

**BAVEL**  
**A Creative Exploration of Jewish Exile and Personal Narrative**

ADAM SCHELDT

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
Graduate Rabbinical Program  
New York, New York

14 March 2013  
Advisor: Professor Wendy Zierler

Thesis Summary for the Thesis:  
*Bavel: A Creative Exploration of Jewish Exile and Personal Narrative*

- This thesis project contains no chapters. Rather, is made up of 4 sections: an introductory essay; an academic, research based essay on exile; a short story/novella entitled “Bavel;” and a bibliography.
- This thesis project contributes to the fields of Jewish Exile Studies and Jewish Literature by exploring exile and exilic narrative in both Biblical and contemporary milieus through the lens of creative/literary writing (as well as academic and text-based research).
- The goal of this thesis project was: to explore Biblical (and extra-Biblical) textual understandings of exile, to gain an understanding of contemporary exile in an effort to better engage my own (autobiographical) narrative and identity as an exile, and to craft and refine a piece of creative writing to express the nexus between myself and such Biblical texts.
- As noted above, this thesis project is divided into 4 sections. The introductory essay outlines many of my textual influences as well as my goals in undertaking such a project. The academic essay represents my explorations into both Biblical and contemporary Exile Studies. The short story/novella (67 pages in length) represents not only further text-work, but also the nexus of my research on exile and my personal narrative.
- The materials used were a litany of Biblical texts, apocryphal texts, and pseudepigraphal texts (listed and noted within the body of the thesis project)—as well as numerous secondary (and some primary) sources on exile. Creative writing and creative writing exercises were also utilized in this project’s creation, and given the personal nature of some of my work with this thesis project, introspective meditation was also used.

## Table of Contents

<b>The Road to Babylon .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>An Introduction to This Thesis Project</i>	
<b>The Evolution of Exile .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<i>My Exploration of the Evolving Understanding of Exile and its Dialogue with Judaism</i>	
<b>Bavel .....</b>	<b>38</b>
<i>The Fictional Narrative Portion of the Thesis Project</i>	
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>105</b>

**The Road to Babylon**  
*An Introduction to My Thesis Project*

Exile is a song that only the singer can hear.  
 Exile is an illness that not even death can cure—for how  
     Can you rest in soil that did not nourish you?  
 Exile is the warning example to those who still  
     have their homes, who belong.  
 But will you take heed of the warning?<sup>1</sup>

What does it mean to be exiled? Or, perhaps more importantly as we inhabit a post-modern world, what does it mean to possess and live an identity of exile? To be sure, we recognize exile as a casting out, banishment, the result of usurpation, conquest, or punishment for any number of reasons. We live, today, in a world where we have well-known exiles—individuals who have been cast out of their homelands to seek refuge elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Concurrently, our minds also focus upon exile of a larger scale—the displacement of entire peoples, the creation of refugees living in camps outside the borders and political boundaries of the nation they once knew. As Jews, however, our minds rest upon the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem—those foundational moments within the Jewish narrative in which our most holy places are desecrated and we, as a people, are ejected from *אֶרֶץ*, *the Land*.

The contemporary field of Exile Studies, however, illustrates a much broader perspective on the idea of exile. Current work on exile is truly multidisciplinary and stretches from the worlds of poetry, fiction, and visual art to traditional archeological histories and political analysis. Exile has become in our contemporary lives, an issue of

---

<sup>1</sup> Taken from Hungarian born novelist, journalist, and political writer Paul Tabori's "The Anatomy of Exile"

<sup>2</sup> Such as Aristotle, Dante, Giacomo Cassanova, Napoleon, Benazir Bhutto, Leon Trotsky, and the Dalai Lama to name a few.

personal identity. Personal narratives and the meaning derived from them open up new ways of understanding exile, and we see exile as something far more nuanced, psychological, metaphoric, and personal. Where study of exile was once the project of understanding the effects of political or historical events and displacements, exile has now expanded to tackle the project of personal transition, personal displacement (defined in a number of ways), and human struggle, for their own sake. And in so doing, such study has expanded the definition of exile.

More than a shift in geography, exile has become a point of transformation. The Russian poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky, who was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972, once noted, “Exile brings you overnight where it would normally take a lifetime to go.” (Brodsky, 1988) And indeed, much of exile writing today addresses the trauma, anguish, and internal change that such an ‘overnight’ change can bring. Within both the expansion of exile’s definition as well as the personal changes that Brodsky alludes to, there is significant possibility for the creative writer. Croatian creative writer and novelist, Dubravka Ugresic,<sup>3</sup> notes:

The exiled writer is not met with indifference. His life’s choice, exile, provokes not only the people in the environment he leaves but also the people in the environment where he ends up. ...The idea of self-banishment secretly intrigues everyone. Exile is a total change, achieving a different life, realizing the daydream of how it would be to wake up one day in a different town, in a different country, perhaps as another person. Exile is a kind of coveted trial: we all have a hidden longing to test

---

<sup>3</sup> Dubravka Ugresic was born in former Yugoslavia. In favor of internal-political reform, Ugresic opposed Croatian independence from Yugoslavia and was politically active during the war that eventually saw the dissolution of Yugoslavia (in 1991) (Ugresic). She has lived in a self-imposed exile since 1993—living, writing, and teaching in Europe and the United States.

ourselves in the exam of life. Exile is that dream of transformation.  
(Ugresic, *In Exile*, 2007)

While Ugresic seeks out an exciting mystery within exile that few others may share, her treatment of exilic identity decidedly points toward the inherent power of exile to transform its participants. For creative writers, this ‘power’ opens up a vast array of possibility for expression and exploration of both self and what it means to be in exile. Indeed, it is this possibility that this thesis project seeks to engage. My work in this project has included extensive reading and research in the field of exile.<sup>4</sup> I have also undertaken a great deal of textual examination—exploring foundational Biblical, apocryphal, and pseudepigraphal works. In engaging the creative process upon which this thesis project centers, I have also undertaken a process of deep introspection to understand and investigate the role of exile in my own past. And, lastly, I present a narrative piece whose fiction works to weave together and culminate my extant learning as well as to insert myself into the Jewish ethos and identity of exile. Though the act of researching exile, of exploring ancient text, of personal introspection, and of crafting narrative, I seek to both explore and express my own historical narrative while doing the same with that of the Jewish people.

### **Exploration of Exile**

The research-based paper that follows this essay contains a study and exploration of exile. Because the world of Exile Studies (and indeed *Jewish* Exile Studies) is incredibly vast, this paper is non-exhaustive. Instead, I worked to focus my examination

---

<sup>4</sup> both through a traditional archeological-historical perspective as well as through a contemporary lens

of exile to areas that are most germane to my creative process and thus fuel, inform, and further the fictional narrative portion of this thesis project. The paper works to briefly examine Biblical notions of exile—looking at the usage of two key Hebrew roots. The paper also examines the understanding of exile as it has evolved from a more traditional geo-political and archeological-historical definition to the evolving, fluid, multidisciplinary nature of contemporary exile. Further my investigation of exile also works to explore ideas of land and landedness and the personalization of exile in the contemporary realm. This examination of exile provides me with multiple access points with which I might insert myself into the Jewish ethos and identity of exile. The Biblical understandings of exile that I have explored provide me with entry to the very foundations of Jewish exile. The contemporary understandings of exile I have developed, directly connect with my own contemporary understanding of the world around me (in addition to creating a fuller and more complete understanding of exile writ large). And notions of landedness and the personalization of exile allow me to connect my own past with exilic themes.

### **Exploration of Text**

My use of text in this thesis project is two-fold. First, I have used Biblical text (as seen in the following essay on exile) to investigate the Hebrew roots for exile and expel (as in *to cast out*) to gain an understanding of how the Biblical text begins to define exile. I also utilized the Biblical text (selections noted below) well as the apocryphal Book of Tobit and the pseudepigraphic Fourth Book of Ezra to explore and gain a fuller understanding of exile in the Biblical milieu. Secondly, I additionally chose to explore a

selection of Biblical texts that engage me emotionally and creatively. These texts (also noted below) either may or may not have direct dialogue to exile, nevertheless, they are germane to my creative process and inform the fictional narrative that I present in this thesis project.

Regarding exile based texts of the Bible, my explorations centered on the books of:

- Genesis
- Exodus
- Numbers
- Ruth
- Jeremiah
- Chronicles
- Kings
- Lamentations
- Psalms
- Tobit
- 4<sup>th</sup> Book of Ezra

The narratives of Genesis and Exodus produce a rich litany of instances in which peoples and Biblical characters are in flux. And, by our contemporary standards, exile is present throughout. The Bible makes use of a number of different words in reference to what we, as contemporary readers of narrative, may identify as exile. In the following essay on exile, I examine the Biblical use of the roots הלג (*golah* meaning exile) and שרג (*gareish* meaning to cast out) and their defining resonance within the Biblical text in regards to exile. In my investigations however, narratives such as Abraham's journeying to Egypt<sup>5</sup> and Naomi's journeying to Moav,<sup>6</sup> for example, use neither הלג nor שרג, yet

---

<sup>5</sup> see Genesis 12:10 which uses the word “וַיֵּרֶד” (“and he went down,” in reference to Abraham)



each presents a situation that, by contemporary standards, would be considered exile. In these situations, the characters involved, are forced to leave lest they face starvation and personal ruin. As much as they are refugees, they indeed live in a state of exile.

Nevertheless, through examining the Hebrew text in this way, I have been able to ascertain and better define the Bible's notion of exile.

The texts of Jeremiah, Chronicles, and Kings attempt to explain the geopolitical exile of the Jews. The text of 2 Chronicles 36 begins with political successions, tributes, and conquest. Interestingly, of the first ten verses of chapter 36, only two mention any sort of iniquity on behalf of the Israelites.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, 2 Kings 24 also relates political successions and conquests. The text of Kings, however, references that of Chronicles<sup>8</sup> and includes not only mention of Jehoakim's evil in the eyes of God, but also prior sins committed by Manasseh (verse 3). The King's text also differs from that of Chronicles in that detail is given regarding the destruction of Jerusalem. Verse 2 gives a litany of tribes that attacked the city, and verse 4 cites God's wrath upon Jerusalem for the spilling of innocent blood (תִּנְקֵי-דָם). The text of Jeremiah, by contrast, clearly sites sin and turning away from God as the rational for Jerusalem's destruction. Geopolitical struggle is set aside in exchange for religious rhetoric. To be sure, such speech falls in line with the style of diction that many of the Bible's prophets are known for, however, the differing

---

<sup>6</sup> see Ruth 1:1 which uses the word “וַיֵּלֶךְ” (“and he went”, in reference to “a man of Bethlehem,” named as Elimelech in verse 2)

<sup>7</sup> Verses 5 and 8 mention sinful wrong doing on the part of Israelite leadership. In verse 5, Jehoakim does “what is evil in the eyes of the Lord his God.” And in verse 8, we find another reference to Jehoakim's misdeeds—this time “תַּעֲבֹתָיו,” his abominations are mentioned (but not listed) in the verse.

<sup>8</sup> See 2 Kings 24:5

foci present an interesting internal debate within the Bible's text regarding exile. Is exile the result of geopolitical ventures<sup>9</sup> or the consequence of iniquity?

The text of Lamentations, by comparison, discordantly situates itself within the emotion of loss. As Daniel Grossberg astutely writes in the Jewish Study Bible, "Abrupt changes in speaking voices mark shifts in perspectives, so that we hear various aspects of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem as well as diverse responses to the catastrophe." (Grossberg, 1999) Lamentations is a book of poetry that deals with exile and loss—indeed not only do the Jewish people lose their Temple and their cities, but also the Land of Israel loses its God appointed inhabitants. Lamentations's text switches voice with frequency and whose diction stands as frequently unique within the biblical text. The book opens with a depressive and evocative scene that uses the description of a mourning woman to describe literally and metaphorically the state of ancient Judah:

- 1 Alas! Lonely sits the city  
Once great with people!  
She that was great among nations  
Is become like a widow;  
The princes among states  
Is become a thrall.
- 2 Bitterly she weeps in the night,  
Her cheek wet with tears.  
There is none to comfort her  
Of all her friends.  
All of her allies have betrayed her;  
They have become her foes.
- 3 Judah has gone into exile  
Because of misery and harsh oppression;  
When she settled among the nations,  
She found no rest;

---

<sup>9</sup> Traditional models of exile, which support themselves with archeological findings and applicable references from the texts of other near-eastern cultures, work to engage empirical evidence and eschew more emotional texts.

All her pursuers overtook her  
In the narrow places.  
4 Zion's roads are in mourning,  
Empty of festival pilgrims;  
All her gates are deserted.  
Her priests sigh,  
Her maidens are unhappy—  
She is utterly disconsolate!<sup>10</sup>

The text of these opening verses at once displays the depressive emotions of loss and humanizes the destruction Jerusalem by metaphorically speaking about a bereft and 'disconsolate' woman. Indeed, as Grossberg noted, much of the text of Lamentations works in this fashion. The city mourns its own death—commerce has ceased, it is a mere shell of its former grandeur. And as such, the text of Lamentations becomes a powerful backdrop to not only informing my sense of Jewish exile but also in crafting the fictional narrative that this thesis project focuses upon. The raw emotion and personifications conveyed in the portrayal of a land that has lost its people, offers me as a creative writer, the opportunity to create a dialogue between the Biblical experience of exile and that of my own exilic story. In garnering an understanding of exile itself, the text of Lamentations points to the expression of political turmoil. Grossberg points out that "friends" in verse 2 refers to former political allies. (Grossberg, 2004) And Danish professor and exile scholar Jill Middlemas notes, "In terms of human suffering, the Book of Lamentations explores in graphic detail the dire consequences of war for the people of Jerusalem and Judah. ...The archaeological evidence supports to some extent the grim portrait of a devastated and crippled Judah evoked by the historical record." (Middlemas, 2007)

---

<sup>10</sup> Translation taken from the 1999 Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation

The Book of Tobit, written in Judeo-Aramaic exists as part of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian biblical canon. While it is not part of the Jewish Bible, the work, however, is considered apocryphal and even appears (in fragments) in the Qumran Scrolls (the Dead Sea Scrolls). The Book of Tobit relates the first-person personal narrative of a righteous man named Tobit (although much of the text relates directly to his son, Tobias) who is taken into exile following the sacking of Jerusalem of Sennacherib, the then King of Assyria (before the Babylonian destruction of the first Temple).

Tobit is unique as his character relates a first person account of Jewish exile in the Biblical era. To further his uniqueness, Tobit is neither a prophet nor a priest.<sup>11</sup> His story, while fantastic in nature,<sup>12</sup> relates the trials and travails of a general exile who “made truth and righteousness [his] lifelong guide.<sup>13</sup>” In doing so, the text portrays some aspects of life (for the non-elite) in exile. Tobit’s life in exile was anything but easy. The text portrays needy and starving Israelites (who Tobit feeds and clothes)<sup>14</sup> as well as Israelite corpses (murdered by the king), which Tobit works in secret to have buried properly.<sup>15</sup> For all his charitable acts in exile, King Sennacherib seizes all of Tobit’s possessions and tries to have him killed.

---

<sup>11</sup> Tobit is, in fact, an orphan (1:8) and in exile found employment as a buyer of supplies for the king (1:13).

<sup>12</sup> The narrative of The Book of Tobit relates his blinding and the magical restoration of his sight, as well as interventions by the angel Raphael and a demon (named Ashmedai ((אֲשֶׁמַדַּי)) a name containing the root אשם which connotes religious persecution and a conversion away from Judaism).

<sup>13</sup> Book of Tobit 1:3

<sup>14</sup> 1:16-17

<sup>15</sup> 1:18

Where the text of Lamentations portrays emotion through poetry and uses metaphor to discuss a land whose people are in exile, the Book of Tobit portrays emotion directly and makes little to no use of metaphor in its depiction of life in exile. Further its construction as a first-person narrative mimics similar contemporary personal narratives of exile such as the one I seek to craft. As such the Book of Tobit provides a helpful resource (as well as another ancient voice) for understanding the ancient Israelite experience of exile, illuminating a biblical-era exile narrative, and providing yet another access point for my creative work.

Originally written in Hebrew, the Fourth Book of Ezra exists as an apocryphal text, outside the Jewish Biblical canon. To date, works of the text exist in Greek and Latin<sup>16</sup> (known as 2 Esdras in Christian tradition), and manuscripts of the text are housed in the Vatican. Regarding content, the Fourth Book of Ezra, is comprised of 7 visions set during Ezra's exile in Babylon. Two of the vision relate to this project in their pleas to God. In the first vision, Ezra questions why the ancient Israelites were sent into exile:

Are the deeds of Babylon better than those of Zion?

Or has another nation known you besides Israel? Or what tribes have so believed you covenants as these tribes of Jacob

Yet their reward has not appeared and their labor has borne no fruit. For I have traveled widely among the nations and have seen that they abound in wealth, though they are unmindful of your commandments.

Now therefore weight in a balance our iniquities and those of the inhabitants of the world; and so it will be found which way the turn of the scale will incline. When have the inhabitants of the earth not sinned in your sight? Or what nation has kept your commandments so well?

---

<sup>16</sup> Although Hebrew texts exist, they are largely translations from the Greek.

You may indeed find individual men who have kept your commandments,  
but nations you will not find.<sup>17</sup>

Further in the third vision, Ezra again asks God why the Israelites suffer the plight of exile:

But we, your people, whom you have called your first-born, only begotten,  
zealous for you, and most dear, have been given into their hands.

If the world has indeed been created for us, why do we not possess our  
world as an inheritance? How long will this be so?<sup>18</sup>

Each time, Ezra questions the Israelite state of exile, he is answered by the angel, Uriel. And each time, the angel's response is the same: one cannot know the will of God.<sup>19</sup> Ezra's questioning (and indeed Uriel's response) posits a distinct and powerful response to the explanations of exile put forth in Lamentations and (to a lesser extent) in the texts of Kings and Chronicles. The examination of such a contrast lends another voice in a dialogue of understanding exile from an ancient perspective. Further, the essential question at the heart of Ezra's inquiries is one of why us? Universal notions of fault, responsibility, redemption, and why anyone must suffer (specifically exile) extend from Ezra's questions. As such, the Fourth Book of Ezra also offers another entry point for me as a creative writer to infuse the Biblical text with my own narrative.

Famously, Psalm 137, "By the Rivers of Babylon," illustrates the breadth of emotion of exile.

---

<sup>17</sup> Fourth Book of Ezra 3:32-36

<sup>18</sup> Fourth Book of Ezra 6:58-59

<sup>19</sup> In response to Ezra's question in Chapter 3, Uriel states, "Your understanding has utterly failed regarding this world, and do you think you can comprehend the way of the Most High?" (4:1-2) And in response to Ezra's question in Chapter 7, Uriel replies that, "You are not a better judge than God, or wiser than the Most High!" These replies, while harsh and blunt, work to relate the unknowable nature of God's actions in the world.

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
- 2 Upon the willows in the midst thereof we hanged up our harps.
- 3 For there they that led us captive asked of us words of song, and our tormentors asked of us mirth: 'Song us one of the songs of Zion.'
- 4 How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?
- 5 If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.
- 6 Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I remember thee not; if I set not Jerusalem above my chiefest joy.
- 7 Remember, O Lord, against the children of Edom the day of Jerusalem; who said: 'Raze it, raze it, even to the foundation thereof.'
- 8 O daughter of Babylon, that art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that repayeth thee as thou hast served us.
- 9 Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock.

Psalm 137, *JPS translation*

Its words conjure vivid images that both draw us near with empathy and shock us with evocative and vengeful violence. To explore the text of Psalm 137, through our contemporary lens is to explore this very spectrum of human emotion, human drive, and human compulsion. Where Ezra emotionally plead with God, asking why exile had to befall ancient Israel, Psalm 137 asks no questions—instead the Psalm gives way to a process of immediate emotional reaction. Indeed, we see a deeply emotional process evolve over the course of the psalm itself. Beginning with a mournful remembrance, the tone of verses 1 and 2 is emotional and sad. Verse 3, however, begins an inner struggle. The psalm begins to wrestle with the result of exile. And, torment from the Israelites' captors results in further aggravation. The Psalmist further transitions from solemn sorrow to struggle with vows toward a land lost—wishing for both loss of speech and use

of hand if Jerusalem be forgotten (verse 5). In the final verses, inner struggle gives way to outward rage as the psalm not only wishes destruction upon Bavel but also levies a violent and repulsive curse upon the women of Babylon. The land of Bavel is not to be despoiled. Its inhabitants are not to be displaced. Rather, the women of the city are to bear the brunt of Israelite anger. Such aggression toward women presents an interesting contrast to the woman of Lamentations who represents Jerusalem. Where the woman of Lamentations is a widow, the women of Psalm 137 are known as daughters. To be sure, the vibrancy of Bavel (particularly at the cost of Jerusalem's own vibrancy<sup>20</sup>) is resented. And indeed the Psalmist wishes not only to destroy Babylonian success, (i.e. the daughter of Bavel in verse 8 of Psalm 137) but also to destroy a Babylonian future.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, all this emotion is magnified as the preceding Psalm (Psalm 136) extols Israelite landed-ness and security, only to contrast Psalm 137's world that is devoid of any such idea.

The evocative, psychological evolution of emotion in Psalm 137 (particularly as it appears in dialogue with the text of Lamentations) is an invaluable tool in my creative writing process. The depth and pain portrayed within an Israelite nation exiled and pushed beyond the brink to some extent parallels a development or progression of emotion that anyone could feel under similar burdens. As such, the very human sorrow, anger, and vengefulness of Psalm 137 quite directly informs my creative writing in this thesis.

I have chosen to use text throughout this thesis project in two ways. The first, such as the above, focuses on Jewish texts as a mode of understanding exile. The second

---

<sup>20</sup> As the text of Lamentations notes in verse 4, "All her gates are deserted."

<sup>21</sup> Verse 9 of Psalm 137 reads: "Happy is the one that seizes and smashes your little ones upon the stone."



mode of text usage appears in the fictional narrative portion of the project. In the fictional piece upon which the thesis project is centered, Biblical and other Jewish source texts appear either directly (i.e. by incorporating portions of translated Biblical verses directly into sentences or character statements), or indirectly (i.e. passages or sentences in the my fictional narrative are thematically informed by Biblical verses). In each case, such textual references are cited in footnotes.

### **Personal Exploration**

In 2005, my grandmother, my family's matriarch, died of brain cancer at home on my family's farm in rural, southern Illinois. She, in concert with my mother raised me on my family's farm—a farm that had been in the family for 5 generations. Following my grandmother's death, my family imploded and then broke apart, and my mother and I were evicted from the farm without notice. Shortly there after, I moved to Israel, and my mother moved to a town an hour away from the family farm. Since that time, a bitter family member burnt and bulldozed the farmhouse that I (and my mother as well) grew up in. And neither my mother nor myself have been able to return to the area. All we have of the farm is a small box of soil that we were able to dig up as we left. For all intensive purposes, my mother and I now exist in exile.

The creative basis of this thesis project, as well as all my creative writing, is rooted in my own experience. Each time I sit to write or compose a creative work, I must find a piece of myself to explicate, explore, or unearth in my writing in order for the task to succeed. Indeed, my writing consistently fails to be compelling when it is devoid of my self. Thus, this thesis project very intimately finds its basis in my own story and

seeks to embody not just my research but also my own narrative. In doing so, my research and learning in the field of exile and Biblical text is interwoven with both fiction and my own non-fictional past. The events of the story herein are often true or at least rooted in a truth. While I, myself, have not suffered the destructive force of traditional geo-political exile as early exile scholarship defines it, I have suffered the pain of exile in the contemporary sense. Moreover, Biblically rooted ideas of exile have the ability to resonate with my own experience, as well as the diverse, interdisciplinary, and personal nature of contemporary Exile Studies. I am thus presented with a robust lens through which I might understand and portray both myself and the exilic nuances of the Jewish people.

My personal task since losing the farm has been one of attempted reconciliation and personal growth. Indeed, as art historian Linda Nochlin relates in an essay on art and the condition of exile, “I don’t know. I don’t see what I’ve seen, don’t comprehend what’s in front of me. I’m not filled with language anymore, and I have only a memory of fullness to anguish me with the knowledge that, in this dark and empty state, I don’t really exist.” (Nochlin, 1998) Rooted squarely within the world of contemporary Exile Studies, I have undertaken a process of coming to terms with my own exilic state—dealing with the pain, suffering, and anguish caused by such a displacement. To borrow Nochlin’s terminology, through this creative project, it has become my task to know, see, and comprehend what is in front of me so that I am no longer in the dark, no longer empty, and so I do exist.

Thus the process of composing this thesis project has not only served to educate me in the academic study of exile but has also been a process of healing and catharsis. A

cyclical rhythm emerges beneath my fictional writing. To write a narrative of exile is to write a narrative of my self. And, to write a narrative of myself is to write a narrative of exile. Moreover, to write either (or both) is poignantly Jewish. To that end, during the course of this project, I engaged in extensive self-reflection and mindfulness practice to both engage and disengage my past. Stepping into myself to reflect upon the events of the past and engage the emotional trauma of exile was essential to understand my own exilic state. At the same time, a measure of disengagement and distancing was required to effectively craft and re-work a narrative that represents an encounter with both myself and with the field of exile. While no one has been absolved of the wrongs committed within my family, my learning and my creative writing have allowed me to attain a measure of solace within myself. As Joseph Brodsky adroitly states, “Taking this route for an exile writer, in many ways, is like going home—because he gets closer to the set of ideals which inspired him all along.” (Ugresic)

### **The Narrative**

My use of fiction in this thesis project allows me to textually embody both Biblical text and my own past. It is my aim to fluidly explore some of the depths of what it means to be in exile and in doing so, further develop understandings of the Jewish condition. The fictional piece entitled *Bavel* is the culmination and focal point of this thesis project. It represents learning and research regarding the field of Exile Studies, textual learning, and work in personal introspection. The story unfolds as a coming of age narrative for an unnamed, male protagonist as he grows up happily on his family’s farm, experiences the loss of his beloved grandmother, and then becomes exiled from his

home only to attempt to start a new life in the bustling metropolis of New York City. In so doing, the narrative explores the protagonist's intimate relationship to his family's farmland and the process of loss (of both matriarch and homeland). Biblical parallels are drawn between Temple leadership and exile from ancient Israel, and inter-textual references are drawn throughout—metaphorically linking my creative writing to Biblical and extra-biblical texts.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Such connections are made apparent in annotations found in footnotes throughout the fictional narrative.

### **The Evolution of Exile**

#### *My Exploration of the Evolving Understanding of Exile and its Dialogue with Judaism*

Exile is in the DNA of Judaism. Throughout our most cherished foundational tales, there is more often than not, a movement, removal, or ejection from place or person or both in concert. It is with some measure of consistency that significant Biblical characters, for one reason or another, are forced to leave their home and journey to another land. Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden of Eden. Abraham is commanded by God to leave his home in Ur Kasdim [Ur of the Chaldeans] in order to go to Canaan, and then later, leaves Canaan twice, for Egypt and Gerar, as a result of famine in Canaan. Jealousy and deceit took Joseph to Egypt--where shortly thereafter, drought and famine forced his father, Jacob, away from his own home and into Egypt as well. Famine also appears as the root of Ruth's narrative, where Naomi and sons are forced to leave Beit Lechem. And of course, the epitome of dislocation is the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem and subsequent exile of the Jews from the biblical land of Israel.<sup>23</sup> The destruction of the first and second Temples is so synonymous with exile that comparatively we often overlook the notions of exile present in other biblical narratives (such as those above). Contemporary scholarship has done a great deal to broaden our notion of exile--both in the historical context and in today's world. Exile

---

<sup>23</sup> The destruction of the Temple and its subsequent exile of the Hebrew people stands out as a singular, cataclysmic force of decimation and displacement in Jewish historical memory and identity. Examining both the historical and biblical narratives surrounding the Temple's destruction and its subsequent repercussions is a historical/political field of study unto itself. While the insights such study both provide support for and illuminate this paper, Temple destruction is not the focus of my explorations and investigation. Rather I focus upon exile from land in terms of agriculture, identity, and emotional connection/rootedness.

studies are now deeply interdisciplinary and at once both contradict and enlighten the Bible's notion of exile.

The agricultural context of the biblical text and its rootedness in geography as home sets the stage for the Bible's idea of exile. Just as a physical place, a land, is home, so too are other places, other lands, not home. Movement from one realm to the other signifies great change--not only in setting and plot but also in character and character dynamics.<sup>24</sup> Current exile scholarship, however, illustrates that there is far more at play and at stake in exile and how we understand it. Such study offers new and deepening insights into Biblical narrative and broadens our understandings of Biblical exile. As we understand them today, different forms and valences of exile stemming from an array of sources appear at odds with the more clear cut presentation of exile in the Biblical text. Further, the diversity and scope of contemporary exile studies offers a greater spectrum of opportunities to engage the biblical narrative and allows us to cultivate new understandings of the Biblical text as well. To that end, this essay will work to explore the evolution of understandings of exile.

### **Past Definitions**

In comparing the biblical use of the word exile to the definitions present in current exile scholarship, some distinct differences become apparent. The biblical notion of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Indeed in each case of the aforementioned 'exiles' in the Biblical text illustrates upheaval and uprooting from a home that seems to yield a new stage in history. Adam's casting out from Eden marked the beginning of human civilization; Abraham's setting forth from his father's home began the true start of his narrative and life's journey; and the exile inducing famine of Ruth's story propelled her toward even greater suffering before finding her home amongst the Hebrew people and presages the establishment of the Davidic dynasty.

word appears to have relatively clear boundaries in both its denotation and its connotations. From their multidisciplinary perspective, however, contemporary scholars unsettle the idea of exile and present nuanced definitions of the word that are at times purposefully unclear. Presentations of political exile are examined in order to discern their value as historical fact as well as their value as metaphors for proscriptive meaning. Personal narratives of exiles are likewise picked apart for their importance of historical detail, psychological insights, and the emotional illuminations on the inward journeys of a person's struggle and growth.

Regarding the Biblical perspective, however, we see that the Hebrew word for exile is תולג (*galut*). Its simple definition appears in the Evan-Shoshan Concordance as “תריקע ינב סדא סמוקממ” (to uproot/displace people from their place).<sup>25</sup> (Even-Shoshan, 1984) It appears in its nominal form outside the Torah in the books of the Prophets and Writings--largely in reference to the aftermath of the Temple destruction. As a verb, however, the root ש ר ג appears in the Torah with some frequency and generally refers to a driving out with regard to punishment or conquest.<sup>26</sup> Depictions of violence almost always follow or precede the use of שרג in the Torah's text.<sup>27</sup> And in each case, people

---

<sup>25</sup> See footnote 38

<sup>26</sup> For example, such usage appears in Genesis 3:23 where Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden; Genesis 4:14 in reference to Cain's expulsion; Exodus 11:1 in reference to Pharaoh's decrees upon the Israelites; Exodus 33:2 in reference to the driving out of a number of enemy tribes/peoples; and Numbers 22:6 in reference to a curse Balak wishes Balaam to say against the Israelites.

<sup>27</sup> Using the narratives mentioned above, Adam and Eve's expulsion follows a litany of curses; Able's murder followed by God's punishment of Cain precede Genesis 4:14; use of the root שרג in Exodus 11:1 is couched within the destruction of the famous Ten Plagues upon Egypt; Exodus 33:2 follows the narrative of the Golden Calf--a sin for which many Israelites were put to death; and in Numbers 22:6 the root שרג appears in a curse designed to destroy the Israelite nation--a curse that as Numbers 22:22 relates, causes, “God's anger to be kindled.”

(sometimes an individual, sometimes an entire nation) are very much uprooted and displaced from their geography. Contemporary scholars define this as political and geographic exile--an understanding that has served as the starting point for the diverse, multidisciplinary understandings and definitions of current exile studies. For the Bible, however, political and geographic exile appears to be the text's greatest focus.

Traditional scholarship regarding Jews and exile works with the Bible's notion of exile and thus largely focuses on the historicity of the Jewish expulsions after the destruction of the Temples. Indeed, the field of exile studies appears to begin with the effort to understand the Biblical depictions of exile after the destruction of the Temples.<sup>28</sup> Examining the Biblical and associated sources for historical evidence of the Jewish exile, such scholars deal by and large with political exile<sup>29</sup> and in doing so reinforce the biblical notion of the word. Furthermore, political exile and geographical exile, particularly in the Biblical text frequently overlap. Geographic expulsion can stem from a number of sources. Economic and personal health reasons frequently cause displacement or geographic exile in the Bible (due particularly to famine<sup>30</sup>). And, indeed, even family strife (such as the expulsion of Hagar in Genesis 16) can result in a geographic exile. Political exile, however, directly relates to power structures and their resultant events. In this overlap of exiles, the Bible reflects an understanding of displacement regarding both

---

<sup>28</sup> Writers and historians such as S.A. Cook (*Cambridge Ancient History* Volume 3, First Edition, in 1925), A. Lods (*The Prophets and the Rise of Judaism*, 1937), and A. Causse (*Les Disperses d'Israel*, 1929) served to create a basis of textual understanding that focused on exile as a geo-political phenomenon following Temple destruction. Such academics were not Biblical scholars and were instead primarily historians and anthropologist who turned to archeological evidence to support their ideas.

<sup>29</sup> Although such political exile from the view of the Biblical text is frequently attributed to spiritual and ethical faltering. See Jeremiah 2:19, 2 Chronicles 36:14

<sup>30</sup> Such as Genesis 12:10 and Genesis 26:1



geography and political power. And, it is from these types of displacement that the more metaphorical or spiritual crises of Kings and Chronicles<sup>31</sup> appear.

### **Landed and Landless**

For peoples of the ancient Near East, geography was everything. Within the Biblical text, a constant focus on geography appears time and again in each chapter. Characters explicitly leave one place/geography to go toward another. Personal identities are intertwined with geographical origins. Ruth is a Moabite,<sup>32</sup> Moses's wife is a daughter of a priest of Midian,<sup>33</sup> and even the first verse in the Book of Job reads, “וּמִשׁׁ שֵׁיִא הִיָּה עִרְאֵב עֵינֵי, בּוֹיָא” or “there was a man from the land of Uz, Job was his name.” And perhaps most of all, there is a repeated, steadfast focus on a promised land. This focus upon geography, location, and constant movement only heightens the magnitude of post-Temple exile. Indeed, after exile, movement from place to place stops. Characters once known by their points of origin are now severed from their identities. A people identified by a God-given geography, whose foundation story is built around journeying specifically to this promised land, is uprooted and displaced from that very same promised land, and become culturally decimated. Without the Promised Land and all that it contained (particularly the first and second Temples), the ancient Israelites move from an exalted status to forced to re-work their very identity. Everything they know about

---

<sup>31</sup> See 2 Kings 24:19-20 and 2 Chronicles 36:12-16 in which the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple (and the subsequent exile of the Jews) is attributed sin and misdeed before God.

<sup>32</sup> Moab was an area east of the Dead Sea in what is present day Jordan.

<sup>33</sup> While the Torah does not make direct mention of the location of Midian, scholars believe that it could have possibly been located in or near present day Sudan.

themselves is dislodged. As Halvorson-Taylor<sup>34</sup> writes, “Exile now signified...a variety of alienations: political disenfranchisement within Yehud, deep dissatisfaction with the status quo, and a feeling of separation from God.” (Halvorson-Taylor, 2011)

At the heart of this exile and so many others is the question: what is it to be defined by land? And further, what is it to be exiled specifically from the land that defines you? In a contemporary milieu, in her essay “The Land of Others,” writer and professor of literature and cultural studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Carola Hilfrich states:

the biblical expulsion from paradise; the exclusion from the promised land or the deportation from any land; or, simply, standing at a door that one shall not enter. In all these geopolitical, metaphysical or existential senses, exile signifies both something that is done to bodies and something that bodies do. ...It refers to an interaction between embodied human beings and the body of the world in which each really acts upon the surface of the other. (Verlag, 2003)

In Hilfrich’s writing, exile is “always both real and imaginary.” (Verlag, 2003) She recognizes that political boundaries separating lands are a human construct. They are an idea to which we as human beings attach value, connection, and emotion. We use them to define ourselves, yet they are agreed upon ideas. They are ideas that in her estimation must be engaged. They are lines that must be crossed, and in doing so an exile fashions his or her own survival, and life stories are created. In this way, it is perhaps not the land that defines us, but rather our intimate, physical *relationship* to it, our *engagement* with it, our *removal* from it, and most importantly the non-geographic personal narratives and

---

<sup>34</sup> Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor, professor of Hebrew Bible and early Judaism at the University of Virginia.

identities that we derive from such crossings. Our landed self gives way to an authorial self, as we no longer have geographic definitions, but rather rely on an autonomous crafting of identity.

### **Contemporary Definitions**

The contemporary understanding of exile (by comparison to the traditional understanding) is far more nuanced and interdisciplinary than the understandings we cull from the catastrophe of Temple destruction. And indeed, much has changed since the first scholars to address exile in their works began writing academically in the 1920s.<sup>35</sup> Such scholars tended to be European, and had no connection to exile outside of what they studied or archeologically excavated. Contemporary exile scholars and writers, by contrast, often have deeply personal connections to the topic of exile, and focus not only on physical removal from a geographic home, but also on estrangement, metaphor, psychology, and personal narrative. Exile (even in the ubiquitous Merriam-Webster Dictionary), can now be either imposed or voluntary, and does not require the experience of a forced removal from a home with no option of return.<sup>36</sup> Further, these notions are exemplified through the fact that exile thinkers are as diffuse as their writings are diverse. Instead of definitive schools of exile thought, we see exile writing appearing in

---

<sup>35</sup> See footnote 28

<sup>36</sup> This broadening of exile invites us to examine the obtuse ideas of immigration and emigration vis-à-vis exile. Every act of exile results in emigration. That being said, however, in so far as emigration relates to one's movement from one land to another, not every act of emigration is necessarily the result of exile, nor is every emigrant necessarily an exile. Immigration, by contrast, is a matter of sovereign-state and international law that governs and regulates the legal status of foreign residents. As such, immigration only engages emigrant-exiles when they seek legal status in a new sovereign state.

anthologies<sup>37</sup> of sociology, anthropology, poetry, literary critique, politics, and culture. Such scholars broaden the boundaries of exile and even ask what it means to be exiled from one's self. Doing so, they stretch previous notions of exile to understand further (and in new ways) what it truly means to be removed from one's place--to be uprooted from the familiar and specific that is named and felt as home and to be cast out into an 'other' that is not familiar, may not be specific, and certainly is not named nor felt as home. Nearly all definitions however, no matter how contemporary continue to be rooted in some way to geography.

One exile writer, the late European literary critic, Christine Brooke-Rose wrote that as a child, she:

used to think that *exile* meant 'ex-ile,' out of the island... But no: *exile* (L. *exilium*, earlier *exsilium*; *exul*, earlier *exsul*, a banished man) was long thought to be linked to *solum*, soil, but is now related to the root *sal*, Sanskrit *sar* (to go), L. *saline/saltare*; and L. *exsilio* meant 'spring forth.' But then later, in Old French, *exilier* or *essilier* meant 'to ravage,' 'to devastate,' a shift in meaning still traceable in *exterminate*, literally 'to drive beyond boundaries.' (Suleiman, 1998)

Indeed, as its historical, etymological use would connote, exile is all these things: a banishment from soil, a springing forth to something new, a state of being driven beyond boundaries--often leaving devastation in its wake.<sup>38</sup> Brook-Rose's definition straddles

---

<sup>37</sup> in addition to complete studies, articles, and books (including novels)

<sup>38</sup> By comparison, an etymological examination of the Hebrew word הלוג also sheds light on Biblical meaning. Following the Mandelkern Concordance, the root הלג stands alone with its denotation of exile and has no historical or etymological linkage with other Hebrew roots. Dictionaries such as the Koehler-Baumgartner Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, however, assert a connection between הלג and such Hebrew words as תולגלג and תולגתהל meaning to discover/reveal and to reveal one's self, respectively. If indeed, exile, in Hebrew, is etymologically linked to notions of discovery

both traditional and contemporary notions of exile. Firmly planted in physical location, she also incorporates the construct of boundaries and metaphor. In doing so, she works with etymology to negotiate broader meanings, and the idea of the geographic incorporates more intangible and emotional involvement.

Even in the contemporary context, however, this is not to ignore the emotional expressions of the Biblical portrayal of mourning the loss of the Temples. The text of Lamentations, evocatively depicts a desolate and bereft Jerusalem: “The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn assembly; all her gates are desolate, her priests sigh; her virgins are afflicted, and she herself is in bitterness.”<sup>39</sup> The scene depicted even in this singular verse is wrought with depressed torment. And to be sure, any analysis of Jewish exile that addresses the Biblical text, must recognize the mental-emotional nuance that the text brings. Yet, psychological nuance in the modern sense, exists as a contemporary lens into the Biblical text. The verses of Lamentations portray emotion together with plot, to teach the reader about the result of inequity and sin. The psychological content and themes often addressed in contemporary exile writing, appear for their own sake and to directly illustrate psychological human engagement with displacement.

Choosing to describe the concept through its human embodiment (an exile as it may refer to a person), scholar Paul Tabori offers up another definition:

---

and revealing one’s self, the possible consequences for Biblical interpretation and meaning—both for metaphoric and literal meaning—cannot be ignored. In this way, the Hebrew word for ‘exile’ becomes linked to the Hebrew word for ‘reveal/make known,’ and thus (for example) connects to the Book of Esther where the word יָלַג (make known) appears twice.

<sup>39</sup> Lamentations 1:4

An exile is a person compelled to leave or remain outside his country of origin on account of well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or political opinion; a person who considers his exile temporary (even though it may last a lifetime), hoping to return to his fatherland when circumstances permit--but unable or unwilling to do so as long as the factors that made him an exile persist. (Tabori, 1972)

Working as a journalist and political writer, Tabori came to this definition through interviewing numerous exiles. Through this writing he has become a major name in the field of contemporary exile writing. And, while his definition appears to reinforce the more traditional understandings of exile, he nonetheless illustrates nuanced contemporary additions to the definition. Not only is a person expelled from their homeland for belief and personal identity, but exile is something that can be chosen. Exile becomes optional and this added idea, further pushes the boundaries of traditional exile thinking.

To be sure in the Biblical text, we may also see instances of chosen exile. This becomes particularly true in the examples of famine in which Abraham and the sons of Jacob leave to go in search of more prosperous lands. Even in the Book of Ruth, Naomi leaves because famine threatens her existence, only to come back when her support structure disappears (the death of her sons), leaving her little recourse but to return to her people. Those who ‘choose’ to leave do so as a technicality as they face a very real risk of personal, physical ruin were they to remain in their home geography. Most importantly, however, even within such narratives neither the roots *הָלַג* nor *שָׂרָג* appear. Indeed the Bible for its own sake does not recognize leaving one’s land for famine or other personal reasons as exile. Instead, it is our contemporary lens that defines such movement within the scope of exile. The Biblical understanding makes little to no room

for choice in exilic displacement. Within the contemporary world of exile, a person may choose to leave their home for the sake of greater physical comfort or freedoms (not just imminent physical danger). In so doing, the idea of exile becomes more fluid and personal with a wider range of emotional-psychological ramifications that effect personal identity.

The exile of the Jews and their subsequent Diaspora, is perhaps the best studied and most widely researched exile of Western Civilization. Through the contemporary lens, however, we find that the focus of exile studies is no longer Jewish history. German professor Doerte Bischoff, a scholar and researcher in the field of exile, literature, and transnationality/transculturation at the University of Hamburg has published in the field of contemporary exile. While she focuses on the experience of post World War II German Jews, her larger body of work addresses the intersection of culture, exile, and Judaic studies. She offers still another definition that is particularly germane to our exploration:

...exile no longer means separation from a Jewish homeland and the memory of the destruction of the Temple as a specific Jewish symbol of oneness of place and (absolute) meaning. The split between self and origin, actual dwelling place and home, which had been a mark of a Jewish difference (and had also been connected with their being the Chosen People), now concerns the intimate connection between universal concepts of humanity and their radical other. (Verlag, 2003)

Bischoff situates us in the time-line of exile writing. Exile was once considered to be part of the realm of the Jews. In the contemporary sphere however, exile is something far more universal. No one owns it, and it can be universally accessible. Instead of situated

in specific culture or an historical environment, exile is something intimate that exists within humanity--pitting human identity against a polarizing other. Bischoff, like others in the field, extends exile to the self and both personal and group identity. Memory becomes intrinsic to exile. Perceived memory of what was--whether actually experienced or not--becomes a conveyor of meaning. This conveyor comes into question, particularly in the Jewish sense, when barriers to returning home come down. The exile finds, as Bischoff notes, a “split between self and origin”--dissonance between a perceived (and thus lived) existence and reality.

Interestingly, another major scholar in the field of contemporary exile is Palestinian, Arab-American literary theoretician and former professor of comparative literature, Edward Said. While his academic focus was on post-colonial thought and literature, Said also worked in political advocacy,<sup>40</sup> centered on Palestinian rights stemming from his family’s experience as Palestinian refugees. Much of Said’s writing on exile both illustrates and explicates a personal yet universal sense of exile. Ironically, in doing so, these aspects of Said’s writing produces text and meaning that not only apply to exile writ large, but also can describe the *Jewish* condition of exile as well (even though his writing is actually crafted in response to his own engagement with Palestinian exile identities). While, the thesis of much of Said’s writing is decidedly anti-Israel and anti-Zionist, his underlying, universal and personal understandings of exile are nonetheless relevant to the explorations of this essay. Further, where Tabori works to unsettle exile from its Jewish connotations (if not denotations), Said reappropriates these very ideas of exile and applies them to Palestinian life and culture. This process of

---

<sup>40</sup> also connected to and interwoven with his academic work



reappropriation and reapplication of exile thought and process is a common trope in contemporary exile studies. Said exemplifies this process in his writing and in doing so adds to the field. Said repurposes ideas of the traditional/historical understanding of exile,<sup>41</sup> and applies them to the experience of his own family. He notes, “the pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question.” (Said, 2000) Inherent in Said’s comment is a connection to geography--a rooted home that is a physical landed space. Additionally, by Said’s thinking, return is not an option for an exile--a notion that Tabori’s definition of exile would refute. Perhaps most importantly, within the contemporary world of exile studies, both defining ideas while in opposition, are valid.

Further, Said cites the Jewish literary critic, novelist, and philosopher George Steiner<sup>42</sup> in adding an even broader and postmodern valence to exile:

The critic George Steiner has even proposed the perceptive thesis that a whole genre of twentieth-century literature is “extraterritorial,” a literature by and about exiles, symbolizing the age of the refugee. Thus Steiner suggests, “It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely...” (Said, 2000)

---

<sup>41</sup> which appear to be largely connected to the Jewish historical narrative

<sup>42</sup> It is important to note that while George Steiner is Jewish, he is not a Zionist, and views the existence of the modern State of Israel negatively. In the words of Assaf Sagiv, Associate Fellow in Philosophy, Political Theory, and Religion at the Shalem Institute, “Steiner has no sympathy for the more isolationist elements of Jewish tradition, contending that such tendencies—and particularly their manifestation in Zionism and the State of Israel—“debase” Judaism and undermine its most important qualities. According to Steiner, the true mission of the Jews is to be found in exile.” (Sagiv, 2003)

Said and indeed Steiner, harness the warfare, wide-scale displacement of refugees, and sweeping changes of the twentieth century to broaden opportunities for understanding exile. In their view the events of twentieth century world history have displaced so many that exile has become a subtext in the lives of many--surfacing widely through literature. Modern warfare has indeed led to the displacement of millions (and continues to do so today). Whereas Steiner's writing frequently examines the displacement (through the literary lens) of European Jewry after World War II, the writing of Said views his Palestinian homeland as a casualty of Jewish displacement after the very same war. Through their own understandings, these writers present a domino-effect of exile—alluding to the idea that one exilic displacement creates another.<sup>43</sup> And in so doing, still further questions arise within the realm of contemporary exile studies: does one people's exile necessitate another's? Given the scale of the twentieth century, can there be a terminus in such a chain reaction? And truly, what effect does such broad sweeping exile have on not only humanity but on any current understanding of exile?

Although it provides few answers, to be sure, some of the greatest strengths of contemporary exile studies are the questions that it raises. The field has become vastly broadened from the Biblical notions of exile. The diffuse and multidisciplinary nature of both exile thinkers and exile writers offers multiple points of entry with which definitions of exile have become varied and encompass greater populations (both in groups and as

---

<sup>43</sup> For example, newly exiled Group A moves into Group B's territory, which then eventually causes the displacement of Group B. Group B is then forced to move into Group C's territory, which in turn eventually causes Group C to become displaced, and so forth. This notion deals with issues of modernity and mass displacements caused by war, famine, and political turmoil. Steiner and Said allude to the idea that so much of such movement has occurred that in effect a possible majority of humanity could in some way claim exilic status.

individuals). Through a Jewish lens, these questions seemingly multiply exponentially with complexity. To what end (literally, metaphorically, personally, etc.) have the displacements of the twentieth century (both Jewish and otherwise) played out in Jewish history? Is there indeed a cascade of exile? Given current populations and cultural trends, are Jews still in a state of exile? If so, what constitutes such exile? Has Jewish exile become something that each Jew decides? Can Jews, or anyone, be both exiled from home and comfortably at home someplace else at the same time?

### **Exile Becomes Personal**

To be sure, Brooke-Rose's summation of exile is a personal one. Having been born in Switzerland and raised mostly in Belgium, her life was further geographically split as her father lived in England, where she eventually settled.<sup>44</sup> Her own narrative of exile indeed hinged on being ex-ile--out of the island. And, it is impossible to read her writing on exile without attributing her ethos to her existence between multiple geographies. And yet, not every geographic dislocation results in the creation of an exile. Indeed we live in a world in which many have homes on multiple continents across which they divide their time. Many more hold multiple passports staking their claim literally to multiple geographies. In neither situation do we find the perfunctory, writ large creation of exile. Nevertheless, Brooke-Rose's writing powerfully persists. Through her writing of her own personal experiences she claims exilic status for herself and sees the world through the lens of the exile. And, in so doing, her resoundingly personal identity as an exile becomes validated.

---

<sup>44</sup> See obituary citation in bibliography.

Likewise, in his book, *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said brings in the addition of personal, raw, experienced emotion into our prior definitions of exile, while continuing to refine his own definitions and explicate his own experience:

On the twentieth-century scale, exile is neither aesthetically nor humanistically comprehensible: at most the literature about exile objectifies an anguish and a predicament most people rarely experience first hand; but to think of the exile informing this literature as beneficially humanistic is to banalize its mutilations, the losses it inflicts on those who suffer them, the muteness with which it responds to any attempt to understand it as 'good for us.' (Said, 2000)

His definition in this passage confronts existing exile scholarship as falling short of engaging the true emotional and personal destruction exile can wreak. His understanding of the world (and the large-scale displacements of the twentieth century), stem from the personal experience of his family. In doing so, Said takes his personal experience and self-consciously dramatizes the pain of exile from a Palestinian point of view.<sup>45</sup> To be sure, Said's personal experience with exile, and the exilic identity that he claimed for himself propels his writing and philosophy on exile.

## Conclusions

To be sure, exile in the contemporary sense of the word represents a broader spectrum of understandings than the exile of the Bible. Whether induced by famine or by

---

<sup>45</sup> Said's political work and political writing vis a vis the basis of this paper's exploration creates a very strong sense of irony. Recognizing such irony, however, Said's importance as an exile writer, the understandings of exile that he unearths, and the exilic processes he illustrates cannot be ignored. As such Said's understandings--especially as driven through his personal experience--are particularly germane to this paper's explorations.

the cataclysm of Temple destruction, the relative clarity of exile in the Bible contrasts the multifaceted and diverse definitions of contemporary scholarship. Current understandings of exile weave together such complex notions as personal journeys, human emotion, choice, and identity. In contemporary terms, exile has become vastly more metaphoric, psychological, and postmodern--operating on both grand and personal scales. Such a multifaceted, fluid definition of exile, while in many ways counter to the Biblical understanding, also offers new ways to examine and understand the Biblical text.

Oral and social histories now appear alongside political timelines and historical analysis.<sup>46</sup> Anthologies containing the works of interdisciplinary academics, exposit personal experience in the light of current thinking in anthropology, sociology, and literature. The resultant body of understandings of exile vis-a-vis the Bible, offers us—as contemporary readers—the opportunity to re-explore and to re-examine the Biblical text.<sup>47</sup> Biblical characters, their possible motivations, their reactions, and their possible feelings become fleshed out and deepened, as, for better or worse, we imprint our current modes of thinking and our contemporary understanding of exile (together with the

---

<sup>46</sup> Indeed *Altogether Elsewhere* and *Exile: The Writers Experience* are compilations working to further their messages through grouping or ordering their content (compiled essays). In *Narratives of Exile and Return*, author Mary Chamberlain devotes two initial chapters toward historio-analytic content while devoting her remaining nine chapters to actual personal narratives or discussions of personal narratives writ large. Such treatment in both essay compilation and presentation of personal narrative exemplifies the current field of exile literature: in each case traditional treatment of exile gives way quantitatively and qualitatively in favor of personal engagement and the understandings such examinations can produce.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed many writers and scholars such as Rabbi and professor Norman Cohen and Dr. Avivah Zornberg to name but two, consciously work to include the contemporary lenses of psychology, sociology, literature, and multi-cultural studies into their biblical exegeses. Much in this vein, reexaminations of biblical text and narratives under the observance of contemporary understandings have, in many ways, become standard practice and work to deepen biblical understandings.

experiences of our own lives) upon our Biblical reading. In this way, the multidisciplinary, broadening trend of recent decades<sup>48</sup> of exile studies has opened up the field to become something more personal and intimate than it was previously thought to be.

---

<sup>48</sup> Exile literature dating from the 1960s and 1970s (such as the works of such scholars as Peter Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, and Joseph Rhymer, *Babylonian Experience*), still, by and large focused on the geo-political nature of Jewish exile. Since that time, scholars such as those identified and quoted in this paper have worked to diversify, personalize, and expand previous definitions and connotations of exile.

## Bavel

Its 7:00 am, and I'm<sup>49</sup> shuffling my still sleeping feet onto the B Train heading into Manhattan. This early, thank God,<sup>50</sup> it's not hard to get a seat. As tired as I am, the scratched, hard, burnt-orange and harvest yellow seats—colors only the 1970's could love—look ironically inviting.

Do I rest my weary self on the seat to my left? It's closest to me. It looks clean—or at least it looks like it was clean a few decades ago. There's a seat to my right as well. But I think its graffiti is still wet. I could walk further into the subway car, but the prospect of the acrid, soured odor that I think might be filling my nostrils makes me want to stay put.

The only people in the car I'm in are worn down smooth, not with grace and wisdom, but exhaustion and servitude. Half asleep, and too poor to afford any gadget to plug themselves into, they just sit there. A Jamaican woman reads her bible. A Puerto Rican girl with her feet upon another seat and the hood of her jacket formed into a makeshift refugee tent over her head is fast asleep. They all tick away the moments until they get to work where they will tick away the moments until they move on to the next

---

<sup>49</sup> Throughout the field of exile studies (both contemporary and Biblical), there is the notion that exiles lose their identities while in exile. In the Biblical text we see this through the general use of home-geography used in names vis-à-vis the lack of any such geographic marker attached to the names of returning exiles in the Book of Ezra, Chapter 2. In the field of contemporary exile studies, a loss of identity and the reformation of identity is repeatedly examined through a multitude of voices in both academic analysis and creative expression.

<sup>50</sup> At times the Biblical and religious references, quotations, and allusions contained within this story work to invoke the passages and narratives from which they come. At other times (indeed perhaps the majority of instances) such references actually work to subvert or destabilize the Biblical text.

thing to tick away. I'm going to work, and so are they. After work, they will either go to more work or they won't. After work, I am lucky enough to go to class. I didn't finish my reading for today—that's nothing new. Once again, I had to choose between earning money so I can eat and reading about international contract law or the history of human civilization. I know that Cyrus<sup>51</sup> was a king, but for the life of me, I can't remember when and where. But for now, it's 7:00 am, and I've chosen my seat; opting after examination for whatever harvest-yellow throne was before me—head against the window, staring out into the black bowel of Brooklyn. I could be doing my reading, but I know that that is only an invitation to fall asleep and miss my stop. So for now, it's just me and my thoughts and the other worn down commuting slaves to Manhattan.

If I allow my eyes to just close partially—not falling asleep, mind you, just closing partially, staring out the window of the subway car and into the endless dark beneath my borough, I can see endless fields punctuated here and there with a grand old tree or two. And if I un-focus my vision just right, I can even make out the crops that the Aram's<sup>52</sup> planted—looks like this year's gonna be corn.<sup>53</sup> Corn's a good crop. Nice and tall, it keeps old Mrs. Aram's binoculars from seeing into our yard...

“Good morning ladies and gentlemen, please protect your belongings. Keep them in sight at all times. If you see something, say something and have a safe day,” the rusted, half obscured voice of the subway train's conductor roused me from my

---

<sup>51</sup> Cyrus the Great was the ruler of Persia and the liberator of the Jewish exile, allowing for the Jewish return to Jerusalem.

<sup>52</sup> Aram, a play on the word/name 'Aramean,' a neighbor to ancient Israel during the time of the Babylonian Empire, that according to 2 Kings 24:2 was part of an alliance of other surrounding nations to destroy Judah just before the Babylonian exile.

<sup>53</sup> Corn appears in the dreams of Pharaoh in Genesis 41:5 as a harbinger of both good times and bad.



inadvertent, half-lucid slumber. We just left Brooklyn, I can see it now, the gleaming man-made alps of glass, steel, and greed. The feats of engineering, the high-powered jobs, the glamorous lives, all the excitement—all to be had, all so available and enjoyed, so far up in the towering, snowless, manmade alps of Manhattan. I get a glimpse of it as my train crosses the greenish depths of the East River, before descending back down into the caves underneath the glistening peaks of America's great metropolis. I have no place in these mountains of glass and steel—at least not these. Give me the God-made Rockies, or better yet, the low rolling Smoky Mountains where we used to go camping each summer. I'd take them any day over the shinning waxen<sup>54</sup> peaks of New York. I prefer the plains—where the great expanse of good black earth that lies beneath polite small towns like Hebron, New Canaan, and Salem<sup>55</sup> feeds the world. The plains are home. You can look off past an endless horizon of corn, soy, and wheat to see a storm brooding hours before you hear the first drops of rain strike the leaves that shade your house. You can look up to see the richest blue day and the clearest star-filled night.

Coming out of the West 4<sup>th</sup> Street Station, I lifted up my eyes to the mountains<sup>56</sup> of the Financial District, for a fleeting second, I thought, “maybe someday.” And just as

---

<sup>54</sup> This passage refers to Psalm 97:5, “בְּדֹיגָה, נִמְסוּ מִלְכָּנִי יְהוָה—הָרִים.” While the Psalm works to extol the power of God over even the greatest of natural wonders, the reference above works to assert God's power over even the greatest of human-made accomplishments. Although an exile may be subjugated to the control of others, as the Psalm might assert, nothing is beyond God's reach.

<sup>55</sup> These small towns, both actually exist in the Midwest and also appear in their own form in the Bible: Hebron (in both Indiana and Genesis 13:18), New Canaan, (in both Illinois and Genesis 9:18), and Salem (in both Illinois and Genesis 14:18). Such references both situate the story in the protagonist's homeland, but also draw a comparison between that home and New York—between the fertile lands of ancient Israel and Babylon.

<sup>56</sup> This passage quotes from Psalm 121, “הָרִים-אֲשֶׁר עֵינַי, אֶל־.” The Psalm presents its reader as raising his/her gaze in order to garner strength from God and asserting God's

quickly, tower after tower after of Babel confounded my thoughts and brought me back to my reality. As if on cue, two suit-clad, coffee toting, executive wannabes pushed into me, and I fell partially down the greasy chipped stairwell of the subway. Neither of them noticed. I regained my foothold and with my head down, I once more moved forth. This time steps away from the subway entrance, a hand-ball player exhaled his cheap, mentholated cigarette smoke into my face as if I were not there. I choked—my lungs coughing, my body trying to vomit out<sup>57</sup> not just the foul smoke of the indifferent hand-baller but also the airborne filth of the subway, the streets, and the city itself. When my ‘someday’ comes, it will have nothing to do with this place. I am a stranger in a strange land<sup>58</sup> and one day I will go home.

But for now, tomorrow will be yet another day like this one—as will be the day after that. Sometimes I think that the days will just go on like that til I lose count and become like one of my fellow commuters on the subway car—ticking away moments til I don’t have any left. I truly can’t fathom how God works, why life has to be like this. There’s that old cliché about how God works in mysterious ways. People always say it without really thinking when they don’t know what else to say. But yet, there seems to be some truth to it. I had this nightmare once in which this angel stood over me—or at least something that I thought was an angel—and kept screaming that old cliché at me

---

protecting power in his/her life. The usage above, however subverts the Psalm’s intention. Just as exile presents a usual/familiar world made discordant, here the mountains are man made, and there is no strength or solace to be found.

<sup>57</sup> The rhetoric of Leviticus 18:28 states that the land will ‘vomit out’ those who commit iniquity and sin. Just as the land seeks to cleanse itself, so too does our exile in this story seek to cleanse himself of the iniquity and state of living that has been forced upon him. This notion also engages the iniquity that led the Biblical Israelites into exile.

<sup>58</sup> Effectively living in exile after murdering an Egyptian, Moses says this phrase, found in Exodus 2:22, upon the birth of his son Gershom.

over and over and over again.<sup>59</sup> I kept trying to run, but everywhere I went, the angel was over me, pounding that damned cliché into my head until finally I looked up into a blinding light and wept. God willing, one day, I will go home. Until then, I will just keep on rousing my 35-year-old, aged body out of bed before the sun rouses from hers. (I say aged, mind you, because like a new car driven cross-country, I fear I already have too many miles on my engine—doubtful that my re-sale value will be anywhere close to the Bluebook). I will go through the motions of my morning rituals—pray, dress, bathe and eat a little—and then shuffle my way to my subway car on the B Train.

I constantly wonder how the hell television cameras manage to clean things up so well before they arrive in my television set? Whenever someone from back home remembers that I'm out here, and calls or writes, I tell them that if everyone from back home were to see the real New York City, they'd all turn off their TVs and take up card playing or knitting or something like that. It doesn't look anything like I thought it would. I guess the grass is always greener.

After a while, I suppose you get used to all the filth—all the unidentifiable black that's caked onto the streets, or the tiny patches of barren soil that has been so molested by the city that it is indistinguishable from concrete—it all just becomes so familiar as to be invisible to your eye—just like most of the people—but even then, when all that familiarity gets caked onto your shoes, you're still surrounded by a sea of strangers and strange places.

---

<sup>59</sup> This passage references the apocryphal Fourth Book of Ezra in which Ezra, living in exile has 7 visions during which (in the first and third visions) Ezra asks the angel Uriel why the Israelites must endure exile. As a reply, Uriel tells Ezra that, humankind cannot know how God functions: essentially that, God works in mysterious ways.

I tell people back home that I live on a street that looks like the one from the Cosby Show from years ago. Of course, I tell them that, and then they think I have some sort of hifalutin, fancy life. Like most things around here, though if you scratch the surface you see a completely different picture. My Mama knows more of the truth. She worries about me: whether I get enough to eat, whether I am safe, or can sleep at night. I try to reassure her without just lying out-right, but my sidestepping of the truth never quite works all the way. She knows that things are tough out here. Sometimes, when I need to feel free, I open my one little window as much as it will open. I pull back drapes that I hand stitched myself out of some remnants Mama sent me from what we had left of the old sewing room, and although the air is just a little bit fresher, the view is what I envision people in prison get to see: bars, brick, and anything the neighbors happen to be doing. On a fair day, when there's a breeze, my neighbor's cigarette smoke wafts into my room like so much midday incense.<sup>60</sup> Or at least that's what I call it: incense. It sounds better when I put it like that, than to have to tell Mama that my home smells like some old ashtray whenever I try to let in a bit of sweet fresh air.

Growing up, we never went to church. A love of God and my family's farm was all the religion we ever had—it was all we ever needed. Once a week we took a rest; Saturday afternoons were ours. And so they are still. Mama calls up once a week during our brief sabbath, and gives me the weather report: 50 degrees, windy, some rain. By now, she's learned that generally, it just takes a few days before we get the same weather here, and she likes playing the role of Oracle. I don't have the heart to tell her that for the

---

<sup>60</sup> This is a reference to mid-day sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem and in the way presented here, juxtaposes the holiness of rising smoke in the Temple to the profane and damage causing smoke of a New Yorker's cigarette.

love of fitting in, I spend every spare dime I have (and some I don't) to keep a smartphone, and whenever I feel small and provincial, I bring up the weather for New York, Jerusalem, London, and yes, even all the way back home in rural Illinois. After the weather report, she gives me a list of all the fancy New York City restaurants she's seen on the Food Channel. Every once in a while she'll have put back a little money and puts it in my account, "Now, I've put a little something in your account so you can go and treat yourself a little. Surely \$10.00 will be enough for a nice meal, maybe you can even buy for one of your friends?"

I don't have the heart to tell her that I don't have any friends. Back home we welcome the stranger—this place, however, is another story. And I certainly don't have the heart to tell her that it would take more than her \$10.00 just to get an appetizer at the restaurants she tells me about. It's better for her to fantasize that she's living vicariously through me than to have to consider her own life. I always use the ten bucks to buy groceries.

In addition to my phone, I've tried to change my clothes to fit in with the natives—though my obvious knockoffs always give me away. For a time, I even took a third job at a clothing store so I could get a discount and afford the clothes. I took a shot at changing my habits as well—but to no avail. Even after college and now a good way through graduate school, I don't talk like these people; I don't move as fast as they do; and I certainly don't enjoy living life stacked on top of other folks like they do. They all talk as if they're the only ones around the only ones that matter, honking, yelling, spending—and each one moves through life as if its do or die 24/7. They are each the center of the universe and although they may or may not notice, everyone else is just

getting in the way. Back home, we all move a bit slower. None of us really thinks about any universe, though I suppose if there *is* a center to it, it would have to be God, not us. This city ain't comfortable, hell I don't even think it's very civilized, but we all do what we have to do. At least I do. I have to keep on going, keep moving forward, try to make it into some sort of Promised Land.

\*\*\*

I don't know where my promised land is anymore. I thought I knew. For the longest part of my life, I was deeply rooted in that good land, that perfect place—my home. Born and raised on my family's farm,<sup>61</sup> a sheep farm, no more than 40 minutes from Abraham Lincoln's very own hometown and still out in the middle of nowhere, I invented and imagined countless promised lands. But as I am the last of five generations at the farm—our home-place—it took expulsion to fully and truly realize how deeply I had been living in my promised land all along.

Even when I was little, I was up before the sun rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. Every day I had my toast with jam made from last summer's berry pick'n and some fresh milk. I put on the big rubber boots my Grandma<sup>62</sup> got for me special from the local Rural King. They were just like hers—black with a little line of red at the bottom. Going up

---

<sup>61</sup> The pastoral and agricultural basis for much of this story is in and of itself a Biblical reference and situates the narrative within the agricultural modality present throughout much of the Biblical text.

<sup>62</sup> The grandmother character in this narrative, like the protagonist, is left unnamed. Within this story, the grandmother (or "Grandma" as she appears) shifts in metaphoric representation between prophet and priest, and between the awe of nature conveyed in the Biblical text and the holiness of the Temple in Jerusalem.

past my little knees, even the smallest size they made were too big for me, but wadded up pages from the Sears catalog stuffed in the toe of each boot insured just the right fit until I had grown enough. And, clad as such I would go out to water the sheep. When I got bigger I fed them as well. Grandma always reasoned, “Little squirts cain’t feed sheep, they’d knock you down and tromp your head. They don’t mean no harm, they’s just sheep and they jus’ don’t know no better.”

By the time I grew old enough to have a memory, all the men of my family had died. My grandfather was lost to heart disease. “My ol’ ticker’s ‘bout shot, I reckon,” he used to say sardonically—or so I’m told, at least. He apparently said that nearly every day for years. No one paid much attention to it until it came true. Grandpa was as much Grandma’s child as the rest of us were. He not only called Grandma, “Ma” but, his constant fussing and petulance made him the target of odd looks from all the neighbors. “Ma, my water’s too warm. Ain’t we got no ice?”

“Yes, Robert, there is more ice, but cain’t you go fetch out the icebox yourself? I have to go out an’ feed the sheep...”

“Oh yes! Feed the sheep! Feed the sheep” he would instantly rant, “I have to fend for my poor self, but those damned sheep get waited on hand and foot! Oh yes! Go feed the sheep!”

A hit-and-run took my father. Back home there’s not much for young people to do except for either work or get into trouble. Usually kids chose one or the other. Those that tried to do both did neither very well. Dad was a body man. Not for living bodies mind you, rather he worked on cars, and car-wrecks accounted for most of his business. We in the family never talked much about it, but old Mrs. Aram, the local gossip, told me

about it once. He was out by Honey Bend with a wrecker picking up a Buick Regal that had just hit a deer, when one of the Lusk boys came around a corner and ran him right over. As old Mrs. Aram told it, there wasn't much left of my Dad. What was left got thrown out into a hay field. The Lusk boy wasn't yet 15 and Judge Messiah threw him into juvie. No body seems to know what's come of him since. Without men, all the heavy lifting at the farm was carried on the backs of women: my grandma, my mama, and my mama's sister—whom I've never laid eyes on, and who herself hasn't laid eyes on the farm for years.

Every family has its rogue, and by that measure, life on the farm didn't seem to suit Aunt Delilah.<sup>63</sup> She did her share of the work well enough, but it was never without complaint. She always thought she knew more than anybody—more than my mama, more than Granddad, more than Grandma, even more than the land itself. She never listened to nobody and had a taste for trouble. Despite all the discord she delightfully let follow in her wake, she was strikingly beautiful (at least according to the picture of her that Grandma kept in the hall). Her wavy, brunette hair fell over her shoulders and her bright smile seemed almost framed by her high, defined cheekbones. The story goes, that no more than 5 weeks and 5 days<sup>64</sup> after turning 18, Delilah took off with the hot-rodding, trouble making Stuart boy from down the road. And that was that. At the time, Granddad was apparently happy to see her go, Grandma, however sat silent looking out

---

<sup>63</sup> The name Delilah was chosen because of the attributes of the character from the Biblical Book of Judges. In Judges, Delilah is marked by deceit and betrayal for the sake of personal gain. As it appears in this portion of this story, the character's name Delilah foreshadows future events in the narrative.

<sup>64</sup> The sum of 5 weeks and 5 days totals 40 days which coincides with moments of maturation in the Tanakh (such as the 40 days and nights spent aboard Noah's ark and the 40 years of Israelite wandering in the wilderness).



the porthole-like window above the kitchen sink. That little window with its homemade lace curtains looked out over a field and down the lane. If any one was coming to the house, you could see the dust kick up from their car from a mile off.

Of course I worked as well, doing more and more as I grew up. All of us did our share—not as much as we could, but rather as much as needed to be done. The farm’s needs and demands didn’t really recognize personal limitation, and so neither did we. After a storm felled a tree onto our barbed-wire fence line and let 60 head of sheep loose from the pasture, we alone were the ones to wrangle them back onto the farm and then, in our exhaustion saw up the tree and mend the fence. And when a wet, wet spring came and soaked the ground like Noah’s flood, we and we alone were the ones who—with old oak timbers from the great old barn that we dragged through the mud in a torrent of rain—reinforced the farmhouse’s basement walls so they wouldn’t collapse and sink our home. Time and time again, we thought we knew our limits, and time and time again God and the farm showed us that we didn’t know anything.

Ever since that day that the sheep got out, I *always* carried a walking stick—a lesson that ordeal made me learn the hard way. It wasn’t so much for protection, but rather after four generations, our sheep had learned to do what the stick commanded. I steered them this way or that, they took notice when I raised it up, and when I struck it down they split like the sea.<sup>65</sup> After tending the flock and setting them out to pasture, I would gather my books and homework and start walking to where the bus would pick me up for school. When I was little, it took me about an hour to get down the mile-long dusty gravel lane from the house and out to the tar and chip hard-road, unfortunately the

---

<sup>65</sup> an allusion to Moses’s parting of the Red Sea and by an extension, a reference to a Promised Land narrative.

bigger I got the less time it took. I loved my time walking alone on the lane. Even when there was no school, I still walked to the road. I cherished those quiet moments with only my imagination to keep me company. Some mornings I was a track and field star running my way to Olympic gold. Still other mornings I found myself aboard Christopher Columbus's great ship the Santa Maria, leaving home to chart out a new world. In the winter I would pretend I was an Eskimo as I played in the snow drifting over the banks of the fields; in the spring I would hurry to the foot of the hill where I could see all the bluebells blossoming in the edge of the woods—a sight far prettier than even my vivid imagination could dream up; the summer brought fuzzy worms to catch and grasshoppers to chase, and the autumn harvest provided me with a show of tractors and combines to watch and haystack high piles of leaves to jump in.

Getting home from school, Grandma and I would have milk and cookies—just as she had done with her children as they grew up. And then we would go out to work the farm: cutting the 12-foot-tall horseweed out of the corn fields, whitewashing and patching our aging sheds, feeding and watering the sheep as we put them in the barn for the night, and finally pulling weeds from the vegetable garden until the sun was too low to see. In the evening, I would help get dinner ready. Sometimes I would go get greens from the garden for collards or wrestle carrots and turnips from the earth for a salad. Other times, I helped fry up chicken or went down to the fruit cellar to fetch some meat or get some green beans we canned from the summer before. My mother would help when she could, although the many jobs she pieced together to pay the bills meant that she was rarely at home. After dinner I would do my homework and practice my multiplication tables, and Grandma would embroider new pillow covers, darn socks, or

piece new quilt blocks. With gingham and lace curtains wafting in the breeze and the scent of a dinner well-earned upon the air, we never had much, but we never knew it.

\*\*\*

My Grandmother was the very heart of our family's farm. Without her the farm was nothing but a plot of land. And, she worked hard so that our little 60 acres of Eden cultivated us as much as we all cultivated it. But Grandma, herself directly connected to the farm in ways none of us could imagine, was larger than life. It was she who had 17<sup>66</sup> brothers and sisters. It was she who saw electricity come to the farm. It was she who bought the family our first car and our first refrigerator. And it was she who built our farmhouse with her bare hands out of scrap lumber so old it bent or broke even the strongest of iron nails. She strung barbed wire, birthed calves, raised children (and one husband), made jam, baked pies for bake sales, survived measles when no doctor would come near, sewed her own clothes (and the clothes of my mama's Barbie dolls), shot skunks, baked bread, and was one hell of a barn dancer. When I was four, all wrapped up in one of her hugs, I was convinced that she could fly.

For my part, Grandma would take me out to the woods, just beyond the sheep pasture, and just above where the bluebells bloomed. We would don our rubber boots, tromp across the pasture, scramble over the rusted wire fence that divided sheep from wilderness, and there we would enter into a whole other world. With the labor of the

---

<sup>66</sup> The sum of her family is 18 (17 brothers and sisters in addition to herself), and 18 is representational of life signifying that 'Grandma' comes from life, is part of life, and is a cultivator of life.

farm far behind us, she taught me how to walk a log—those fallen trees that happened to lie across the creek that snarled its way through the farm. We climbed trees together, slid down the clay cliffs on the south acres of the farm, and regularly got so dirty that Mama thought we'd never be clean again. I clearly remember one spring, far out in the woods, on just such a walk, she sat me on an ancient grape vine, so old and so thick that you couldn't get both hands around it, and showed me a maple leaf, then an oak leaf, then a birch leaf, then the leaf off an old "hick'r nut" tree. I learned the unique language of each one. She held them up to the sun so I could see all the veins running through them, and she said, "You see that there? Can you see him?"

"See who?" I asked.

"God," my grandmother replied.

"Where?" I asked, "God must be really damn little!"

"Don't cuss, good people don't talk like that, good folks talk right. But don't you see him? God is there, and there and there." She pointed to various parts of the leaves, and then to the trees themselves.

"Grandma, I don't understand."

"That's ok, you will. I'll show you."

That evening, a ewe gave birth to two lambs, and I got to watch. I was scared. I had never seen anything like that in my life, and the ewe screamed and bleated like crazy. I thought she was going to die.

"See that?" my grandmother asked, "See how she's scream'n but look at 'er face. She don't mind it really. She knows what's goin on. An' see, God's there too."

She was right. The sheep sounded as if she were about to leave this world, but her face looked as if she had already conceded to what was taking place. She was working, creating life and letting it loose on the world. There was an odd serene stillness to her. At the time, however, I still didn't see God.

The lamb grew and matured and eventually came ready to have a lamb of its own. As time walked on we worked the farm, and it worked us as well. And through the exchange, we had everything that we needed. We had peace and quiet, we had comfort, we had each other. I had long since mastered my multiplication tables and was moving on to some rudimentary algebra. And one day, I was trying to remember my rules and formulas to prepare for a quiz the next day while I was cleaning out the hay loft in the barn. I must have been nearly 13-years-old. Grandma came up and said that she needed my help transplanting a tree.

She and I had planted a white pine from seed several years before, but as it turned out, other trees around it were growing faster than ours. Growing and living practically one on top of the other, the other trees bustled and jostled themselves, growing in each other's way; and the little white pine, with its wood so soft had to be removed from its home just to give it a fair chance. She handed me a shovel, and as we took a look at where exactly to start digging and where exactly to re-plant she asked, "You see God?"

I smiled in response.

"Yep, that's what I fig'ered. I reckoned that you'da catch on sooner than later."

The two of us starting cutting and removing the sod, stacking it and setting it aside to re-plant on the bank of the lane. "Grandma?" I asked, "How come it matters?"

“How come what matters?” she replied as she began to shovel soil into the wheelbarrow that her father had made before she was born.

“How come it matters, ‘dat I can see God?”

“Well, I reckon it matters cause you gotta see why we’re here. You gotta be able to see who you’re workin with before you can work with’em. Cause without God there ain’t no farm. You understand? Now fetch me that bucket.”

“The green one?”

“Yes, sir. That green one’ll do just fine. You understand, now?”

I was quiet as I kept digging—looking at the soil, how it gave way and crumbled in some places and how it was cut smooth by the shovel in others. I watched my grandmother and even myself with care as we placed the tender white pine into its new home and judiciously shepherded its roots just so, so it could find its footing in its new land. I noticed our fingers adroitly negotiating each crevice and clod of soil. I smelled the fresh, fragrant mustiness of earth coming to the air. The little, fragile tree that we had in our hands stood on the precipice of ruin. In a matter of hours it would be dried out and would begin to die. We, who had tore it from its home had its life in our hands. Either the tree could wither, or we could help it grow even stronger. And in that moment, everything seemed crisp. Colors were brighter, the sky was more vivid, the leaves had more detail—every vein was apparent and almost sparkled. We were farming with God.

“Yep. I got it,” I said.

As so many summers turned to autumn and then to winter, spring, and back again, I had somehow grown into it. Who knows when the moment was—there probably wasn’t one to know—but I had indeed met the God of my Grandmother, the God of the

farm, the God of living. “If you is really gonna farm; if you’re really gonna be *fit* to be a farmer, then you gotta know the Almighty,” she would say, “cause if’n you don’t then you’re jus’ grow’n plants—when what you really oughta be do’n is help’n the good earth bring forth its life.” I suppose it’s the difference between driving a car and understanding the intricacies of how one is built or the soulful hum of a particular engine; the difference between reading a history book and living the history. I nodded to her. She gave a quick nod in reply and we started digging. As ever, as we dug and planted, we hummed and sang a mixture of spirituals, radio jingles from the 30’s, and the occasional Elvis Presley classic—a musical repertoire culled from the expanse of Grandma’s life.

I made my way through high school unlike most other kids. Instead of driving fast, drinking out in cornfields, and playing football, I opted to spend my free time at the University of Illinois’s agricultural extension office. By the time I was sixteen, I had studied enough to become a certified Master Gardener—the youngest in the state’s history. Even then, and no doubt thanks to both the farm itself and my grandmother’s care, I wanted to learn as much and give as much as I could to the land that so cultivated me. Its like Grandma always said, “You get out what you put in. That’s why Old Junior’s farm don’t amount to nuth’n. He ain’t never worked a real day’s work in his life. An’ you can rest assured, he’s get’n out jus’ what he’s put’n in.”

Nevertheless, I kept on learning and as I was gearing up to graduate high school, I could tell you exactly what time of year and exactly where on the branch any pruning would need to take place for any herbaceous or woody ornamental plant in a whole host of USDA growing zones. Though I’m not so sure as to whether or not I knew it then, everything I was—everything I had become, and grown into—was thanks to the farm. Or

rather, thanks to the farm and my grandmother—more often than not they were one and the same.

She was bound to the land in ways that I could never quite figure out. Her knowledge of the land, of how to make things grow, was greater than any book could hold. And to be sure, were she a book, wisdom would have been packed between each line of text. To add to her mythic stature, no one really knew where she was born, and the when of her entrance into this world was more guess than fact. She was one of the few Americans to be born during the Great Depression.<sup>67</sup> Her father was a farm hand, moving from place to place, renting a farm here or there while working on others. He and my great-grandmother didn't raise their family out of undying love, but rather because they needed the added labor to help work whatever farm they found themselves living on at any given moment. And she was one of several siblings who were born on "the back forty"—wherever that may be. What she lacked in her own upbringing, she worked doubly hard to give to her own children. For Grandma, love wasn't something found in marriage, it was something given to the earth and to children to help them grow. Her kids were all oxygen for her. They allowed her to breath and filled her chest with the good clean air and energy needed to work our family's farm. In her care, we all grew—even Delilah, in her own way.

\*\*\*

---

<sup>67</sup> The Great Depression figures heavily as a backdrop to this narrative. In one sense, the Great Depression represents ancient Israel before it forms itself into the political power we see before it's fall into exile. In a greater sense, the agency of the Great Depression caused thousands to lose their livelihoods and leave their homes effectively creating a generation of American exiles within the bounds of the United States—a motif that in many ways Steinbeck plays with in his novels.



For all my grandmother's ability to make things grow, the farm was past its prime. Our herd of sheep was just beginning to dwindle. Crop prices had consistently declined since the big corporate farms started pushing the little guy out. In addition to working the farm, we'd all had to take extra jobs to keep the tax man off the home-place. Grandma started cleaning houses for some wealthy old women in town. Mama refinished concrete statues out at the old statuary, and I did odd jobs when I could.

"Time's is change'n," Grandma said one day as the three of us were picking raspberries out of the bramble patch, " 'honest man cain't keep a farm just outta work'n no more. He got to get himself an education."

I became the hope of the farm. An investment in me, meant dividends in the form of continuing our way of life. And thanks to our hard work, God saw fit to send me to college—the first ever of our family to go. Grandma was just coming into her 80s by then, and she was so proud, "Our big college man!" —it was a phrase I heard so often I could have recited it in my sleep. Mama, excited as she was, feared the expense of it all. She took on another job, and we saw her even less. Grandma and I set to work figuring how to manage the farm without me. It would not be easy, but as we were not strangers to sacrifice, God willing, we'd find a way.

During breaks, while my classmates and friends were off traveling the globe or at some prestigious internship or another, I was busy making my regular pilgrimages just a few hours' train ride south to the farm.<sup>68</sup> My life at college was solitary, but was also teaching me a new, more refined manner of English and had expanded my world

---

<sup>68</sup> use of the word, "pilgrimages," parallels the family farm to Jerusalem

exponentially. I was learning everything from the writings of Aristotle to the Art History of Zambia, and when I was done each day, I would check up on the price that corn and wheat is fetching at the markets in Chicago—or figure up our feed costs for the next year. The people I saw in class everyday went out drinking, I stayed in and worked out crop rotations. The arrangements we made kept the farm up and running well enough, but summer break meant non-stop work. My days were again born well before the sun rose, leaving me to collapse in exhaustion some hours after the sun itself had gone to bed. I was exhausted but I loved it. It was a sweet kind exhaustion, the sweat of which makes you feel cleansed. The work I was doing brought me closer to everything I held dear, and regardless of what my classmates were or weren't doing back on campus, I was exactly where I wanted, and needed, to be.

One Saturday afternoon, I came in to escape the heat of the day. I had spent the morning cutting thistles out of the sheep pastures. Grandma was sitting at the dining room table staring out the big picture window that overlooked the flower beds with the vegetable garden just in the distance. She had taken to the mail that Mama brought in earlier that day, and a hand written letter lay on the table before her.

“Grandma?” I said.

She and her gaze remained silent.

“Grandma?” I curiously raised the volume and tenor of my voice, “I think I got all the thistles out...”

“What? Oh! Yes, those thistles. How'd you make out kid? Ya get 'em all?”

“Yeah, I think I did. Some of 'em were high as your head! Who's the letter from?” I breezed through my need to share my accomplishments out in the pastures for

the sake of my grandmother's blank stare out the window. Something had clearly gone awry.

"Oh that's nothin--nothin worth worry'n 'bout. I was just lost in my thoughts, that's all."

I didn't buy it for a second, and Grandma knew it. She and I were never able to lie to one another, it was a near physical impossibility. But when she didn't want to talk about something, the conversation was definitely not going to happen. And I knew better than to push the subject. "Well alright then, if I don't have to worry about your something, then I'll just be free to worry about something of my own," I replied with a grin. "And speaking of worrying about something of my own, how about let's figure out how to patch the roof of the tractor shed? You want some coffee?"

"Yeah, I'll take some more—just top off my mug, will you?" she said with her usual upbeat cadence. I turned to get the coffee carafe off the warmer of her Bunn Automatic Drip. And as I walked across the room, she returned her gaze to a distance I couldn't see, and barely audibly, she let her thought tumble forth from her lips, "Just as the farmer sows many seeds upon the ground and plants a multitude of seedlings, and yet not all that have been sown will come up in due season, and not all planted will take root."<sup>69</sup>

Tilting my ear and rousing my posture as I heard her speak, I scarcely made out her words and decided to let them fall unnoticed as she once again picked up her usual

---

<sup>69</sup> passage/statement taken directly from the 4<sup>th</sup> Book of Ezra 8:41 (in which human kind is compared with seeds and plants—their success and growth dependent upon God and their relationship with the Divine)

voice and spoke across the room to me, “I reckon we could get ol’ Wallace’s boy to come out at take a look at the shed...”

As I brought her, her coffee I stole a sideways look at the table. And I could have sworn that the return address of torn envelope before my grandmother read Delilah Sparks—or maybe it was Speck? From the quick look I got, the last name wasn’t so clear, but I saw the first name clear enough—Delilah. By Grandma’s reaction I’d wager that it was my infamous, long-lost Aunt Delilah, maybe married now with a different last name and living in Chicago—I could make out the city clear enough too. Seeing just as much as I did, I let things lie. Fixing the roof of the tractor shed was more important than any discord ol’ Del (as some used to call her) could stir up. And there’s nothing like work to move a person past their past.

A few summers later, the sun’s intense anger could only be matched by the thick, cumbersome humidity that seemingly sought to slow life to a crawl. When I went to college, we sold off our herd of sheep, and horseweed had started to take over the old pastures. There was really no practical reason to maintain the pastureland, but that wasn’t the point. It was the principle of the thing. Even though, we, as farmers, prize practicality, that spot had always been pastureland, and pastureland it was going to stay. And likewise the bramble patch had been overrun with itch-weed. Granted it was behind the old tractor shed, and we didn’t even have the old tractor any more—it too was sold and our fields now sharecropped out. But that wasn’t the point either. Every year, that bramble patch had given generations of us blackberry and raspberry jam, and it wasn’t about to be pushed out by a bunch of damned itch-weed. The farm had finally grown old. After five generations its wrinkles and grey hair had finally become apparent. The old

girl just couldn't run like she used to. All summer long, I worked in that bramble patch until the thorns and itch-weed would inflame and chew my skin to the point I could take no more. Then I would head to the sheep pasture, where I would cut down horse-weed—rubbing its juices on my red, raw, burning flesh. Thanks to the wisdom passed down through the generations, I long knew that fresh horse-weed juice will cut the itch brought on by itch-weed. Grandma always used to say, “God don't wound what he won't give salve to heal.” And so I alternated between the pasture and bramble patch until both were restored to an image of their former glory and my skin was nearly destroyed.

Late into that summer, after we had eaten dinner one night, Grandma looked up from her embroidery work and thought we might benefit from a sit on the porch swing to watch the lighting bugs flicker in the burgeoning night air.

She sighed as she slowly lowered herself onto the handcrafted old swing. As if on cue, the swing's ancient, hand turned frame creaked under the non-existent burden of her light, efficient weight. “I'm get'n old,” she said.

The little flickering luminescent bugs rising out of the distant bean field seemed to punctuate Grandma's words, flicking on and off their bodies in tune to the worn melody of her voice. “You look young enough to me,” I replied.

“Uh huh... ah'yep, I'm old. You'ns is gonna have to get on without me one of these days.”

“I know,” I replied, “but not for a long while still.” I secretly knew I was full of it. Two summers before when we were hiking down south she told me to go on ahead, as her “hike'n stride needed a bit of a rest.” I thought it was odd at the time. Her stride

knew no rest before that day. And now, now there was something more. Something had changed with her. The farm had not grown old by itself.

“You going back to school in the fall, then?”

“Yep. I got two more years left,” I replied.

“Good. I’m proud’a you. You’re my boy too, ya know.”

I knew she was proud, and I knew that she staked a claim to me. The hit-‘an-run that claimed my father happened not long after I was born, but still even then, my mama and papa were forced to make room for a third parent. Regardless of age, I was and always would be, her boy too.

“Grandma? I’ll make a deal with you,” I replied, “I’ll finish college, if you’ll live long enough to see me graduate. We’ll both make it there together. Deal? You won’t kick the bucket until I get my diploma.”

“Deal.”

\*\*\*

The weather on the day of my college graduation was cruelly foul. The tall, Victorian brick buildings, stately and historic, appeared foreboding in the half-light provided by the grey clouds. Campus was eerily quiet as a bitter wind cut through the manicured lawns and pathways turning my picturesque college into ghost-town. The college was located in a diminished, sickly town that had become emaciated and weak since the Great Depression. To be sure, my school was the only beacon of prosperity for miles. Yet on that day everything matched—you couldn’t tell where economic blight

stopped and the ivory tower began. A cold, blowing, foreshadowing from Mother Nature had swept into campus the day before. The frogs, the crickets, and the smell of the wind all said hail and rain was coming—but only just hours before the first drops began to fall. We had planned a picnic to celebrate. And while the picnic was thwarted, not everything was dark and dismal.

Mama had gotten off work—which was miracle enough for me. Grandma was there, wearing a bright red, ruffled shirt with a white gabardine suit she had stitched herself back in '78. She wore some jewelry that I had bought her along with a good deal more she had picked up across the course of a hard life well lived. And she had never looked more proud. My graduation with a degree in agriculture was her triumph as well, and she shared it with the generations before us and even the farm itself. None of us really understood what a college degree was or what to do with one, but we understood that people better off than us always had them. That's how we knew how big my graduation day really was. Mama's face and Grandma's face—they were both radiant, and showed it all. But Mother Nature won the day. My Grandma was cold, chilled to the bone. Proud as she was, she was out of her element, and she could not seem to warm up.

“You made it kid!”

“Thank you,” I replied.

“And see? We both kept our end of the deal. You graduated, and I'm still here. Ha! We both made good.”

“Yep, now I suppose you're free,” I replied. I knew something was up. The way she looked at me, I understood that she knew part of her triumph was due to being granted life, and being sustained, and being brought forth to that day by something more

than herself.<sup>70</sup> Maybe it was us, her family. Maybe it was God, the God of that maple leaf all those many years ago who helped us plant and harvest. Whatever it was, it had kept her going. And although the light still burned bright in her eyes, she seemed to know that whatever that sustaining force was, it wasn't going to keep her going so very much longer. But I kept still. I didn't care to think that she would never make it to whatever Promised Land I may or may not come into. My brain just wouldn't have it, it was a day for celebration.

\*\*\*

The celebration, however, didn't last. Back on the farm, we knew very little about the lives of college-educated folk. We just knew that they had more money, nicer jobs, bigger houses, fancier words, and fewer manners than we did. Grandma saw to it that that last epithet would not apply to me. I was to remain the polite and courteous gentleman that the farm had produced. But, the success never came. The nice job was nowhere to be found and with its absence came no money. Much like ourselves, no one else back home knew what to do with a college educated man. I was either over qualified for most everything, or people looked at me as if I thought I was better than they were, "Hi Doris, I'm here to apply for the management job I saw you and your father posted in this week's paper? I hope your two boys are doing well."

"Oh, I'm terrible sorry, Sir, but I am afraid that that po'sition was filled this morn'n." Doris was a senior in high school when I was a sophomore. Her dad owned a

---

<sup>70</sup> a reference to the Shehekhianu blessing



small agricultural shipping company in the town we all went to school in, and she had gotten married to her high school beau just a couple years outta graduation. A few people said it was a shot-gun wedding, cause her twins were already on the way. But, most knew that that was just a dirty rumor started old Mrs. Aram because those boys were so much cuter than her own grandkids.

“Oh, I see. Well, have a good day, Doris.” I responded with the manners I was brought up with. I couldn’t help but use those manners to hide the fact that I felt like an outsider. She, like many others, spoke to me as if I was a stranger.

“Nah, I’m sorry, but we ain’t got nuthin fer a college man. Why you want’n ta stay ‘round here for anyway?” At least Bob appeared to remember me, or rather, he remembered my father from when they went to high school. Bob ran the only auto-dealership in the county. He was a good friend with my father when they were younger—both of them loved cars more than they loved the girls they dated. The only job he had available was a mechanic’s position.

I did my best to keep my failures away from the farm and away from the family. The famine<sup>71</sup> of employment forced me to move further afield, away from the farm, and into a one-room apartment near my college that was smaller than the tiny feed shed in which we kept our garden tools. I slept on a mattress on the floor and used milk crates as living room seating. I bought groceries when I could and tried to make them last til I could buy more. Life at college had opened my eyes and taught me that we were poor,

---

<sup>71</sup> Famine is a common Biblical motif that precedes geographical displacement—a situation that in contemporary scholarship becomes ripe for the formation of exilic personal identities.

but life after college taught me something new—utter poverty. I had nothing, nothing except fancy words, good manners, and fear.

In those difficult years, I quickly learned to do what I knew, and I knew hard work. I had no fences to mend, hay to toss, or barns to repair, but I knew that I could tackle any job I could find. And to be sure, I did just that. I left the idea of rest behind and I toiled seven days a week.<sup>72</sup> Piecing together a patchwork of waiting tables, working in a department store, and doing bookwork at night for a hotel put food on my table and a roof over my head. Twelve and fourteen hour days left me small and lifeless, every night collapsing on the mattress on my floor, that was my bed. My minute, meaningless home strained its seams to contain my depression. I kept my family, still so proud that their college man was educated and out on his own, away from my reality. I could not bear for them to know that outside of an education that wasn't taking me anywhere, I had achieved very little since leaving the family farm. I lived in fear of my family's possible disappointment. It wasn't just my failure that I was living, it was theirs as well. I was the great hope of rising above the farm. No longer would our family have the strained, weathered, and cracked hands of laborers. I was a college man, and so of course I was going to be a success! But, I wasn't.

Each day I scoured the newspaper looking for employment—something, anything to raise me just a bit higher. More often than not, the only opportunity I could unearth was a creative use of the paper itself. I had fashioned an end-table out of the useless newspapers sitting on my apartment floor. I don't know if it was the new moon or if

---

<sup>72</sup> A reference to Shabbat and Biblically commanded rest. In this passage, the protagonist, forced from the farm (representational of Jerusalem) and into a sort of exilic state, has been forced to eschew any sort of sabbath rest (no longer physically distant from home but also spiritually so)

something in the air altered life just a little bit in my favor, but, one day I found myself sitting in a cheap suit (that was now becoming worn in places I could see but hoped interviewers couldn't), in an over-lit, grimy hallway with two other interviewees. We three were trying to get a job as a landscaper. Having a degree in agriculture but no formal education in landscaping, I was really armed only with what life back home on the farm had given me. I knew how to grow flowers and shrubs and trees, but on paper all I was, was livestock and crop management. I figured I didn't have one single chance, but by the grace of God, I started work the next day.

At the time the job was a gift from heaven, the farm had begun to sustain me once again. The landscaping paid far more than my previous three jobs combined, took me to a spacious, new apartment, and allowed me to gain a whole weekend of rest. I frequently went home to visit my mama and Grandma back on the farm. Each time I would go, I brought presents and made sure to work. I fixed what needed fixing, mended broken fences, and painted what had faded. Tried as I did, though, the farm relentlessly continued to age. Its limbs creaked, its muscle tone sagged—eroded with time—and its voice carried a dull raspy tone.

One night, I remember well. I was out for a walk and the sweet fragrance of linden trees hung lethargically in the air. It was a smell of home. I closed my eyes and found myself walking down our mile-long lane. The paved sidewalk beneath my feet gave way to the chip-rock and gravel of the dusty way home. But instead of navigating the Santa Maria, I just stood silently fixed in place watching the lightening bugs creep up from the bean fields—slowly growing in their luminescence before fading off back into the night. I don't recall how long I was there on our lane, but as my mind truly began to

float a few feet above me, intoxicated with a mix of linden and memories, my phone rang; it was my mother—in time for her usual weekly call. It was yet another mimeographed copy of every ring that my phone ever emitted. And to be sure, that ring hit my eardrum, just as every other ring before it ever did. But this ring also resonated somewhere deeper. This ring began to prickle that part of the mind where an uncomfortable equation of trepidation, fear, and curiosity waits for a solution. It was that same recess that noted my Grandmother's age while hiking years ago. The moment felt suddenly disjointed—discordant. The lightening bugs of my mind fell to the ground and in place of comfort, the sweet breeze felt suspect. There was more in the air than the linden trees wanted to admit.

“Mamma?”

“Grandma is in the hospital,” her voice was stern, “she was feeling too dizzy to make it across the family room and so she called me and we came here to the hospital, she's been admitted.”

“Did she ask for you to take her to the hospital?” I inquired, my voice pale with fear yet polite. Grandma always raised me to be polite, “the nastier something is, the politer you behave. Cause ain't nuthin was ever solved by lose'n yer mind,” she'd always say. To hear me, it would have sounded as if the question was perfunctory—as if I was simply asking for clarification. As if the content of my mother's call was really rather run of the mill. The truth of the matter, however, was that I was mentally fumbling about trying to put my finger on the pulse of what was actually at stake.

Years ago, back when I was in high school, I got a similar call. Of course, back then mobile phones were a thing dreams were made of, anchored to cars and reserved

only for the rich or people on TV. The call came via a note delivered to my civics classroom from the high school's secretary. I left class and learned that my grandmother, in an attempt to end a longstanding show down with the groundhog that had been burrowing under our feed shed, had accidentally shot herself in the foot. Upon seeing said targeted critter in the lawn, she grabbed the family's generations old shotgun, loaded it as she headed down the stairs, and seeing how the gun was too old and hand made to have a safety, it went off as she began to head out the door—the blast tearing through my grandmother's foot on its way to create a melon sized crater in the concrete floor of the farmhouse. Neither in shock, nor in the pain that such a wound deserved, my grandma quickly reloaded the family gun, swung open our worn and faded, wooden screen door and shot the groundhog. Afterwards, realizing that my mother would force her to go to the hospital to treat the massive, gaping wound on her foot, my grandma cleaned herself up, 'put her face on,' and called my mother. Because as she figured it, "If'n ya gotta go see the doc, ya might as well do it now as later." Fifteen minutes later, when the ambulance my mother called arrived, the EMT found Grandma sitting on the porch swing, working a word search, sipping a cup of black coffee, and wearing a suit with her wounded leg propped up. Tough as nails as she was, my grandmother never went into town without looking her Sunday best. Of course she was fine in the end, the ordeal seemed more of an annoyance to her—getting in the way of canning the summer's string beans.

She was in her late seventies.

"She actually asked for help?" I reiterated—having apparently not accepted my mother's initial answer in the affirmative. Knowing that the unstoppable woman I knew,

the sturdy pioneer woman who could not only care tenderly for the family, but also vanquish anything with one shot; knowing that she not only needed, but had asked for help—from a doctor no less—made my stomach drop. The languid, thick air that minutes before had lulled me into feeling drunk with reminiscence now stopped me dead in my tracks, even though my pace had quickened. Indeed, I had arrived at my doorstep before I realized that my feet had moved at all.

That night, I packed my bags and went home. I knew then that the moment she and the farm had tried to slowly prepare me for was at hand. She was dying. As I passed through the mid-night hours on my drive home, the entire realization burst into my mind again and again like waves crashing into a rocky shore. It was finally happening, I thought. I knew this was coming. Nothing lasts forever. Nothing, and no one. Ebbing and flowing, both horror and ease filled my mind and soul. The Bible says that the Almighty spoke things into being. I never went to Sunday school. My Grandma taught me what I know of the Good Book. And for all my schooling, I figure the Bible's right. Grandma actually called for help, and in her calling, she spoke a whole new reality into being.<sup>73</sup> It had been clear for some time that she was finally getting older, more frail. Indeed as she aged, so too did the farm. But the admission of her state put things in our faces. No longer amorphously gestating, no longer silently apparent as it grew in a womb, a new chapter of life as we knew it was born. The beginning of her death had come to life for us, and it was all frightfully real.

\*\*\*

---

<sup>73</sup> Genesis 1

My mother had brought Grandma to the hospital a few hours before I arrived and had gone to get some coffee. In high school, Mama was a beauty queen, literally. Next to Mama, Delilah looked plain and simple. Even though she came from a little farm, and even though she was a hard worker, she was the popular girl, the beautiful girl—the charismatic one who everyone knew and who knew everybody and who won the county wide beauty contest at the summer fair. All the boys wanted to date her, and all the girls wanted to be her. After high school, she married my dad who was also one of the beautiful people—an All-American boy fluent in nearly every sport and crazy about cars. Back home, she had the perfect life and was the envy of everyone. A few short years after she was married, she became pregnant—further proof of her small town, rural notoriety and success. But shortly after my birth, she became a widow. Dad was thrown out into that field. The Lusk boy went to juvy, and before she could even really finish completely moving out of the farm house, she was moving back in it—this time as an unemployed, depressed, despondent, single mother. The whole affair knocked my mother off her pedestal.

Dethroned, in town, she became the target of pity. She had fallen from grace. When she came into town to help Grandma do business, people stole looks and spoke in hushed voices, "Isn't that Betty Sue? She has really let herself go. She used to be so pretty, everybody thought so, the poor thing..." "Well you know her husband died and just left her all alone with that little boy. She's lucky she's doing as good as she is..." "Well, if you ask me, it serves her right. Her and her perfect little life, always so pretty, look where it got her!..." Although bereft of her former glory as she was, the farm still

had need of her. And when she came back, she went to work. She plugged a hole, a leak that needed patching in the life of the home-place.

Grandma had met Granddad at the old well<sup>74</sup> on the corner of the Abrahams's wheat field where everyone on the road would stop to get a drink back during the Depression. And while my Grandfather (grumpily) never got to wear the pants in the family, he fussed and worked and fussed some more for as long as he was living. And toward the end he could always be found sitting beneath an old oak tree snapping beans, shucking corn, or picking walnuts out of their hulls. He was buried at the little Bethel<sup>75</sup> Ridge cemetery with the rest of the family that had come before him, but she was never able to remember that day. To be sure, my own memory only holds a single image of Grandma's thumb stroking my mother's knuckles over, and over, and over again as the two of them sat next to one another, holding hands at the graveside funeral. Looking back, I wondered if my long lost rebellious aunt even knew he passed—who could know what she was up to? But yet I wondered, if in that moment, Grandma noticed that her other daughter was gone too? No more than a week after, Grandma went out to the east side of the farm to mend some barbed wire fence.

Through the years, the farm work never really changed much. And once my father died it was my mother whom Grandma would find sitting under an oak tree even after I had gotten older, snapping some beans and shucking corn for supper.

"Betty Sue? You got supper a start'n?"

---

<sup>74</sup> meetings at wells are typological scenes in the Biblical text, generally preceding a marriage or union.

<sup>75</sup> Genesis 28, 35



"I'm getting up some corn and string beans, meat's 'bout thawed. We'll eat here in about 20 minutes or so."

"Fine by me." And then she spoke softly with a voice low enough that I could barely make out her words, "Where is he? He finish up at the barn yet?"

"Oh no you don't!" Mama conspicuously replied, "I'm not get'n in on you two's hijinks. You're not rope'n me into that!"

"Shhhhhh! Betty Sue! He might hear you!"

Just then, bursting out of feed shed, I startled my grandmother. Her hands flew up in the air and she nearly jumped out of her skin. While talking with Mama, she had ever so quietly and with the stealth of a hunter, been searching for me in the yard. I rolled on the lawn in laughter. "Oh dang you! You little cuss! I thought sure I'd had ya this time!" each word successively laced with more of her own smiles and snickers.

Everyday, as work wound down, she and I would race to finish the task at hand. Each day the ritual was the same, run up to the house, hide, and try like hell to scare the daylights out of the other. And each day, either my grandmother or myself would try to enlist my mother in our little campaigns of shock and fright. An unwavering and constant turncoat, Mama ardently worked to ply both sides only to make things harder for each of us and more interesting for her.

The three of us were firmly reunited in my Grandma's hospital room. The three of us were there, alone with one another—no one was hidden, we were all on the same side. United, but unprepared for what was sure to follow.

\*\*\*

A doctor eventually came into my grandmother's room and sat on the edge of the bed. As kind as she could and with as much warmth as she could muster, she explained that several occurrences of metastasized non-small-cell carcinoma were found on Grandma's lungs, and had led to three grade II, malignant, inter-cranial neoplasms located in the mesencephalon.

"I am so incredibly sorry to share this with you," the kind doctor said as she wiped a small tear from her eye, "Even though this is my job, it is always painful to say." The three of us sat staring at her, unblinking. And, as if to translate so our expressions could be ameliorated, she added, "We cannot operate. You may have up to a year, but you will lose more and more ability along the way. We would like to run a few more tests and then review your chart. A treatment counselor will stop by tomorrow to discuss your options."

Our expressions didn't change, though the reasons behind them did. "Thank you," Mama added.

We didn't really need the translation. There was really only one thing that all that jargon could mean. And there was little else to be said, or rather there was little else that any of us cared to listen to. My mother went home to the farm—her tears making the 40 minute drive from the hospital seem as 40 days. I stayed at the hospital. I had already stopped by the home-place and got some of my grandmother's things. So when Mama left, I went to my car and came back with my grandmother's suitcase—a suitcase that bore the battle scars of so many family vacations camping in southern Missouri and hiking out west. Coming down the hall, I noticed a middle aged woman, perhaps some

years older than Mama, sitting in the waiting area at the end of the hall. We made eye contact. To be honest, I may have even been staring. Something about her felt familiar, although in times like those, familiarity can flower when circumstance and situation collide. And especially on an oncology floor of a hospital, nearly everyone's fears and circumstances collide. I politely smiled the brief smile of a Midwesterner in passing, in reply, the woman's eyes instantly darted away—she almost turned a bit red. For a second I thought that I may have made her angry, but realizing that cancer wards are hard places to be, I went about letting the moment slip by as quickly as it had come, and entered my grandmother's room.

Grandma saw me and smiled. “I knew I could count on you, kid,” she said, “what all did ya bring?”

“I got your spice drops, puzzle books, your red pajamas, make-up kit, hair brush, and the stuff for your dentures. Now let's get you out of that god-awful hospital gown and get you looking normal again.”

“You got it kid! Damned hospital supposed to make you feel better, but they make you look like death warmed over. T'hell with that crap.”

“Amen,” I replied.

As Grandma got herself in order, I got a blanket from the nurses' station just outside my grandmother's room. I informed my grandmother and the hospital that I would be spending the night with her in her room. No one at the nurses' station dared to offer a rebuke. As we were lying there, she in her hospital bed, and I in the “bed” I had rigged up out of two chairs, I asked Grandma softly, “How long have you known about this?”

“A while. You?”

“Not quite as long, I think. I wish she hadn't a'said quite all that. I was hope'n that you or me could tell Mama.” I was surprisingly holding my calm.

My mother, for all the care and attention that she had shown to the farm and to Grandma, never quite understood the rhythm or the soul of things. My father's death broke my mother, and life afterwards for her never really got better, but on the farm she was safe. She well understood her life in high school. Her identity was firm and with it she walked amongst the clouds. But after my father was killed, things were different. She was disconnected—untethered from the 'her' she used to know and understand. The farm gave her a haven. But even within that haven, every so often with all the day's work done, Mama would step out with one of her romance novels to try and escape even further. She would walk on down the lane a ways, sit out on the bank of a field, and read from cover to cover in one sitting—afraid to stop reading and let the real world invade her mind once more. As dedicated as she was to both farm and family, she couldn't handle death and even the living, breathing home-place couldn't protect her from her own hurt. She could never let herself accept the cycle of things, and because of it, her roots never really took hold in the good earth that had sustained our family for generations.

“Yeah, I thought that too as that damned doctor was talk'n. You're my boy too ya know, you'll help her.”

“Yep, I know, and I'll never forget, Grandma, I won't.” I paused, knowing that I would indeed help Mama the best way I knew how, but still terrified that I would need to as there was no one who would in turn hold me as well, “Whose gonna herd the flock now?”

“Well, Christ-warmed-over, I ain’t gone yet! ’Sides, we got rid of the sheep years ago.”

“We got rid of the sheep, but there’s still herd’n to be done. Oh, you know what I mean,” I replied. I was selfishly seeking answers. I wanted reassurance that there was an heir. A line of succession at the home-place that I could put my stock in—I was searching, trying to grasp at someone to lead me—someone to lead the family, cultivate the farm. I feared evaporation, that we would be come yet another family people would forget about as they drove by what used to be the family farm.

“Oh, that. Well, I just reckoned you’d do that. You’re old enough. I dun taught you. You’ll do a fine job. Hell, ya half been do’n it already.”

“Me?” I was taken aback. Retrospectively, I would be lying if I said I had never dreamed of leading the family and running the farm, but the reality of such a dream materializing before me was overwhelming. And besides, in the reality of my dreams, I was already married with a wife and kids. The family had already become so small, to lose her now would be irreconcilable. “Maybe we best just go to sleep.” I replied.

“Cain’t ain’t never done nuthin,” she said, settled into an uncomfortable bed, and fell asleep with surprising speed.

Three days later, she was released from the hospital. My grandmother, refusing surgery, was given her options and then sent on her way. “They ain’t cut’n into me. Those damned fools wouldn’t know how to carve up a turkey on Thanksgiv’n day, and they sure as ‘ell ain’t gonna carve me up neither.” She eventually decided that she would try some of the radiation therapy, mostly, I think, to appease Mama—but also, in part, to make the appearance that she was fighting her cancer tooth and nail. In reality, she knew

that her time was up and that God was calling her back. And in her words, “God ain’t one you say no to... unless o’course he’s wrong.” This time, God was not wrong.

\*\*\*

As the corn began to ripen in the fields, I returned full time to the family farm to help my mother care for Grandma. I quit my job and decided to cast my lot with the farm and all it held.

“Did you file for government protection?” I asked Mama as she came into my old room while I unpacked. Mama had been lucky enough to get a state job doing clerical work to supplement the farm's own income, and the state never fires anyone for anything.

“Yes, thanks God, the lady took the forms and its all settled. You want some supper? I thought we’d have some chicken fried steak with mashed potatoes an’ gravy an’ maybe some string beans if there’s any ripe an’ you wanna go pick em. There’s still light enough out yet.”

“Oh, Mama, no use a’fixin anything big for me. I got a lot of unpacking to do anyway.”

“Please?” my mother plaintively asked. Her voice showed weeks of prior defeat, “Grandma is so happy that you are back for good, I think she might eat more with you around. Please let it be like old times.”

I looked at her in silence. Tears welling up inside me blocked any word from escaping my throat. Part of my mind rejoiced at the idea of the family being together again, back at the farm. But, of course, as soon as that joyful thought began to creep into

my being, the reality of the circumstances came back with a vengeance. And the whole of my thinking was crowned by my Mama's sorrowful plea.

That night we feasted as if sickness had never entered our world. The hordes of medicines were taken away, and in their place Mama put the old family record player. We dined on the heartiest meat and potato dinner that any farm hand had ever dreamed of and did it all to the dulcet melodies of Grandma's favorite Elvis Presley album.

"It sho is good to have you back," Grandma said, "maybe tomorra you 'an me will go out 'an look at them roses your Mama say's is bloom'n."

"Yes, I think you 'an me will do just that," I replied.

After supper, Mama and I cleaned up; Grandma played Solitaire. Later, I lay down to a sleep with out rest and awoke the next morning with tears already running down my cheeks.

Mid-winter that year was when we started seedlings in the old baking-pan-turn-make-shift hothouse for the spring garden, Grandma had gotten a little worse—but she was still up and about. Her hair had fallen out in clumps just before it began to turn cold. As she sat on the porch swing, wrapped up in a blanket, she likened the little haphazard bales of hair to tumble weeds as we raked them up with the oak, maple, and even the ol' hick'r nut leaves. Just the same, the winter went along as one might expect. Despite my restlessness, the three of us were indeed together. Grandma, no longer able to hide and frighten me, or be frightened herself, got to work telling me stories of her childhood. And although I had heard most of them before, I took great care to listen and hang on each and every word. All the while, she darned socks and did embroidery work, and Mama read her book. It wasn't until the clutches of winter began to recede and the first

little crocus blossoms tried to poke their heads through the snow, that things took a turn for the worse.

"Betty Sue? Could you get me some coffee?"

"Why yes, ma'am I do believe I can do that," my mother jovially replied.

Raising my head from the book I was reading as the mug of coffee found its home in front of my grandmother, I smiled, and turned the page.

"Oh! Why thank you! You read my mind! How did you know I needed a refill?" my grandmother declared with marked surprise.

I raised my head a second time, first looking at Grandma and then at Mama—who was already looking at me. In that so very brief moment, my mother and I had an entire conversation without moving our lips. As Grandma's eyes began to show the beginnings of bewilderment, my mother replied, "I've become a mind reader! Didn't you know? Nah, actually, Mama, I just thought it'd been a while since you had some, so you might like a cup."

"Well, you're a sweetheart! But don't you go read'n my mind all the time!"

"Oh I won't! Lord only knows what you got up there!"

And upon that remark, the three of us laughed. Grandma's giggle was genuine, mine was nervously faked, and my mother's was painfully forced. Mama left the room. And shortly there after, posing the idea that we might need some more blackberry jam from the fruit cellar, I also took my leave from Grandma's presence and found my mother sitting next to the front door, sobbing quietly. She had hoped to make it out to the porch so as to make sure that Grandma could not hear her weep, but her tears came faster than



her feet could carry her. And in my first act of shepherding, I placed my arm around my Mama, "There ain't no hide'n from it now."

Sniffing her tears and the instant runny nose they brought out, she replied, "I know. I just wanted a little more time. Just a little more."

"I know," I said staring off into space. "I know."

That spring, brought some much needed brightness to the farm. I once again found myself working until sundown, and Mama gave most of her effort to tending Grandma. We both became accustomed to her sudden and repetitive forgetfulness. Both Mama and I covered her tracks and behaved as if nothing at all was the matter. If she would not be the Grandma that we knew, then at least she would be allowed to feel as if she was. Flowers began to bloom, trees began to unfurl their green leafy feathers, the air once again smelled sweetly filled with vitality, and I once again resumed picking greens from the garden to do my part in the evening meal. And after a repast well eaten, the three of us would settle in, my mother escaping with another book, and this time my grandmother and I with some sewing. I would thread the needles and watch carefully as she made each stitch. Years ago, she had taught me well how to sew, "I don't rightly care if you're a woman or a man, you ought know how to sew. It's a practical matter. Who would stitch on your button if it fell off and I wasn't 'round?" Although now, I watched as her stitches became cumbersome, irregular—unsteady. I said nothing and instead generally smiled, but inside I allowed my mind to cry because every horribly made stitch went completely unnoticed by its seamstress. Never in my life had I ever seen anything but precise, machine like quality come from the combination of my grandmother and a

needle and thread. Nevertheless, for the first time in some years, my grandmother, my mother and myself were completely bound to both each other and the family farm.

As my grandmother failed, so did the land she cultivated. As summer's swelter began to grow, I could not keep up with all that had to be done. Barns, sheds, and fences, some nearly a hundred years old had begun to wither and finally grow old. Opting to use what money we had to hire a nurse to help take care of Grandma, who now was relegated to a wheel chair, I had to triage my efforts in the fields and pastures. Despite my long hours and the seemingly endless toil of my body and my soul, the farm had become a mere husk of its former self. As had Grandma.

One night, when I finally came in from working, Mama had gotten out Grandma's old jewelry chest. It was big, nearly two feet across and replete with tiny drawers and little latches. It was a time capsule of her old jewelry (much of which she had crafted herself) made of white, lacquered pasteboard—itself an artifact of the Depression.

"What'cha do'n Grandma?"

"Oh, I'm sort'n out this old chest. Been long overdue, I reckon."

"Want some help?"

"Sure kid, come on over."

Slowly, one by one, we began to carefully open each drawer, take out its contents, and examine it.

"This one, Nancy Pottington got fer me back when she went to Mexico on a vacation. It was made by some kinda Indian, or something, I think. And this one, I made outta beads. Lord that was years ago..." Her voice trailed off, and a brief pause punctuated the moment before her eyes rested again upon the Mexican beads. Her hand

faltering by yet another short dizzy spell, she picked them up again for the first time, and declared, "And these? Now, let me see. Oh yes. Nancy Pottington bought these off an Indian down in Mexico."

Two hours later, we had progressed through a total of three of the multitude of small drawers that the chest had to offer—each time a little bit shakier, each time repeating the story of the Mrs. Pottington's purchase. Grandma, exhausted and a little dizzy, yet again needed to go to bed.

The end of July brought in nearly a bushel of tomatoes. Blackberries were ready to become jam, and string-beans were waiting in line to be canned. Regardless of the state of things, the land continued to bless us. But, even with the help of the part time nurse, the summer garden harvest was too much work for Mama and me. Since the late spring, my Great-Aunt Jane had begun to visit Grandma with increasing regularity—frightened that her once vibrant sister was quickly slipping away. Thankfully, she agreed to come up and help us out. And after putting her sister down for a nap, Aunt Jane came back to a table piled high with berries.

"How is she doing?" Mama asked.

"Exhausted, just exhausted," Jane replied, "conked out the second her head hit the pillow. She got worse since I seen you'ns last. Only been a couple weeks, ain't it?"

The afternoon breeze drifted through the little kitchen window, just enough to gently rustle the now faded gingham curtains. "Yes," I replied with a sort of superficial politeness, "I suppose she has. Sometimes its hard to keep on track, I think." I knew very well the trajectory of Grandma's descent.

"You remember when you'ns used to go on vacation down in Missouri? Them few times I went with ya? Damn that sure was fun. You were slid'n down them rocks into that little river. The water is so clear down there. You remember that?"

"Oh yeah!" Mama erupted, "Johnson's Shut-In, we used to have a whole lot of fun down there. Just about every year we'd go. 'Course I saw on the news a few weeks back that that last bit of flooding came through and changed that little river up so that now it's not like it used to be. I guess people can't go swimming like they did before."

Upon that thought, Aunt Jane's tone changed and slowed, "No. Ain't nothin ever stay's the same." And staring off, through that little kitchen window, she, for a moment, lost herself in her thoughts. In the far distance, she saw the dust of a car starting down the long lane to the home-place. The car stopped, perhaps lost, and although Jane's eyes rested upon it far off in the horizon her mind was someplace else. As the car changed its mind and backed away, Jane began to speak softly, "She's lucky to have you two. You'ns all three lucky to have each other. You know that?" She turned back to the table, bringing her thoughts back into the room and increasing the confidence in her intonation. "The three of you always worked like Turks and had so much fun 'a do'n it. No matter what, you'ns is always been there for anything—just anything—that you needed."

Both Mama and I stopped our work to listen to the words of my aunt, whom rarely spoke with either passion or conviction, and never about anything personal.

First looking into my eyes and then into my mother's, "You's keep'n up the home-place—grow'n up to be a fine man! I remember when you was knee-high to a grasshopper, and out there feed'n them sheep you'ns had. Sis was always so proud of you. Is proud of you. I know she's come'n to the end, but there still ain't no other face

she'd rather see. Especially you wear'n that shirt she stitched fer you. And you, you Betty Sue, ain't nuth'n short of a saint fer care'n for your mama like you are. You always was so pretty, and you still is. I know you don't think so, but you is, and your mama thinks so too—always has. I don't know how y'all manage it. My Stanley made good money, we did everything for our kids, gave 'em all we could. They grew up, and now they jus keep ask'n fer more. You'ns ain't never had nuth'n, never did ask fer nuth'n, and you just keep give'n. Damned lucky, yes God. Damned lucky."

I don't know about having and giving, but it was true that the three of us were intimately connected, and always had been. We were bound to each other and to the land that had given us life, kept us, and allowed us to reach that day. It was also true that Great-Aunt Jane's family didn't act like ours. They weren't bound to any land, nor each other like us. Our farm, our home-place was who we were, and who we are still. Without it, we'd have been untethered, homeless, drifting. But, just the same, Jane's speech took Mama and me aback. Hearing the words put out into creation as Aunt Jane did, embarrassed us. At once, they made us feel both immodest and deeply loved.

"Well, Aunt Jane, I guess we just do the best we can with what God gives us," my mother said quietly. Looking back, it was a bit of a throw-away statement to make, although to be sure, I couldn't have come up with anything better. And I'm not sure I could now either. But having said her peace, Great-Aunt Jane returned to the blackberries, putting another few handfuls in the sink to wash and pick out the bad of the lot. Mama went back to measuring sugar, and I once again began to clean and sterilize mason jars.

Occasionally, Grandma would have good days. In those golden afternoons where her ever growing pain would subside enough to bring back memory of her appetite, I would take out a tape-recorder and interview her over some tea and toast—asking questions for posterity, and mining wisdom to help carry me through the uncharted waters of the future. On particularly good days, I would carry her out to the porch swing and we would watch the farm live and breathe. Despite the verdant lushness of the season, the farm had become grayer; its breaths had become labored. An army of weeds had laid waste to several old sheep pastures and were currently working to move their front lines ever closer to the farm house. I felt embarrassed. No matter how hard I labored and no matter how long I worked each day, the farm demanded more than I could give. Everything my grandmother could lay eyes on, was kept immaculate and pristine. I re-painted only the parts of the sheds and out-buildings that she could see. Likewise, the rose garden, butterfly patch, and flowerbeds were kept healthy and vibrant while the far off wells and the old barn slowly fell to ruin. Grandma, with the aid of my great-grandfather, had divined all those wells—every one of them with perfect and perpetually sweet water, they had brought life to the farm for generations. And the barn, it was raised by half the township one spring Sunday three generations ago. When I was little, I would leap out of the hay loft and onto huge piles of recently reaped hay waiting to be baled. But now, as my grandmother grew weaker, she was a mere effigy of who she once was, and the farm was likewise.

"You got the place look'n good kid," she said as we sat on the aged and now creaking swing. I felt a wave of relief wash over me, knowing that she was happy with what she saw. To be sure, the farm was far from good working order, but as only one

man caring for the entirety of a farm I had surprised myself with what I had done, and what I was able to do. The garden was easy enough to tend while it was growing, but somewhere along the way, Grandma had taught me how to strategically plan the whole of the farm, and doing so had apparently become second nature to me without my ever knowing it. I was stringing barbed wire, repairing sheds, planning crop rotations, paying the taxes, and negotiating crop prices at the county grain elevator. I had begun to step outside to breathe deep and smell the air, and in doing so, I was giving the week's weather forecast and setting the week's work accordingly. When Grandma complained of one ailment or another, it was I who without thinking, would go out into the woods to pick or dig up what was needed as a cure. I looked up to the heavens, gazing at the stars and the moon to figure planting times. And it was I who had begun divining the new sweet spots of earth that would yield the most water for a new vegetable patch or tree planting. I knew not when or how exactly, but she had taught me all those things. I could take credit for none of it. And though the farm's prime was some years past, my connection to it was robust, steadfast, and had become deeply rooted. Like a tree well grown, I would not easily be blown over by the wind or even the harshest of storms.

But still, I was not able to stave off the inevitable. Weeds grew ever higher; the roof collapsed on the old tractor shed; even the walnut grove had conceded to a number of young mulberry trees; and the old, great oak had begun to rot from the inside out.

\*\*\*

One night, with corn high enough to lap at our chins and the sweet scent of linden trees filtering the breeze, Mama and I awoke suddenly. Each of us, I in my makeshift bedroom in the basement and she in her bedroom next to Grandma's, sat straight up with a start. There was a silence hanging in the thin night air. It was a silence so loud, nothing could have slept through it. No crickets, no owls, not even a tree frog uttered a sound. I got out of bed, barefoot and wide awake, and I made my way upstairs. First through the family room, then the kitchen where my great-great-grandmother's pie-safe stood. A legendary pie-safe that came out to the farm on a covered wagon, that had cooled hundreds if not thousands of pies in its lifetime, but now held the family's china. Upon its top laid the old shotgun. The hall leading past the kitchen and into the bedrooms had somehow become miles long, taking me seconds that felt like days to traverse—and still a deafening, thin, silence. Mama was already at my grandmother's bedside. The circadian rhythm of the farm was no longer ebbing and flowing—as if the farm itself had stopped breathing. And with it, we could no longer hear the breaths of my grandmother. Her frail husk lay in the bed, and it was clear she was no longer there. My mother and I exchanged looks as empty as the corpse that lay before us.

I stepped outside, as my mother went to the phone. I looked out into the darkness of the farm. My mind was blank—hollow, seeking desperately to be filled. As if an answer to my prayer of need, the frogs began once again to croak and the crickets chirped. In the far off distance I thought I heard a coyote. Little more than ill-willed scavengers these days, they had been getting more and more gutsy in recent months, coming ever closer to the house. I went back inside and retrieved Ol' Berthy from her perch atop the old pie-safe. It was only a few hours until dawn, and I knew that I would



have been rising soon anyway to start my day. So, with gun in hand just to be safe, I headed out into the woods to start work on a barbwire fence that needed mending. I came back in just a little past sun-up and Mama had breakfast ready. Though both of us sat down to the table, neither of us ate. The funeral director would be coming around 8 and I would need to get cleaned up. There was still some field work to be done.

Mostly just to irritate my mother, Grandma always spoke tongue in cheek about the fact that she wanted her body to be wrapped in a burlap sack and then “just tossed off in a ditch like some ol’ lame horse.” She was not, however, joking in her sentiment that her funeral be something simple, small, without a lot of fuss. The funeral home offered to dress her up and spackle her face until she looked, as the funeral director said, “Peaceful and in comfort.” And at the sound of that, Mama and I looked at one another and quickly requested a closed casket.

We received guests, far off family, and visitors for days after Grandma was buried with the rest of the generations out at Bethel Ridge. Each came to pay their respects—some heartfelt, some perfunctory. The funeral itself, so I’m told, was nice, although to be honest, I remember very little of it. Throughout the entire process, both the funeral and its desolate days that lingered after it, Mama and I sat quietly. What had to be done was done. Polite smiles were offered, small talk was exchanged, fences were mended, fields were tended, and the garden’s harvest was picked. But in those moments to ourselves, that used to be filled with reading, or sewing, playing card games, or watching The Wheel of Fortune, we were silent. At the table, looking east out toward the garden, I was silent—my thought-free gaze noticing every vein in the thin, heart-shaped leaves of the redbud tree that grew near the window. Mama washed the dishes, looking out to the

fields and the lane beyond. Eventually, the cars stopped coming, their tires no longer kicking up dust to announce their arrival.

The farm kept us going. Regardless of what happened in our lives, the needs of the land were constant. In its way, that is how the farm sustained the generations of my family—taught us a sort of calloused continuity, and in so doing taught us yet a little more about the Almighty. But simple sustenance doesn't reform a broken family. Grandma always taught me that you only need three legs for a table to stand up and be sturdy. Our table was left with only two legs, and it frequently fell over. My father's death knocked my mother off of her pedestal, and my grandmother's death left her hollowed out. There was always more work to do out in the farm, but housework only offered Mama a finite amount of distractions. After the house-chores were finished, so was she. She was as a ship without its rudder, floating listlessly through dark seas with no landfall in sight.

"Say, why don't me and you go into town and do the shopping early? We can even grab a bite to eat out at the bowling alley, the paper said they re-did the restaurant." I was grasping at straws. I was the shepherd now, and while Grandma taught me how to cultivate the farm and all the living on it, dealing with my own grief while dealing with my mother's despair was a subject we had failed to cover.

In town, we finished our errands in no time at all, and the greasy, small town deliciousness of the bowling alley's restaurant seemed to be just the outing we needed. While we were at it, we decided to try our hands at bowling, and our utter failure at rolling the heavy black ball toward the far-off pins had us rolling in laughter. For the first time since the funeral we both seemed to be back to our old selves. Perhaps when we

went back to the farm, back to the home-place, the air might smell a little lighter, and help us sleep cleanly and restfully for the first time in a long while. It was a hope.

\*\*\*

Instead of answered hope, however, there was a soured smell in the air—like rancid milk separated from cream that'd set out too long. We came home to an envelope nailed to the door. It was an eviction notice.

The cold document outlined that we were to vacate the premises within 24 hours, taking only our personal effects, as the farm and the entirety of my Grandmother's possessions belonged to the eldest child and thus legal heir of my grandparents marriage—my aunt, Delilah.

Such a thought had never entered our heads—nor the heads of anyone else out in our township. Most of the neighbors for miles around even thought that Delilah and "that young buck she ran off with" had long ago died, having gotten into some trouble, or at the very least just left never to return. Beyond my silent shock, my mind was a blur of thoughts and possible scenarios that this edict of exile could entail. Maybe it was a sick, twisted prank? Perhaps someone is pretending to be Delilah and is trying to trick us out of our land? My mother was dumbfounded. Walking over to the kitchen sink, she stared out the port-hole like window out onto the fields that framed our mile-long lane.

That night, I laid awake, utterly unable to sleep. At first light, I got out of bed, cleaned up, and put on my good clothes—clothes I had not worn since we buried my grandmother. I still had some hours before the county clerk's office would open. I drove

into town anyway and waited in the small gravel parking lot outside the courthouse until it roused itself to life. Before I left, I gave Mama—who had begun to clean and scrub the house as if nothing had ever appeared on the door: "You lock the door, and don't you answer it for no-thing and for no-body. I got my keys. I'll get in on my own. I'm gonna get to the bottom of this."

\*\*\*

"Awe gol'dammit! Dammit all straight ta hell!" Tom Beasley shouted with embarrassed and remorseful anger. "I dun told her to let me have a talk with y'all first!! I'm awful sorry. Just awful sorry that it dun come out like this. But one week ago yesterde' morn'n this woman struts on in here with this folder of papers say'n that she's your Grandmama's oldest, Delilah. I thought she looked familiar, although its been so damned long... Well, but, there wasn't no will—nuthin on record anyway! How come yer Grandmamma never wrote out no will?!?"

Tom had gone to high school with my Mama, and I think they might have even dated once. I had known him since I, myself was in high school—ever since I started going with Grandma to pay the taxes and take care of farm business. Of course once every few years, his face would also appear on flyers advertising for his re-election as county clerk. I had even gone to school with his daughter. Back home, everyone knew everyone.

"What the sam-hell are you talk'n 'bout Tom? No will? Of course there was no will. Why would there need to be a will? Ain't none of us ones to do this! Or at least

that's what Grandma musta thought! Why the hell didn't you call us? Why the hell didn't you say something before you or the sheriff or whoever nailed this damned thing on our door?!?!" My confusion and fear was quickly turning into a public rage that threatened to scare Tom's secretary, igniting a bigger scandal than had already been set alight.

"Now calm down. Ain't me, nor Sheriff Barnstable, nor nobody else in town what nailed that to y'all's door. It was all her. She snatched them papers outta the sheriff's hand quicker'n you could spit." Getting me a cup of coffee and motioning for me to have a seat in his office, he closed the door behind me, and continued in a far calmer tone, "It's like I said. This woman come in here saying she was your Aunt Delilah and said she had a whole bunch of papers what proved it. Of course I knew Ol' Del took off decades ago, and I wasn't about to let somebody pull one over on me. And I sure as shit-in-a-sty wasn't gonna let 'em do it to you and your mama, not after y'all's poor loss. And, I'm awful sorry for your grand-mama's pass'n. I am. She was a good woman." He finished with resolution.

"Thank you, Tom, I 'preciate it." Regaining my composure, I labored to remember my manners.

"Any way, I asked her what exactly it was that she was want'n. And when she told me that y'all's farm rightfully belonged to her and that she wanted you all out and her in as soon as possible, I told her that I'd have to see these so called papers, of hers and that I'd have to do some checking before I'd even consider allowing this whole thing to be processed. So she left me her big folder 'a stuff, and on top of it was a copy of your grandmama's obituary. Then she strutted outta here like she was the Queen a' England,

and proceeded to call twice a day everyday to see where we was at. We couldn't very well tell y'all 'bout til we knew fer sure, ya see?"

Tom paused and shook his head, as if he was still thinking of a way around the unfortunate laws that were working against us. "Anyway, I examined her stuff up one side and down the other, and it was solid. I made phone calls, asked for copies from outta Chicago—did everything we possibly could. She checked out. That ol' sow's your aunt, and that farm really is hers. Well, after see'n me she marched right up to the sheriff's office to try and get this all enforced immediately, she wanted y'all out last night. But Ol' Barnstable said no—even tried talk'n her into give'n y'all 90 days instead 'a jus' one. "

"You tell'n me this is real? We gotta leave our own farm, our home-place! I'll be damned first. I'll be damned straight to hell and back, Tom. What are we supposed to do? We ain't got nothin. After Grandma died, we're tapped out."

"Well, if its any help. Now don't you tell no body that I gave none a' this to ya. They'll have my ass on a plate, if anybody found out. But here's the folder she left with me. She never came back fer it. We done made copies of what we needed."

On my way back home to the farm, I stopped by Judge Messias's house. As a kid, I had sold candy to him and his wife as a fund raiser for our school and it was him that sent the Lusk boy to juvy when he hit my Dad. His house looked like what I imagined a king or a prince would live in, and I never forgot how kind they were to me. It was a bizarre long shot, but instant desperation had blinded my mind.

I knocked on his door, and his wife, kind and greyed as she was, answered, "Oh you poor thing, I've already heard. Come on in and sit right down. And don't you worry, we'll get this all sorted out, I'm sure of it."

News travels fast back home, especially when the county clerk, the county sheriff, and the local judge call each other up to make decisions. As an outsider, she was already seen with suspicion, and Delilah's air of entitlement and lack of manners with both Tom and Sheriff Barnstable had apparently not won her any friends. Without even having to ask, Judge Messiah handed me some pieces of paper. "I was gonna have my girl at the office run this out to you, but seeing how you're here now..." The judge cleared his throat in slight disapproval of my invasion into his private home. "Here you go, son. This'll keep you in your home and that uppitty, smart-ass aunt of yours out of it, for at least the next 90 days. I'd have her run out on a rail if I could, but I'm afraid this is all I can do. You'll have to get some lawyers to finish her off."

\*\*\*

I arrived home in possession of a little relief yet utterly exhausted. I explained everything to Mama, and she set down her scrubbing—she was still cleaning the same space she was cleaning when I had left. She then looked at me despondently, "What are we going to do?"

"Well, I can tell you what we aren't going to do. We aren't going to bury our heads in the sand by the scrubbing our way to the fruit cellar instead of dealing with our

problems and living life as we should. You go toss out that mop-water and go see how much money we have and how we can go about getting a lawyer."

Mama returned to her scrubbing.

"Dammit! I've had enough! I just saved our home-place for the next three months, and by God you're gonna do your part! Our table will stand on two legs, so help me God! Now unless you're scrub'n your way to a hidden goldmine in the damned fruit cellar, put that rag down and get to it." In that moment, I taking my place as shepherd of the family, I had found myself using my staff with force. I was beyond both feeling and emotion.

Mama stared at me, "Don't you talk to your mother like that. Don't you dare!" Her eyes burnt with anger as they filled with the fearful tears of a hundred different thoughts.

"Mama, now ain't the time to hide behind some sort of parental role. You ain't hide'n no more. Aunt Delilah's back whether we like it or not, and we gotta fight, together, to keep our home. Grandma's gone, but we ain't. And now we got work to do." Surprised at myself for saying what I had said, I wasn't backing down—nor, as I thought to myself, was I planning to ever again talk to my mama with such disrespect.

There was a knocking at the door. In the heat of our argument neither of us could see the dust coming down the lane. Delilah had arrived with a younger rough looking man to see that her squatters were packing and heading out in goodly time. The knocking quickly turned to banging. There was a fist pounding on the door, and it was angry. Our argument ended immediately, and our new, unwelcome guests instilled an instant sense of unity and strength within Mama and me. On our way to the door, I took the shotgun



from on top of the pie-safe and opened the door with a stone stare that would not budge one inch.

"Hello." I said, my voice low with determination, reinforcing the immovable look I had cast out from my now stony face.

"What are you still doing here? This is my place." With each word Delilah flew fast into rage, "GET OUT! GET OUT NOW!"

I handed her a copy of the papers Judge Messias gave me and slowly poised the shotgun, bracing it against right shoulder. "Unless you want the barrel of this rest'n 'tween your eyes, you're gonna get the hell off this farm." The two of them stared at me. My mother stood unseen at the top of the stairs some distance inside the house, her mouth agape and covered by her hand. Delilah and her henchman turned and left, the 15 second stand-down that seemingly lasted for hours ended, and I shut the door—locking it after me. Instantly breaking out into a nervous sweat, I collapsed on the sofa, the gun still in my arms. "It isn't loaded," I said to Mama.

\*\*\*

Weeks went by. We had hired the most expensive lawyer we could, who, I found was quite adept at sweet talking my mother into believing his gospel. I didn't trust him as far as I could throw him. Even though Mama had long ago gone back to her state job, and we even painfully sold off what we could, our income still didn't pass muster. Seemingly ages ago, when I had been so bold as to go to his house, I was grateful that Judge Messias had made a few suggestions: "Now, son, I took the liberty of writing

down the names of the best damned lawyers that have ever argued before me. I hope you can get one of them, you're gonna need it." Our lawyer was not on that list.

My mind frequently returned to the moment at the door. I replayed it again and again in my mind, over and over and over. The woman that had stood before me that day, though she had not introduced herself, looked familiar. In the moments after I had shut the door, I simply attributed it to being related. Of course she would look familiar, she my blood relation, everyone in the township knows we all have the same nose. But as I watched the re-runs of that moment in my mind, there was something else. I knew that I had seen her before.

We had just come home from our last meeting with our lawyer. He admitted defeat. The Chicago address that Delilah gave to the county clerk had since been vacated. And with no way to contact her or her legal council, there was little that he could do by way of negotiation. And the inheritance statutes were otherwise clear. The lawyer had given us back all our papers, including the folder that Delilah had originally given to the county clerk. On top of the papers, he had stuck a Post-It note: "Sorry." Mama and I were quiet on the drive home, save for the rustling of papers. Neither she nor I had really bothered to look through Delilah's folder before that day. But with nothing else to do, Mama took a look.

"Did you see this? You think Delilah had some sort of p.i. looking into us all these years?" She held up the programs of both Grandma's and Granddad's funerals as well as a piece of paper with directions to Grandma's hospital scrawled on it.

"I dunno," I replied, "I guess she must have. How else would she have all..." My voice trailed off.

"Hello? ... You ok?"

"What?" I answered, "Oh yeah, I'm fine." My mind was elsewhere. It seemed so obvious now. Good Ol' Del looked familiar because I had seen her before. She was the woman I saw at the hospital that night. There was no longer any doubt in my mind. She hadn't hired any private investigator, she was doing it all herself. She, who had caused pain and even disgrace to the family had the nerve to come back, collecting evidence, waiting for just the right time to strike. Mama always said that Delilah never did anything for anyone but herself, and this was taking the cake. I began to wonder how many other things she had saw, how many moments she either witnessed or catalogued and placed in her damned little folder.

"You want me to drive?"

"No, no. I'm fine."

The next day I stayed in the house instead of heading out to do my morning chores. Mama got up to make breakfast and get ready to go to work as always, and found me sitting at the dining room table.

"Mama? Morn'n, have a seat," I warmly invited. I know you have every right to be angry with me, but I hope you don't. We have some planning to do and we best start it today. We shouldn't wait. I really need you to be home today."

"What for?! I gotta go to work." She replied with astonishment.

"Last night, I looked, and we got 40 days til we have to be completely out and gone off the home-place. We got nowhere to go and no way to get there. And I can't imagine that either you or I would like to see her triumphant return after her self-imposed

exile. I dunno 'bout you, but I'd rather stab my leg with the old rusted pitch fork out in the shed."

Mama sat down quietly. "Well, I can take a sick day, I suppose. But, what are we going to do?"

"Well, first, we are going to find a new home—and not around here. We should find something up closer to where you work. I'd like to leave that in your hands. Second, we are gonna have to do something about Delilah. At first, I thought to set the woods on fire and burn the whole farm to the ground..."

"Oh my God! You can't!" she gasped as she interrupted me.

"No, you're right, I can't. I love this place too much. There is no doubt in my mind that it will eventually go back to the wild and most like do its best to get rid of Delilah in the process. Them papers say we are to leave with quote-un-quote only our personal effects. But nowhere does it state what that means. So I say that we take everything—right down to the errant nails on the floor of the feed shed. I dunno 'bout you, but I feel a personal attachment to everything about this place, and I reckon that makes it all our quote-un-quote personal effects. So if you agree, we'll rent some storage space and start packing up and moving everything into storage as soon as possible. We'll leave dear Auntie Delilah a farm that is, as Grandma would say, 'bout as useful as tits on a boar.'"

My mother, at first bewildered, began to smile in agreement. She was never one for intrigues that weren't jokes. In fact after my father died, she would go out of her way to be conciliatory and not rock the boat. But this time, appeared to be different. Instead of going to work that day, she called in sick and began to pack and organize the farm.

I stopped doing any of the farm work. The harvest work was done for the year and we had our crop income. I dismissed all the sharecroppers that had been working our fields and suggested that they never come back. And I canceled all our orders: next years crop seed, several tons of badly needed gravel for the lane, and supplies for the coming 3 seasons—none of it would ever see the light of the farm.

Mama and I fell into a perfect rhythm. After work, she would look at apartments then come home to pack the cumulative possessions of generations of my family. And, I for my part, spent my days filling our rented storage and dismantling the farm. Mama and I became like a well-oiled machine. Our table was miraculously standing on only two legs. We found time to joke and play, and even though the specter of exile hung over everything we did, we were proactive and felt good. Though we still had no idea what her intentions were, we were going to teach Delilah to be careful what she wished for.

With only a week to go, Mama secured an apartment for us to live in and we moved in. It was small and not nearly as nice as the farm house—but nothing ever would be. It would suit us well enough until we truly got back on our feet. Part of the order that Judge Messias had given us, allowing us to remain on the farm for as long as we did also stated that Delilah could not set foot near our home-place until the 90 days were up. And in that last week, Mama and I said goodbye. We took walks, snapped photos, and all the while sang the songs Grandma used to sing: that mix of spirituals, radio jingles from the 40's, and the occasional Elvis hit. We took small timbers from the old barn and the farm house itself as mementos. And we even took a bucket of soil so that where ever we went, the farm, our home-place would still be with us.

And for Delilah, we left nothing. Anything that we, Grandma, Mama, or myself, had done on the farm came with us. We stripped the walls of the wallpaper that my mother put up. We took out the windows and even the front door that we three had replaced years ago. Every molecule of metal—pipes, wiring, you name it—was removed and sold to a scrapper down south. We tore down the car port we had built, removed every plant from the garden, either replanting them to grow free in a clearing in the woods or taking them with us. Nothing was left but the barest skeleton of what once was. And, yes, we even took the kitchen sink—a piece that I had bought and installed as Grandma's 72nd birthday present. It was us who sacked our Temple,<sup>76</sup> on our terms—and no one else's. By our estimate we were giving the farm back, we released the land back to the wild. We buried my grandmother, and in our leaving the home-place, we had effectively done our best to send the farm into the next world as well.

Mama could not stand to be there for the hand off. She wanted nothing to do with seeing her sister. Still the escapist, she opted to go to work and busy herself with her job while I handed the keys of a door-less farmhouse to Delilah.

"This all you got?" I said as more statement than legitimate question. Delilah and the rough looking young man stood next to their car at the end of the lane. The car appeared old and worse for the wear with spots of rust bubbling through the paint. You could see only the top of two, maybe three suitcases in the back seat. Delilah's face beamed, giving new meaning to the word 'gloating.' I, for my part, stood squarely in their way, in the middle of mouth of the long lane to the home-place.

---

<sup>76</sup> Furthering the purpose of subverted Biblical text-references in this story, this passage (and indeed the greater part of the overall narrative) works to subvert the actual history of the Jews in an attempt to explore the reclamation of a defeated past.

"What do you mean is that all we got? You mean is this all we came with? Oh for Chrissake, I don't care about any of this, I just want you uptight little Puritans to get what's coming to you. You think you're so much better than everybody else. Well, how's it feel to learn the hard way? Hmm? Well? How's that for ya?"

I had no idea of what she was talking about, although her words told me that clearly Mama and I had made the right decision in how we moved off the home-place.

"What are you staring at? Are you retarded?"

"You know, Delilah, ain't noth'n had to be this way. We would'a welcomed you back home. Any time you liked. We could have all been in the house, warm, happy, and together. There wasn't no sense in this."

"Oh shut up you little fucker half-wit. I don't care about you. Now give me MY keys and get out of my way. I want to get in there and sell off all that old shit that my bitch of a mother had, sell off this old shit hole, and get the fuck out of here. So we can retire to a beach down in Mexico."

I blankly looked at her with both curiosity and vague confusion. Even her half assed stalking should have taught her that there were no riches lying in wait at the farm—at least not like she wants.

I was moved beyond anger. I had no idea how anyone could be so bitter and ridden with delusional hatred. I had never met any one of that sort before—nor, thankfully since. Nevertheless, I would rather have eaten my own shoe than to hear such words hurled at my family. And as Delilah began to step toward me to get the keys, I threw them out a good 40 yards into our field—which had not been touched since the corn harvest and was laden with dead stalks and the leafy detritus of the harvester.

Delilah rushed toward me in a rage. I slapped her square across her face, leaving the red imprint of my hand on her cheek like the mark of Cain, "Watch your mouth. I know you were raised better than that—better than this." Stunned, she stood clutching her stinging flesh, mouth agape, and eyes so wide they nearly fell from their sockets. I walked quietly with the practical resolution of a farmer to the family's old pick-up truck, and I began to drive away. As I pulled out of the lane for what would be the last time in my life, I looked back in sorrow. "May God bless you and keep you," I said to the land of my family, the land of my people, "may God bless you and keep you."

A glance in my rear view mirror showed Delilah and her friend bent over frantically looking for the keys to the farm house—the keys to a house whose doors were in storage with the rest of our things. And I smiled to myself, "If she thought I was a 'little fucker' before, wait'll she spends her time find'n them keys and then head's down to the house."

\*\*\*

And so we are—my mother and I—cast out of Eden and into exile. I try to be grateful. There ain't no doubt, that if Adam and Eve were never made to leave the garden—if they never had to leave their farm—life wouldn't be like we know it. Sure life couldn't hurt us like it does, but it also could be as beautiful either. I try to find the best of my past and grow from it like spring field corn, but it is no easy task. The dark cloud of a fearful and uncertain future always haunts my mind. I am untethered and without a home, without a land in which my roots might grow. I look up to the heavens



and I gaze at skies higher than myself—skies that both cover me and still to this day look down upon the ruins of my family’s farm. I look at pictures of my Mama and me as I ride the filthy subway, and see, for what we are worth, and precarious as we may be, a table still standing on just two legs—our foundation firmly set, rooted you might say in the good earth of some far-away farm. We still do not know what became of Delilah. But I, for my part have just one year to go before Grandma’s big College Man get his Masters in Business at NYU. Mama is college-proud once again and I’m glad to have her pride. But now, I, with no farm to ever return to, am bereft of meaning—constantly seeking a home, searching for some semblance of security, a rock on which to build my church. Sometimes all the years of my childhood on the farm almost seems like a fairy tale. I pray that if ever I forget the farm, its wisdom, and its life, that my right hand should lose its strength and my tongue craft words no more.<sup>77</sup> Because, truly what are *we* if not temples to life, built on the foundations of our pasts, our homes, our Promised Lands?

Tomorrow will be like any other day. I will shuffle, half-asleep onto the subway. I will still be poor and worn down, trying to reconcile where I have been and where I may yet end up. Maybe someday my life may become realized and I can find my anchor. As constant is now my task, I am ever seeking a home-place.

\*\*\*

---

<sup>77</sup> adapted from Psalm 137, verses 5 and 6.

## Bibliography

- Ackroyd, P. (1968). *Exile and Restoration*. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press.
- Albertz, R. (2004). *Israel in Exile*. (D. Green, Trans.) Boston, MA: Brill.
- Alter, R. (2007). *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton Publishers.
- Auster, P. (2006). *The New York Trilogy*. New York, NY: Penguin Classics.
- Berg, N., & Lorence, J. (1996). *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq*. New York, NY: State University of New York.
- Berlin, A., & Breitler, M. Z. (Eds.). (2004). *The Jewish Study Bible*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- (1992). The Book of Tobit. In T. R. Bible, *Sacred Writings* (Vol. 2, pp. 42-52). New York, NY, USA: Oxford Press.
- Brodsky, J. (1988). The Condition We Call Exile. *Literature in Exile*. Vienna: Wheatland Foundation.
- Cather, W. (2007). *One of Ours*. Stilwell, KS: Digireads.com Publishing.
- Charlesworth, J. (Ed.). (1983). *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Vol. 1). New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Even-Shoshan, A. (1984). *A New Concordance of the Bible*. Jerusalem, Israel: Hamilon Hekhadash.
- Galil, G., Geller, M., & Millard, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Homeland and Exile*. Leiden: Brill.
- Grossberg, D. (2004). Lamentations. In A. Berlin, & M. Zvi Brettler (Eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible* (J. P. Society, Trans., pp. 1587-1589). New York, NY: Jewish Publication Society.
- Halvorson-Taylor, M. (2011). *Enduring Exile*. Leiden: Brill.
- Hirsch, S. R. (1997). *The Psalms*. Jerusalem, Israel: Feldheim Publishers.
- Kakmi, D. (2008). *Mother Land*. London, UK: Eland.

Koehler, L., & Baumgartner, W. (1996). *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Vol. 1). (B. A. Publishing, Ed.)

Lipschits, O. (2005). *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Lopate, P. (Ed.). (2008). *Writing New York*. New York, NY: Literary Classics.

Mandelkern, S. (1988). *Veteris Testamenti Concordantiae Hebraicae Atque Chaldaicae*. P Shalom Publishers.

Meerzon, Y. (2012). *Performing Exile, Performing Self: Drama, Theatre, Film*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Middlemas, J. (2007). *The Templeless Age*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

Middlemas, J., & Ahn, J. (Eds.). (2012). *By the Irrigation Canals of Babylon*. New York, NY: Continuum Books.

Newsome, J. (1979). *By The Waters of Babylon*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.

Nochlin, L. (1998). Art and the Condition of Exile: Men/Women, Emigration/Expatriation. In S. R. Suleiman (Ed.), *Creativity and Exile* (pp. 37-58). Durham: Duke University Press.

Otzen, B. (2002). *Tobit and Judith*. New York, NY: Sheffield Academic Press.

Polish, D. (2000). *Bringing the Psalms to Life: How to Understand and Use the Book of Psalms*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing.

Rhymer, J. (1971). *The Babylonian Experience*. London, UK: Sheed and Ward.

Robinson, M. (Ed.). (1994). *Altogether Elsewhere*. Winchester, MA: Faber and Faber Inc.

Rolleston, J. (1982). Short Fiction in Exile: Exposure and Reclamation. In J. Spalek, & R. Bell (Eds.), *Exile: The Writer's Experience* (pp. 32-47). Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Rosenfeld, A. (Ed.). (2008). *The Writer Uprooted*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

- Sagiv, A. (2003). George Steiner's Jewish Problem. *Azure* (Summer), 130-154.
- Said, E. (2000). *Reflections on Exile*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Steinbeck, J. (1992). *East of Eden*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Steiner, G. (2008). *My Unwritten Books*. New York, NY: New Directions Books.
- Stone, M. E. (1990). *Fourth Ezra*. (F. M. Cross, Ed.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- Suleiman, S. R. (Ed.). (1998). *Exile and Creativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Tabori, P. (1972). *The Anatomy of Exile*. London, UK: Harrap.
- Ugresic, D. (n.d.). *bio*. Retrieved February 17, 2013, from Dubravka Ugresic: [www.DubravkaUgresic.com](http://www.DubravkaUgresic.com)
- Ugresic, D. (2007). *The Writer in Exile*. Ljubljana, Slovenia: Institute of Art Production KITCH.
- Verlag, M. N. (2003). *Placeless Topographies*. (B. Greiner, Ed.) Bonn: Tübingen.