

Lulling Reaches

My firstborn, the same who delayed descent into the birth canal in favor of one last nap in the womb, has straddled the brass beaver and is riding it with enviable gusto. Playgrounds are playgrounds in the mind of a six year old, or so I hope. This one is located on a choice strip of the Pearl Street Mall in his new hometown of Boulder, Colorado. The last was in Jerusalem on a street that gave way to a slope of thistles with an enveloping scent, damnably unforgettable. The hillside culminated in a village with a mosque and a loudspeaker brash enough to call all the believers, and then a few, to prayer. My husband used to pack a pistol before going to the slides and swings beneath the pines.

We had lived on the edge of town where the populations collide. For a year I had fingered and poked and prodded what passed for reality. The mayor, who later was to become prime minister, was admonishing us to maintain our routines. It was our civic duty to ignore the demons of death. Desensitized by a suffering without intervals, by the sins of our side, they delivered their messages directly. These detonating shells of life with legs intact but none of the inner paraphernalia entered brimming cafes or shot up random targets at crossroads. One woman feigned pregnancy, the protruding belly a front for

explosives, as she disassembled in a supermarket, bearing others with her. I took it personally. I was not a good citizen. I was considering our exit.

My parents had moved to Jerusalem in 1964 from New York. Born before World War Two, they had sound, ideological reasons for this decision. Perhaps I should rephrase that: It was my British-born father who held the convictions. My American mother nibbled away at my naive Israeli patriotism. The grocery stores were so poorly stocked. We celebrated the arrival of cake mixes and canned salmon in care packages tied with a string by my meticulous grandfather. A collector, he would select the most striking American stamps, which I would float off the brown packaging paper in our plugged bathroom sink.

Then there were the hunched, tea-drinking government clerks who spent their days conducting personal business over the phone. They could reduce the most stalwart newcomer to tears with their contradictory and ever-shifting demands articulated in tones of contempt. Arbitrarily kicked hither and thither one time too many, my mother used my father as a buffer from the wrath of the almost powerless.

My mother never did take on Israeli citizenship. But when I considered leaving, she would hear none of it.

He laughs now when he “wipes out” on the slopes. I did a double black today Mom, he’ll tell me. I did jumps. I know how to ski backwards. Look at me, Mom, look at me. Did you see? Truly there is nothing I love more than doing just that: looking at him in free motion. A couple of years after we arrived, I stood in Eldorado Canyon beneath a face of red rock so inspiring as to make my dutifully planning mind, the scheduler, stop. The time valve shut. It was summer, and the shade was soothing. The speckled creek repeated infinitely the message of all flowing water—that you can move and stand still in the same moment. My son, whose head barely grazed my waist, was ascending the wall, dancing upwards, the rhythm pulling him skyward, his chalky palms and rubber-soled feet intuiting their way. The instructor told me that my son’s determination was exceptional for such a young child. Hold after hold he neared the top of the rope. His body was taut with concentration and yet softly flexible. As I watched I thought: He has no fear. He does not know that sensation.

And still he clings to the Hebrew “R.” When he pronounces his name in English, it is incomprehensible. Can you repeat that, please? Foreign born, he has lived precisely half his life here, half there. My mother tells me he is adhering to his roots. His is an act of defiance camouflaged as an accent. The other children must sense the alien spirit lurking beneath the cool exterior of

Colorado skier and rock climber for he has few friends. It seems I traded a snug belongingness for security.

Shortly after my son was born I imagined the inevitable day of his induction into the military. I pre-lived the moment of dropping him off by the bus that would take him to the round-up camp. There he would be outfitted with a uniform and boots, feel the needle jabbing his rump, stand naked for delousing, and extend his hands for the nail inspection. The details were real as I had been through all that. There would be three years of bad nights when a pretty, twenty-year-old, casualties officer might knock on my door, applying her training in sympathy. I still think the barter was worth it. I made a good deal.

His blond hair is fast darkening around the time of our move. Nevertheless externally he blends well with the Pearl Street crowd. He never has to face any of the color-clash reactions, the heritage of race relations in his new country. We are refugees deluxe. We did not lose our possessions. The way back is open. We lost only our source of livelihood, an event that will predetermine the fate of my marriage, his family. On the occasions we wait in line at the offices of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Denver, we get a taste of that first harsh welcome. No food or drinks allowed. No water. No, not even for young children, the guard says. It's sweltering. The bodies

emanate sweat and anxiety, and histories of fortitude unimaginable to the average resident of the American suburbs. The drinking fountain hiccups an unsatisfactory trickle, difficult to trap in a small mouth. Many tears and screams of the young pervade that laden room. But I believe the adults have few regrets.

I cannot know as my son scrambles up and down the shiny, wild animals amidst the gravel that the move will prove tough. Green ashes filter the high-altitude sun. Men and women with immortal physiques and bleached teeth, proud posture and tidy nails, walk past on the red-bricked mall. They appear invincible in their shorts and engineered running shoes. Do they know their good fortune? Do they realize that all assumptions are misguided? A day could come when madness erupts and severs the tranquility. The whirring of helicopters may drown out the calls of geese. The loaded death messengers will banish trivialities. I resent their complacency, though it is no fault of theirs. For a long time, a barrier stands between them and me. And for a disturbing number of months I am coiled, eying passersby for signs of discrepancy and disguise. I am still trying to protect my son from terrorists even in these lulling reaches, as he joyously rides the slippery sculptures.

Eventually, it is the land that massages and remakes me. I succumb to the patterns of quietude of the Rockies, to the muffling snow and the heavy

haze of spring. During the time of violence, nature was denied me. Now I roam the trails of the foothills. Every April, the month of our arrival, I am astounded how rapidly the plants grow here. Their brazen fertility is timed for when the ground is still muddy and the temperature rises. I recognize the earth's metronome, which beneath these expanses, swings both faster and slower than what I have known. In my new yard, large-eared mule deer peer through the windows of my home exempt from the jitters of prey. Freedom, I decide, is absence of fear.

I develop an appreciation so deep for the land it is like fresh love. My son, I believe, will never experience this sense of raw gratitude. I am glad of this.