



Jacque Buncel

Turning the
Corner at
Dusk

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Wolsak & Wynn

The River

My father can smell the river.
We cross streets,
walk under bridges,
pass a yard cluttered with car remains,
make our way through fields of overgrown grass.

Finally we are here.
The River Sekčov is now small and dirty.
The marks on the shoreline
show its erosion over time.
Not like the mighty flow of water
where my father first learned to swim
and a boy was sucked down by the undertow.

We sit on the banks.
His usual reticence loosened
and he spins story after story.
Running through fields,
chasing mice,
playing with friends.
No mention of graffiti on shop windows
Jews are bloodsuckers
signs on the playgrounds
Jews not admitted.

His family lost their house.
Moved beside the army barracks,
a half-a-hour walk then
to the synagogue on *Shabbas*.
I imagine him skipping along that wide boulevard
and everywhere the hatred growing.

I take photos of him
staring meditatively
under the willow tree,
his shadow reaching the bushes behind.

Birth, December 1960

The tree branches heavy with snow
sound and colour muted
as the earth turned inward
replenishing its wisdom

Some fifteen years earlier
the earth helplessly watched
villages of people thrown alive into ditches
screams of open mouths suffocated

The charred ashes, a cloak on the earth's surface
have intermingled now with the soil
and my parents travelled the ocean
to build lives far from that world

I came tumbling out of that inner universe
my tiny lungs taking in the first gulp of air
the nurse presented me to my mother
"It's a girl!"

I looked satisfied (my mother now reminisces)
untroubled by my journey
through moist enveloping walls
out into the florescent delivery room

My big sister slept fitfully near my father
whom they sent home from the hospital
My mother held me, full of new life
her body still frozen

and I brought the wisdom
of the earth's sedimentary layers
rock-old intuition in my soul
kindness to protect its hibernating animals

I carried too the Jewish sorrow of the age
How could I escape it?
I, the next generation
knew you could die under the bright winter sun

but as I cuddled in my mother's arms
nourishing snow began to fall
flakes whirling and twirling
with the ecstasy of a *hora* dance.

Memory, 1972

In the Zellers store on Princess Street,
I discover the rack of name stickers.
Spin it around and around
until a neon flash of happy-go-luckiness
stops before me.
Psychedelic purple, florescent orange,
“Vote Jackie,” “Far-Out Jackie” and “I dig Jackie”
they call.
This celebration of my “Jackiness,” a surprise
among the other more popular names: Debbie, Susan and Kathy.

My sister watches as I finger the package
she, a weighted-down “Irene”
named after our grandmother, taken by the Nazis.

Just one more shopping outing,
my mother, sister and I sit at the snack counter.
Mummy buys me a chocolate milkshake,
nods to her waistline,
and orders a piece of coconut cream pie.

When we get into our navy-blue Ford,
my sister presents me with the stickers, “Surprise!”
The two of them beam with that knowing pleasure
of a gift well-chosen,
and my cup runneth over
like in the old psalm they read
over the school broadcast system.

Not long after, my grandfather dies
and a haze settles over our house.
My mother sits on our porch
and stares out into the distance.
And I walk once more
in that shadowed valley.

Family

Sometimes I crave the freedom
of *la vie sans enfants*.

Coming home at whatever time,
my day to shape as I please.

I miss movies, dances,
meeting a friend for a bite to eat.
No worries about time and
little faces waiting eagerly for bedtime stories.

But today, I am swimming
and I see two small figures
making sandcastles on the beach.
The bigger one looks up and I wave

and she waves back
and that little hand connects me
and I am happy.
And still complaining,
I trade my freedom over and over again
for this.

Piano Music

This morning, I woke up and heard music,
a sonatina
I used to thump out on the piano.

Run into the study of my parents' home
slam the door shut behind me,
throw open the music book
and begin to play.

Play as hard and as loud as I can.
My rage flowing into
first trembling, then calmer fingers
absorbed by the black and white keys.

Only the rust-coloured blanket
on my mother's spare bed
keeps me company.

Other times
I snuggle up to her on that couch
during her afternoon rest,
both our heads under the blanket,
my stomach gurgling beside her.

That music comes back today
and I want to search for it and
play it one more time.
I find it in a dusty music book,
a piece by Dussek.
I glance at the framed photos on
the top of my cherry wood piano.
The faces of my children beam.
Their radiance shines over me.

My fingers remember the notes,
the strong forte opening, the quick crescendo.
The chords, less discordant now,
the sweetness of the treble, less painful.