varied. We would tease her about this but she would just grin her toothless grin and shake her head as though to point out our foolishness for questioning an old woman's ability.

I remember a day when I went up the back stairs and, looking through the glass transom, was stunned to see the two men, Dimitri and Michael, with their arms raised up over their heads, their faces contorted in rage, and Toula—Michael's wife—the recipient of such passion. Were they about to strike her? Each other? Suddenly they caught sight of me at their door. The arms drew down magically, the faces smiled, the heads bowed. I heard through the door their courtly invitation to join them. "We were just having a little discussion," they told me. Later, only later, was I allowed to share in their political discussions, later when I was part of the family, trusted. Thinking of this now, I am reminded of the sign Dino Skenderis put up in his grocery store during the military regime in Greece: No Talking about Politics.

Why do I think of this Greek family when I stare at the empty wall in front of me where I have dragged my desk? And why do I keep my

desk in an empty corner rather than look out each day onto old trees and suburban yards, automobiles readied in the driveways, split-rail fences, sturdy houses, construction, a good road full of traffic day and night, the small whir as comforting and familiar as the air conditioners that hum all summer.

Why am I so struck by the words of T. Carmi, the Israeli poet who was born in America: "There were poets who took refuge in childhood memories, writing from behind closed shutters in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, just as the early painters in the bare Judean or Galilee hills continued to inhabit an imaginary cloud-filled Ecole de Paris." Do I somehow not trust this landscape I have been born into? Is this the reverse of Carmi's poets, who could not tolerate in their arts geographical dislocation? As David Shimoni writes in his poem: "A blossoming winter contrived to entice me/ but I dreamed of the deserts of snow."

And if I were taken from my familiar landscape, which I do not look out on, would I suffer a secondary dislocation? Would I only then long for it, paint it into my poems in its absence?

To go back, why do I romanticize my adopted Greek family, learn their language and customs, learn how to cook their food, incorporate their folklore as though it were my own: "The good pappou resides above, the bad pappou below," the old man tells the children, belt in hand, when they are obstreperous. They plead with him not to release the evil pappou from the cellar. He winks at me, other things on his mind. "My passion," he tells me, "is as rotten as that artichoke spoiling on the table." "More *pouli*," the old woman clucks, shooting him a look. I think to myself how his impotence is transferred directly into his power over this herd of children, which he daily pulls and cajoles into line. Children with that unadulterated energy partial to the offspring of immigrants. Children willful and determined to do better than their parents. Determined to become Americans. And to be educated. Above all.

And why do I suddenly think of the town where I lived during my adolescence, whose adults had been born in Italy and Poland and Czechoslovakia? The children were my schoolmates. I did not know then that it was an unusual town. I did not think about the music I shared with these boys and girls, the Czech folk songs, the Italian love songs and arias we sang on the bus every Friday night on the way back from basketball games, our school's only sport. It did not seem unusual to play in a dance band with these same friends for the local Polish and Czech

dance halls so that the adults could come together to dance their national dances. I thought somehow that this was just a typical town.

It is difficult to integrate the two lives, the suburban with one with strong ties to a European base, a “foreign” family speaking another language, living by certain abiding forms. I am reminded of the friend who struggles to make room in his life for a woman he loves and her children, when the need for space—physical as well as emotional—is all-consuming. I wonder what has become of the various forms by which we once gave each other room.

I remember a story my mother told me a long time ago. When her uncle came to this country from Lithuania, after a long and painful separation, he was able to bring his family here, one by one. When the final member of the family arrived—his youngest daughter, by this time a young woman—not a single word was exchanged. She knelt down and the father placed his hands over her head and blessed her. Such was their greeting.

I think of Bialik the poet and the cold dark mornings when his *matmid*—talmudic student—arose and went to his dark corner to pray and pore over Talmud and Torah, the appropriate prayer on his tongue, the ritual guiding him in his behavior toward his God and toward those with whom he shared his life. Though his small room might become crowded, one soul did not intrude upon the other. There was room for all.

A number of years back—I don’t remember just how many anymore—I met the son of a Yiddish poet whose work I had read. The poet was Halpern Leivick—that visionary figure who stood at the center of modern Yiddish poetry. He was born in Ihumen, a small town in Byelorussia, and had been driven into exile in Siberia for activity in the socialist Bund. He arrived in the United States in 1913. It seemed nearly incomprehensible to me that he could have a living son and that son could live here, barely a mile away. Though we did not meet often, I felt a great warmth toward that son Daniel and his wife and relished seeing them. Two occasions stand out. The first was an afternoon spent around the Leivick’s dining room table with Cynthia Ozick; we were translating a poem by Daniel’s father, a lullaby. We each tried to write a version of the poem and then put together our various attempts, combining the most successful phrases and lines. I remember a lengthy discussion about how to translate a certain Yiddish word, which meant plaything or toy, into English. We finally settled on the word *thimble*.

It was a sweet afternoon. A room with four adults sitting together, laboring over a shared task, moving the father's lullaby across the barrier of language, moving it toward us word by word.

Later, when my own mother was dying, we came across a letter her father had written to her mother when she had gone to visit relatives in a distant city. It was written in Yiddish. I took the letter to Daniel, and he and his wife helped to decipher it. It was an unusual letter; my grandfather spoke to his wife with great affection and respect, with a kind of formal dignity that surprised me. Somehow it did not match the picture I had carried around inside for so many years of the hard-working, gruff man who had fathered eight children, five surviving daughters, two sons. The protective, religious, early-exhausted man, my grandfather whose name I bear, had died before I was born. What remains in my mind now is the picture I have of that afternoon when Daniel and Ida sat together explaining gently the words of his letter, which I carefully wrote down so that I would not forget one thing when I told my mother who waited at home for this last bit of news of her father and mother.

What has this to do with the suburbs? Is it possible to live in a place, not a mile from someone without discovering when that person dies? Not until midwinter did I learn that in the fall Daniel had died suddenly one morning. I found out only by accident, talking by telephone long distance to someone about another matter entirely. It is possible to live side by side with one another and rarely meet. It is possible not to share the most significant events of each other's lives. I am as much to blame as anyone.

Sometimes, when I feel particularly disquieted by this life, I imagine that I am walking in the old city in Jerusalem. I know for certain at those moments that I am no longer in the suburbs. Perhaps the real suburb is only a name for a state of mind that represents a removal from the central district or village, a dislocation from what is human, a removal from the heart. We hold on, barely: centripetal force keeps us here.