# Exorcisms
# by Sonya Taaffe

THIS is the inside of a woman's head. This is looking out through her eyes that are like the eyes of a mask, bone frames and curtains of skin; she blinks and inside her head, seeded close behind her eyes, the spirit curls like the unborn she once was. The woman sips coffee, and the spirit tastes on their shared tongue the rich, burnt bitterness of a drink she never knew when alive. They drank tea, where she lived: in glasses, and you could hold sugar on your tongue while you sipped.

The spirit shifts, finds a roomier resting place in the crannies of thought between how to hold a pencil and first fumbled words, observes the woman's hand penciling letters across a page: quick sharp downstrokes, absurd jaunty tails on "g" and "y" dashed away back-pointing to the left where the letters incline; a backwards progression, to her eyes. Left to right, the wrong way across the page. But she has grown accustomed to the idea, this spirit that tucks herself around a memory of kisses in spring rain; she reads now, through others' eyes, the languages of more lands than she ever saw in her life. Then she saw one country, and one town of it, and the uneasy circling of the world outside: the

bells that rang the orthodox hours, you could hear them when the wind blew crosswise Sunday mornings. Soft smoke of prayer and incense, frightened she could smell it drifting in the dusty streets; her own day of rest flavored with the scents of fresh bread broken and wax slipping down the side of a burning candle, its dip and flicker the light that dances from the bride's bright raiment when she enters at sunset and you greet her with song: she still knows all the words. If she sang them with this woman's mouth, who would hear her?

She came over the sea in the skull of the student she loved, fitted between seventy-two letters like flicks of black flame and a shadow-sketch of the demon who comes to young men by night, rouses them in their sleep and sucks out their lives with their seed; all her daughters are like her and she breeds them from the young men she milks. At nights, the student tossed in dreams half delicious, half nightmare, never knowing who he really carried in the curves of his brain. Because he had sworn himself to her forever, when they clasped living hands in the shadow of her uncle's house and did not dare kiss, she lived within him until he died: young, of a fever, in a sweating tenement in summer. He had less than fifty words in this city's language and one of them was his name, such as it had survived immigration. By the time she parted from his ebbing spirit, cajoling it to join her, knowing it never would, she could mourn him in the tongue of the land he had chosen, golden land, paved with stone and filthy brick. Opportunity killed him, freed her. She took up residence below the memories of his sister, who had come ahead with her lover until they turned him away at the gates—his health, he was never strong; strong enough to cross wheat fields and mountains and an ocean that almost heaved out his stomach but not to step through a doorway?—and swam in the woman's dreams of her dead brother already transformed into a saint, one of the thirty-six on whose back the world rests, sweet and sanctified and studying now in the company of the great sages of the past. Together, they shed tears. In their joined mouth, syllables of the language older than



what they spoke when they spoke to God, speaking to God now, speaking life. On the mourning woman's lips, a smile she did not feel: inside her head, the hopeless laughter of a soul that will never die.

Now, undying, nor dead, she makes a restless circuit of this woman's thoughts. Three generations have come and gone since that first girl covered the mirrors for her brother; this one bears the name of the student's sister, this woman who is writing, by pencil and paper, anachronistic as the teardrop shape of stubborn life that swarms her veins, a history of her family as well as she knows it. Lashes sweep down, fence out light, lift permitting the spirit to crowd against the concave of dark irises and gaze down at the page. So many things, wrong. We never spelled our name that way. The town had another name. The border shifted; sometimes it was there, sometimes elsewhere, who kept track? Yes, he said that. No, she did not. What scraps and patches have lasted down to this time? She is a scrap herself, thought-blown in the remembrances of another. Rags like her great-grandfather sold on another century's streets.

The hand moves on, inscribing fact tattered into fiction: there, there, the woman hears a murmur of pain and recognition breathe from her lips, like seeing the face of a long-lost love before they wash him for the grave, like touching the stone of your house fire-blackened and forgotten, there the spirit sees the name of a girl this woman's ancestor loved, a family legend, whose heart broke when he could not marry her, whose spirit, they swore, possessed him so that he would speak in a voice not his own and say things the gentle student would never think, almost they called a wonder-worker to exorcise their son but the spirit subsided, the possession was over, he left for America in the best of health to find his sister and her lover; the first he found, the second he never saw again, the third rode softly in his dreams until the final fever vision consumed him and she lost him forever.

Still they are twined, like candle-wicks, like the sweet braid of Shabbos bread: remembered inseparable, impossibly rejoined.

The lines of his palm that only she remembers, life, love, heart stopped and broken; woven with her own, on finer paper than ever he could afford. And she is weeping, as she has not wept since she keened Kaddish in another woman's voice; someone else's tears smear and spot the neat eccentric hand and when she wipes them away, graphite blurs out the name of the beloved, the ghost, what cleaves to her even now.

She blurs away, like their names made a smoke-cloud on the white paper hatched with blue, the letters that comprise her being run away into nothing like the old story; though she does not wear a holy name on her forehead, she wears her own name in her heart, and his. Together they bound her to the world he left long ago: now she cannot help but follow. Into light, into darkness, into Gehenna, into Paradise, she cleaves to him as once she clung to his memory in the blood of his sister. She is going, now. The other side of the grave is the other side of a mirror. The way that demons go: she is not a demon anymore, she never was, though when he dreamed of Lilith he dreamed her face. What does a reflection look like from the other side? She passes through the mirror and is gone.

This is the inside of a woman's head. This is looking out through her eyes, which are nothing more than eyes now; they slide to the page and back, they blink, they are filling with tears that she cannot explain: someone is dead and she is weeping for joy. She lifts her pencil, bends to write again. Here, the grandfather; here, the textiles; here, the poetry; where one unravels another begins. A shame that no one knows how family stories end.