

THE NEW BIBLE

"You must remember the future and imagine the past."

Carlos Fuentes

"Venice is a separate country. It cannot properly be part of Italy, or part of anything. It floats at anchor inside its own will."

Harold Brodkey

My title is stolen from Primo Levi; I'll have more to say about it in a few minutes. But for now its most important resonance is with the claim of stories on our hearts. For the last four weeks, I've been interested in walls, in gates, and, especially, in crossings—from the U.S. to Venice; from 2006 in the Aula Didactica where we've met to 1386 in the Lido cemetery; from 1516 when Jews were first given, and confined to, the ghetto to the tourist Venice of today; from the historical novels, poems, and edicts we've been reading to the personal excavations they've prompted in me. What I'm reading to you now is a preliminary report on some of these crossings, moving from initial ideas and images through fact, from observation to re-creation, with obvious gaps because of the time limits. What shape I've managed in these remarks comes from clotheslines: those thick useful ropes that stretch across buildings, and from building to building across streets and canals. I've been intrigued by them since I arrived in Venice, and I've been taking pictures of them—their colors and shapes, the descent of bath towels against the horizontals of underwear, the intimacies of the family's life on display for the neighbors, who've no doubt seen it all before. And the tourist from America, like me, who remembers clotheslines from his childhood, and long El rides across Chicago as he viewed the backs of old apartment buildings through the dirt-stained windows. I was in Venice to study the Jewish Ghetto, not clotheslines; Italian Jewish history, not men's and women's underwear; the longstanding physical architecture, not the ephemeral hanging self-revelations of the contemporary city. Still, I kept looking up, finding one line after another, a new variation of fabric against fabric, child sizes against adult. Then, a couple weeks into the Institute, I bought a picture book on the Ghetto and saw that all the photographs of bridges that crossed from the Ghetto had clotheslines stretched

across the background, like highwires that offered a different egress and entrance. And I gradually understood, or at least started to imagine, that the clotheslines might offer a format for a slightly different arrangement of thinking about Venice, Jewish history, and the ghetto: more offhand, everyday, intimate, uncoordinated in relating piece to piece, time to time, the city to my own warped version of what it has meant for one family to think itself, call itself, and be known to others as Jewish.

So, clotheslines: like those old can-and-string phones that were our first mobiles, they amplify whispered messages. They let me turn from bedsheets and bras to the lines we stretch between spaces and times, hoping to suggest how a family's—how my family's—stories hang alongside those of Venice, summer 2006; how associations, like clotheslines, link one neighborhood of ideas to the next, in violation of all the decrees that confine the Jew, or memory, or imagination, or the mind to reside behind walls, islanded, ghettoized.

I. Bible Stories

In Survival at Auschwitz, Primo Levi tells us about listening to a story: "A sorrowful, cruel and moving story; because so are all our stories, hundreds and thousands of stories, all different and all full of a tragic, disturbing necessity. We tell them to each other in the evening, and they take place in Norway, Italy, Algeria, the Ukraine, and are simple and incomprehensible. But are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?" (59)

So for Levi, the old Bible is not so much obsolete as incomplete. The new Book must be more comprehensive, and provisional. It must give up on consistent narrative, abandon that chosen people attitude and turn into a constantly expanding anthology of the world's sorrows. It might, with time, tell how they, how we, how each "I" enact our faith in the dark days of Germany, Yugoslavia, Darfur, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon as well as Israel.

The new Bible: Before the Word comes the World.

The new Bible, absorbing old tongues, local dialects, inarticulate murmurs, animal cries.

Perhaps God did not multiply languages to prevent the Tower of Babel from reaching Heaven, but to divert our attention to each other and remind us how little we know of this most unsacred globe. If that's the case, empathy is our resistance to self-confining blindness—a way to meaning as necessary as reason or faith.

II. Ghetto Stories

We came to Venice to amass some facts about what was once here, and is here now.

Facts: an uncertain place to start. We study to learn them, study more hoping to alter them. We read guide books to obtain them, novels to transcend them, build theories on them, trying to deny them. Dan Rather got fired for forgetting to check them. They merge with conventions: it took Picasso years to get perspective out of his paint brush. They shape our days, they get in our way. They are what they are. Sometimes.

Fact: The Jews of Venice were confined, for the most part, to a ghetto from 1516 until 1797. **The** ghetto, **a** ghetto, **this** ghetto: a place of protection and imprisonment, where Jewish life prospered while people suffered. The space set aside to isolate, and so control, and so exoticize, and so encourage, and so disparage, and so help create a population where difference becomes a mark: a yellow badge, or red hat; a way of acquainting themselves with God.

Jews weren't alone. Venice's solution to its own impurity was to isolate all outsiders: Persians, Greeks, Turks, Germans, Jews. The isolation preserved difference----and nurtured fantasy.

The Jews themselves isolated their women in synagogue behind screens, where the wooden boundries offered their own scrim for desire, shadowed in restriction, danger, guilt.

And the separate national and racial groups isolated themselves from each other: when Venice required the Persians to go live with the Turks, the Persians left Venice instead.

If Venice is not Italian, what is it? If it is, what is Italian? Ask the same questions about Jews who live in this country and you learn what fear keeps unspoken: that insisting on difference is our way to escape sameness, sameness our way to pretend indifference.

Ideas to test:

A prison becomes a museum when people are more anxious to get in than get out.

A city becomes a monument when people take away more than they leave.

Museums and monuments imprison as they declare who we are and where we come from.

Problems with facts:

Language: That word "ghetto." We don't know where it came from or what it referred to.

Or how it was spelled: g/e/t/o? g/e/t/t/o? g/h/e/t/o? g/h/e/t/a?

Ghetto: from the Venetian, meaning **foundry**? from the Venetian, meaning the **waste products of the foundries**?

from the German **ghet** or **gett**, meaning repudiation, divorce, separation?

from the Provençal **gaita**, meaning guard?

from the Hebrew **Gedad Guda**, meaning wall, separation?

from the Italian **borghetto**, meaning small burgh or quarter?

from the Tuscan **Guitto**, meaning dirty?

from the Modinese **Ghito**, meaning dirty?

from the Italian **Ghetta**, meaning flock or herd?

from the American, '**get**,' as in the Jews were told to '**get**'?

From who knows where meaning who knows what. Jews called it something else, but the name, as a shape for persecution, stuck. But not for awhile: it wasn't until the 20th Century that it starts being used for areas of cities used to isolate minority groups: the Warsaw ghetto, black ghettos.

Time: There were Jews, lots of them, in and around Venice before 1516 when the ghetto was created; otherwise, why bother setting aside an island for them? There's the Decree of 1386, for example, providing a cemetery on the Lido--before there was a place for Jews to live, there was a place for them to die. (A place that was itself buried, eventually, beneath a shooting gallery.) Deaths, even Jewish deaths, mean lives. Jews must have been around by 1386, in Venice if not of it. And the bones are around still, somewhere—though the gravestones have been moved, the prayers of the dead hover over the marksmen's targets.

Ghetto: The Jew as necessity and nuisance; the Jew as leper. A place for projections, a simulacrum. It is where Venice Jews pray. It is where the Murano glass candies and wine bottle stoppers of the rest of Venice give way to glass menorahs and mezzuzahs and dreidels. "Eat at Gam-Gam's," my Jewish friends insisted before I left, as if faith were a falafel. It is a presence of absence: a *campo* without a church, not named for a saint, a way to make a connection that is less to place than story, less to Venice than Auschwitz, pogroms, slavery in Egypt.

BUT. AND YET. A friend showed a student of mine a book she had of people from the Italian village where **his** family once lived, three generations ago. The men and women of that village were all large: tall, heavy, broad of chest and belly, wide-hipped and thighed. As he was, despite years struggling with diets and exercise in a California that discouraged bulk except in fiber intake. Is historical memory like that, the precondition and limit to change, a body we don't exchange? So we never leave the ghetto even if we've never seen it?

III. Venice Stories

I landed in Venice about 3 hours late. By then I had fumbled through French I'd forgotten and German I'd never learned in Zurich, and spent hours on a plane, periodically rising from snatches of sleep to catch glimpses of **The Incredibles** saving the world. And Marco Polo Airport, named for the local hero who found worlds that had been there a long time before he discovered them—worlds that forever disappeared

once he told everyone what he found. I had the number of the bus to get to the city. Numbers are the same Arabic in Italian and English. But I got on # 15 instead of 5. I was off to Mestre, though I didn't know that until I asked a woman in English who smiled and asked a man in Italian if he spoke English, who told me I should get off. So there I was, waiting at what looked like a bus stop, on a two lane road in front of two B&Bs that were set back from the noise and traffic behind long driveways and high metal fences. There was five minutes of pleasure, smelling the flowers, watching as workers and old women bicycled by with plastic bags dangling from their handlebars. There were ten minutes of stretching and tai chi; Paul as California warrior. Then there was panic. Thirty minutes into the wait a thick-chested black man appeared across the way, walking down the driveway. He wore a suit of deep bright yellow crossed by brown lines--pants, jacket, and hat. Sandals. He crossed the street, stood next to me at the stop. I tried to ask about the bus in English, then Spanish; we settled on French and pointing—he at his watch, at the empty highway, back at his watch—the bus was late. To me that meant that it might eventually come. And it did, about ten minutes later, the two of us standing there together, watching and waiting. "A aeroporto"? I mumbled. The driver nodded. I pulled my bags aboard. The bus moved out, the black man did not get on. Instead he turned and walked back across the road to the B&B in the same measured, even step as when he first crossed the road in my direction. If I were writing a story, he would be a guide, messenger, harbinger, warning, blessing. I would exoticize his presence, his mystery, his confusion, his instruction, his skin color. He brought me a sense of solidarity that gave me patience, even if I made it all up.

Venice: grounded in mud, vulnerable to water, in constant need of repair. A place to hide from enemies. A way station. We come here to change form: metamorphosis. Ghettos discourage this: they deny alchemy. We see the same as us and stay the same.

Incomparable--the word I hear most often before the comparisons begin. (I am not the first to say this.) But I understand: writing about Venice is writing a gloss of a gloss of a ghostly footnote.

Venice: People lean over the sides of the vaporettos to get photos of the people drifting by in the gondolas who are shooting films of the people in the vaporetto taking pictures of them filming: a mobius strip of digital memories.

Smells of bodies rubbing against each other in the crowded, dense mass of a summer rush hour vaporetto. I step from the boat, head upstream against a moving crowd of people, slip across to a narrow *calle* that leads me to a bridge where I cross over water; up, then down, staring aside to the boats, to let my eyes translate the splashing I hear into the tasks of a Venetian day. Left and right, up and down again, moving on, amid a crowd, across a *campo*, to the next bridge, the next *calle*, a new view that imitates the last as it offers some surprise of moulding, people, footing--different from the last, and the same, again and again.

My questions to Venice: how do we notice what we don't expect when we look for what we do? How do we constrict what you might be by what we are told you are? And how do you cater to and so encourage our life-denying expectations? And why do we think you have an identity we can personify as a 'you'?

To see is not to see. Yet we recycle events with our shifting attention.

"Where Are We Going?"--the title of the current exhibition in the Palazzo Grassi, and of a piece in that exhibition by Damien Hirst called: "Where Are We Going? How Did We Get Here? Is There a Reason?" The piece consists of the bodies of two cows that have been sectioned in plate glass frames of formaldehyde so one can see several cross-sections of the internal organs of the dead cows. The room is arranged so that as you enter you are confronted by a cow's anus: that's either where we're going, how we got here, or the reason. So time, and explanation, as a series of cross-sections preserved to demonstrate a body no longer able to function: chew, defecate, love--Hirst's history, his vision of his/our/a culture (we join and demur in our pronouns).

Dead Jewish bodies were once stolen to use for dissection.

Pigeons: their coo-whoop, coo-whoop mixed with the scrape of their nails against a large metal pipe, and the flap of their wings in the courtyard as I sit in the early morning at a

table in a wide hallway, the windows open. The stones below are covered with their crap, the white and pale green droppings creating their own shadowed rectangle on the ground, echoing the shape of the surrounding walls. In other climates, you feel that eventually the insects will prevail, outlast us, take command. Here, the pigeons.

White sweat lines along the pillowcase as I wake despite fan, open window, lack of any covering except the sheet that ends up crumpled at the foot of the bed, victim of another night's dreams. Bikram yoga for the soul.

IV. Contradictory Stories

I came to Venice to study the Ghetto. But Venice is a place that quickly turns from stones to tropes, its massive constructions dissolving into a sea of imaginings.

Walter Benjamin offers a very Venetian image for his not-quite-studies of history—that we pull from the past things that have undergone a "sea change." We extract from time moments that have accumulated the rust and tarnish of new possibilities while hidden from our curiosities--unfathomable before our interest.

I was raised a Jew. At one point I realized I could as easily call myself a Russian (out of my mother's family), or a Turk (from my father's). My parents gave me no middle name: just the initial "N." They thought of naming me "Nelson," their Anglicized version of "Neseem," my great-uncle's name, which means spirit or breath of life in Turkish. I was named after him in Hebrew: Paltiyale ben Josef. And I did not get his name in English: my great-uncle called Neseem because he once pulled a boy from the water and saved his life—gave him back breath. I took the name on and off when I travelled in Turkey in 2001, and an imam gave me a card with the name written in old Arabic script. This is what I mean by "sea change."

My mother's family came to the United States from near St. Petersburg, across Europe to England. The family legend is that they had passage in steerage on the Titanic, but missed the boat because their train arrived late. So I claim the right to be tardy as a survival tactic, a protection against icebergs.

My father's family came from Channakkale, Turkey, at the edge of the Dardanelles, across the Mediterranean to Crete. They insist they are Sephardic Jews, a pure lineage back to the Inquisition. But there's my last name—Skenazy, Eskenazi no doubt in Ladino—to explain. Mongrels, my people, with pretensions. There is no record in family memory or lore that they touched Italy on their way, but my father and uncle spoke Italian with their immigrant customers.

Besides my three aunts, then 8, 7, and 3, and the memory of two sons who died in early childhood, and a suitcase of clothes, my Turkish nona took only one other thing with her to America: a brass mortar and pestle. It is almost a foot tall, and heavy. The pestle is the kind of weapon Columbo might look for if I ever murder someone. I was told that she kept the huge mortar with her, in hand or secure between her legs, all across Mediterranean and Atlantic. It is not especially old, not especially beautiful. The markings are faded, and do not seem in any way exceptional. It survived the ocean crossing, survived a fire that destroyed my house thirty-five years ago, and sits now on top of my piano, filled with tumbled stones collected along Oregon and California beaches. The family rule is that it is to be passed down to the oldest son, but my father, who received it, is the youngest male. All his life he was afraid to write letters to his son the English teacher because he worried about his grammar. He was in his 70s when he tried to read my books. Or at least when he told me he had and asked me about them. He was in his sixties before I talked to him about his time as a child, sleeping with his brother on two cots in the dining room because there were always too many new friends from Channakale with families just arrived who needed a bed for a month, two months, longer.

I have only one picture of my great-grandmother on my mother's side. It is about one inch by one inch in size, a front-face portrait of a bone-cheeked dark woman, short black hair, narrow face, large eyes of the sort people like to call 'penetrating.' She might be a worn 30, a well-preserved 50. She must have been short, small-boned. I imagine her sturdy, diminutive, intense, a bit mistrustful of what was to come. What is clear from that picture is that she is Mongol—maybe not pure Mongol, but mostly, by family, coloring, bone structure. Heart too, I want to believe. Or that was clear to me, for awhile at least. Until someone who knows more about history and migration than I do asked me if I was

sure she was Mongol and not middle Asian. As I look back at her in my imagination, I now imagine other mountain countries: Afghanistan, Izbekistan. More sensibly from there than Mongolia, I'm told, if she arrived in St. Petersburg, married, had children, died. Why not from Eastern Turkey, someone suggests? That would merge the two sides of my family stories in ways I hadn't thought possible. So I waver now, wondering how close, or how far, I want to stretch the line of lineage.

From Mongolia--or Afghanistan or Turkey--to St. Petersburg, her dark face to my light skin, her size to mine, her days of work to my daughter this summer in a Soho apartment in New York City where she house-sits two spoiled cats who need their meals cooked for them. This is four generations.

December 2001, and the U.S. is bombing Afghanistan. I sit in a narrow store on a side street in Channakale: Yassar Sports. The walls are lined with balls, shirts, shoes, from the 10 foot high ceilings to the worn wooden floor. We are four: Yassar himself; the head of a travel agency who brought us here; my sister Judy, me. Yassar speaks to me in Ladino, which I awkwardly translate from my barely remembered Spanish into English for my sister, who asks Yassar questions in English through the travel agent, who translates them into Turkish for Yassar, who turns to me in Ladino. And so round and round, for nearly an hour. The agent leaves at one point, returns 10 minutes later with a gift: a bottle of the local brandy we need to take home; it is bitter, strong, harsh on the tongue, not something to serve guests. Yassar has his own gift to bestow: a soccer ball for my son. We take home our souvenirs: photos, ball, brandy. *Souvenir*: to remember.

There were 8 Jews left in Channakale then of a community that numbered more than 400 in 1900. The synagogue still survived, but barely: a large, forlorn, dusty shell next to a garage; the Jewish community in Istanbul is trying to have it restored. I remember the piles of water-stained books from leaks in the roof. I remember the shofar, twisted on itself and short, all black, amid old newspapers in the front hallway. The Jewish cemetery was moved to make way for a city park, so now the oldest gravestones rest amid trees, encircled by swings, near the WC. The *haman* that my aunts described seventy years later still remains where it was, as does the bakery, once a communal oven. The school they walked to is now a private school for Turkish girls.

I have never been to St. Petersburg. I have nowhere to go, the stories gone except talk of a large estate where my great-grandfather was the overseer of Russian peasants who worked the land, of my great-grandmother's 14 children, all but five of whom died before they could walk.

V. What's Left

We need a lost and found department for history, where we can recover what we've left behind on the countertops and couches of the past.

Time and place out of joint: we straddle the chasm with imagination. Discordance makes us start to wonder, stretch a line across the chasm, straddle the confusions with imaginings we call memory.

All stories are personal stories or they don't become stories. We bring ourselves to the ghetto: a meeting of our unlocal lives with the local terrain. The positions of the scholar, writer, tourist, visitor, traveler, crusader, pilgrim, penitent, wanderer, nomad, colonizer, conquerer, invader, exile: and of the reader, the listener, the student—are we that different? We translate space into the cadences of our own reveries. Some impose those measures on others, some have them imposed. Sometimes that changes over time, and we can return to imagine what happened here, once, to others we call family.

To remake the stories that have made us. That's the new Bible: a line stretched across time, displaying contemporary fashion and old schmaties, whatever it is we choose to wear, to wear down. Stories of what's left. Stories of what we have left.

Stories are what we have left.