

Women's Whispers: Be Thee To Me Betrothed

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Photo by: Viva Hammer

I generally avoid Nazi-occupied Europe. Kin blood gathers in pools upon the ground, glinting in refracted light, the soil too saturated to carry more than it holds. (The slaughter is the work of imagination on hearsay but is no less real than the knife held to my own throat: all memory, real and learned, is a flicker of current in the brain.)

It happens that the fourth time my son puts tefillin will be in the Frankfurt airport, on his way to Jerusalem. I shudder in contemplation.

That son is named for an uncle consumed by Nazi decree, firstborn of my grandfather who put on tefillin every weekday of his seven-year Siberian exile and of his Nazi enslavement. If discovered, the consequence would have been death. "Jewish law forbids a person to risk his life like that," a rabbi informs me. But my grandfather was not much beholden to laws, whosoever enacted them. When you become a Jewish man, you put tefillin.

I was raised a shul mouse. From the time I was clean, about a year old, my father rode me to shul. It was still dark outside. Sitting noiselessly, practicing the *alef bais*, I watched the rise and fall of the minyan spread as widely among the benches as geometry would allow them. At first kaddish, the sun split the windows of the ladies' gallery above and thrust down through the dense dust rings of the shul's atmosphere, reaching the *bima* much diminished.

The men wrapped on their black boxes and straps, murmured their

supplications, their desires, their thanksgivings, answered the prayer calls, chatted from politics and cash flow, responded to final Kaddish and unwrapped themselves. I looked up; Papa was done, the press of the black straps indenting his still bare arm. I slid from my perch to the floor and was given a new alef bais letter by Mr. Eisen as a reward for my perfect goodness.

Sometimes my father davened at home, and I heard the rise and fall of his prayer, calling out his part of communal song even while alone. In private, too, he wrapped on and off his black prayer straps.

I banished myself from the circle of praying men and then they banished me. But on new moon mornings as a grown woman, I came again within their circumference. Then I saw them dress in their black straps, throbbing of masculinity.

There is nothing stranger than these garments. In all the museums of Washington, among the Africans and Indians and natives of the islands, Masonic regalia or the Highlands of Scotland, I have never seen anything so unfitting as a man in a business suit, top half undressed with tefillin on. Carpenters' chiseled tumors protruding from his inner arm and his head, but so sharp-edged, symmetrical and changeless, no natural force could have produced them.

Three moons before he become a Jewish man, on the new moon of Shvat, the son named for my uncle put on tefillin in shul for the first time. I accompanied him. He reached into the embroidered purse: one house, two houses. Slowly, he loosened the straps from about the first box and the leather streamed down, shimmering in newness. He surveyed the magnificent handiwork. Each piece is made by a different expert in a different city; back and forth across the world they have flown, building homes for words shut from eyes forever.

My boy unzips his jacket, strips his left arm to the shoulder and threads his hand through the black ring, bringing the black box of words to face his heart; tightens the ring and makes a blessing. Seven times he wraps his lower arm. Turning, he raises the second box and loosens the straps, anoints himself in black and pulls the straps down his front like sidecurls and offers another blessing. Returning to his hand, he prepares to declare his love -

A Jewish male is bound tight and coupled many ways in the procession of his life, to his mother and her milk, to his study partner, to his business and

ambition, to a wife and to the output of his loins. Each is a trick of nature, a fad of passion or fashion, a passing vanity. To one only does he whisper every ordinary morning of his manhood, in a Washington synagogue or Frankfurt airport, in a German lager or at the Temple in Jerusalem:

Prepare the middle finger of the left hand, the boastful pistol; bind the bottom segment,

And I will betroth thee unto me forever,

Bring the strap back, bind the skin again, making the cross sign on the finger, folding it down

I will betroth thee unto Me in righteousness and in judgment, and in loving-kindness and in mercies,

Bring the strap up, bind the middle segment so that the finger is yoked, humbled and embalmed

I will betroth thee unto Me in faithfulness: and thou shalt intimately know the Lord.

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