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THE LOSS PROFESSIONALS

And he said unto his servants, Is the child dead? And they said, He is dead.

I

When we sit down at the table, one chair remains empty; it is always empty.

It reminds us, as if we needed reminding, of how profoundly longing defies the laws of the room; the emptiness is not empty. The absent presence is the most present of all.

II

In his poem 'The God Abandons Antony' (1911), the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy depicts the night when the city of Alexandria was besieged. The poem is addressed to Mark Antony, the Roman politician, soldier, and lover of Cleopatra whose defeat in the final civil war to ravage the Roman republic was sealed that night in 31 BCE:

*When suddenly, at midnight, you
hear an invisible procession going
by
with exquisite music, voices,

don't mourn your luck that's failing
now, work gone wrong, your plans
all proving deceptive—don't mourn them uselessly.*

The title suggests that the narrator is Antony's god Heracles, from whom, legend has it, he was descended, giving his final instructions before his departure. Or perhaps the soldier is speaking to himself, convincing himself to accept the inevitable. In any case, the poem teaches us that we should embrace loss, accept it with the same dignity as we did the successes that preceded it:

*As one long prepared, and graced with courage,
as is right for you who proved worthy of this kind of
city, go firmly to the window
and listen with deep emotion, but
not with the whining, the pleas of a
coward;

listen—your final delectation—to the voices,
to the exquisite music of that strange procession,
and say goodbye to her, to the Alexandria you are losing.*

Soon after defeat in the Battle of Actium, Mark Antony took his own life. I am unsure whether his suicide reveals the greatness of his soul or its weakness. Having occupied Alexandria, Octavian went on to be

crowned Emperor Caesar Divi Filius Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire.

III

Leonard Cohen's song 'Alexandra Leaving' is based on Cavafy's poem. Here, instead of the city, it is a lover to whom we bid farewell: the god of love is preparing to depart, and Alexandra climbs on his shoulders. The parting is inevitable, "even though she sleeps upon your satin, / even though she wakes you with a kiss".

The lovers enjoy their last evening together, drink wine and listen to music. The song's addressee has had his own honour "restored" in Alexandra's company, the narrator explains. Love has elevated him as he prepares to face the imminent loss.

As in Cavafy's poem, what lies ahead must be accepted nobly, as though everything had been pre-rehearsed:

*As someone long prepared for the
occasion In full command of every
plan you wrecked Do not choose a
coward's explanation
that hides behind the cause and the effect.*

Being "in full command" means admitting your own mistakes and accepting what must be surrendered, what is already gone.

*Say goodbye to Alexandra
leaving. Then say goodbye to
Alexandra lost.*

Cohen composed this song in 1999, on the Greek island of Hydra in the Athens archipelago. There is a sense in these lyrics of reminiscing about the past: Hydra was the poet-singer-songwriter's home throughout the 1960s.

The island was a paradise until it wasn't. The idyllic artistic community gradually cracked under the pressure of drugs, mental illness, affairs, separations.

IV

*Don't mourn your luck that's failing now, work gone wrong, your plans all proving deceptive—don't
mourn them uselessly.*

When my husband and I separated ten years ago, I didn't leave on the shoulders of the god of love. The god of love vanished and didn't take anyone with him. I tried to accept my loss and travelled to Hydra.

Everything about the island is perfect: the perfect heat, the scent of sun-tanned skin, the drowsy donkeys and horses around the harbour, cats and dogs sleeping in their shadows; the balmy Aegean Sea, dappled in a patchwork of petroleum blue and emerald green, its beaches abounding with pebbles and shards of glass smoothed by the water, for us to gather. When the wind occasionally sighs, it caresses the shrubs on the balconies, covering the town in a shower of pink petals.

Still, though Hydra's beauty arouses each and every one of our senses, that beauty is distorted when we look back at it through sorrow. Cohen knew this early on. In his poem 'Hydra 1960' he writes:

*Scalpels grow with
poppies if you see them
truly red.*

It's as though, every now and then, the island shows us its monstrous, eponymous face.

Everything is perfect, you say, but the sun's beams burn like a laser, invisible grasshoppers screech in the trees, and on the way to the beach a kitten lies mewling among the parched reeds. You think about the mistakes you have made, every plan you wrecked, and you can't see the worth in anything. In the mornings, you don't want to wake up. You can't be bothered to wash. You lie in bed and imagine the kitten dying of thirst; you think about the inconsequentiality of the flowers on the balcony, ashamed at your disconsolation, your self-loathing, and the humiliation that sorrow foists upon you.

V

In 2011 Cohen was the recipient of the Prince of Asturias Award for Literature. In his acceptance speech, he said he understood how to use his voice, understood the instructions that came with it. He said:

The instructions were never to lament casually. And if one is to express the great inevitable defeat that awaits us all, it must be done within the strict confines of dignity and beauty.

VI

My brother died at the age of fourteen, on my twentieth birthday.

Cohen said death is “the great inevitable defeat that awaits us all”. To me, my brother’s death is first and foremost a defeat. I don’t believe in destiny, so I can’t say who my family ‘lost’ against, but I know that we spent those awful years at his bedside, and in the end, we finished second. I still haven’t come to terms with it.

To my mind, mourning and the sense of defeat have fused into one: all disappointments trigger in me a suffocating sorrow, while mourning a death elicits feelings of shame and humiliation.

While grieving the end of my marriage on the island of Hydra, I was simultaneously grieving the loss of my brother. When I mourn anything at all, I mourn for him, weep that his life was cut short all too soon.

Disappointment, heartache, our grief in the face of death. Different losses seep into one another and fester.

When you have seen a child’s muscles waste away so much that he can no longer hold a pencil, when you have seen his bloodshot, blinded eye that a giant tumour is trying to push from its socket; when you know that the surgeons have opened up his skull from ear to ear, and you have run your finger along the scar, heard him cry out “I DON’T WANT TO DIE!”, when you’ve seen him eventually give up and *accept* death, it breaks you so fundamentally that, even eighteen years later, it’s impossible to recover.

How can one embrace a loss like this, how can one grieve gracefully, let alone with a semblance of dignity, when one feels such overwhelming resentment, such relentless suspicion towards life?

VII

On another trip to Greece, I spent some time in the small town of Dráma, near Thessaloniki. I visited a neglected Jewish cemetery situated beside a dusty road and hidden behind walls. My guide, a man named David Koen, opened the iron gates and gave a talk about local history.

Before the Second World War, half the population of Dráma and the neighbouring towns was Jewish. Nowadays there are no Jews at all, though both Christians and Muslims tried to protect the local Jewish community from persecution. David’s wife died a few years ago, and since then he has been the last Jew in his hometown. His wife’s is one of the few graves that anyone tends to. Almost all

the other graves are unmarked, the nameless resting places of the anonymous departed, a memorial to the destruction of Greco-Jewish culture.

Our guide told us his father's story too: in October 1940, a few months before David's birth, Italy attacked Greece, and his young father was sent to the front. He had recently got married. The war between Italy and Greece was so momentous that the Greeks still sometimes refer to it as *έπος*, an 'epic'. The fighting lasted only six months, but the winter conditions were tough. Many soldiers froze to death. David's father survived and returned to his pregnant wife. He had only been home for a few days when Bulgarian troops marched into the town and murdered him and all the other Jews who hadn't gone into hiding.

David told us he still mourns this loss, the father who never got to see his son, to experience the joy that was so tantalisingly within reach.

Then he smiled, offered us some sugared pastries, and placed the box of pastries on his wife's gravestone.

VIII

I ate the pastry and swallowed back tears. Weeds climbed their way across the cracked headstones, and I was reminded of the glass cabinets at the Jewish Museum Berlin: the dishes that had belonged to victims of the Holocaust, their books, their silver combs... I thought how different it is to live *today*, when a person's life is so much longer than that of their belongings.

I thought of David's father, my brother, their lives cut short. How curious it was to meet him; no description of his appearance could do justice to the sensitivity, the clarity of his being. How grateful I was to have met him.

And how incongruous it felt when *he* thanked our group, said he was touched that we wanted to hear his story.

IX

Never lament casually.

Naturally, Cohen was referring to his own voice, the poetics of his songs and verse. It's unlikely that he intended these words as some kind of motto. But there was something poetic about the unaffected manner in which David Koen dealt with death, with the losses visited upon his life, his family and people.

What is grief within the strict confines of beauty and dignity? It is this: the image of a box of sugared pastries on a wife's grave in a cemetery for nameless Jews.

X

One of our group commented in passing that there was something typically *Jewish* about Koen's relationship with death.

Cohen was eleven years old the first time he saw images from the concentration camps. "We Jews are the professionals in suffering", he said years later.

Cohen and Koen. Rabbis of a composed grieving. Perhaps it is because of the sheer weight of generations that Jews are able to accept defeat with such dignity. They observe the *shiva* and step over their loss.

XI

Must we then become professional sufferers in order to learn how to let go?

XII

In my first book, I wrote about David Grossman's novel *To the End of the Land*. I have spent many years with this book, walking in the footsteps of its protagonist, Ora.

Ora sets off hiking across Galilee in an attempt to keep her son Ofer alive. Having already served in the Israeli army, Ofer volunteers for another post as part of a dangerous, month-long operation. But if they don't find me, his mother thinks, if they can't find me, he won't get hurt. Ora doesn't understand the thought herself. "She knows it makes no sense, but what does?"

The anti-war sentiment of the novel is expressed through Ora's feelings of inadequacy and the events that beset her family. The novel offers a panorama onto a landscape of love and parenthood, the emotional world of Jews and Arabs, a terrain of violence in a land that is at once beautiful but poisoned with anger.

Ora takes with her a man called Avram, a former lover from her youth. Through the course of their conversations, the reader becomes acquainted with Ofer too. Ora and Avram try to keep Ofer alive simply by talking about him, though at times they speak about the boy as though he were already dead.

There are, in a way, two levels to Ora's sorrow: she flees because she is not ready to accept news of Ofer's possible death. But she carries death with her on her flight, she grieves before actually losing her son.

To the End of the Land is, in its own right, a grieving process of sorts. While Grossman was writing the novel, his son Uri was serving as a tank commander in the occupied West Bank. Uri, who had always closely followed his father's writing, was killed in a missile strike during the 2006 Lebanon

War, in the cycle of violence whose filaments extend across the world and far into the past, on the same continuum that claimed David Koen's father too.

XIII

How could a man called David possibly call his son Uri? In the Old Testament, it was King David who sent Uriah the Hittite into battle – to face certain death – after making Uriah's wife Bathsheba pregnant.

What was Grossman thinking when he named his son? Why had my parents given my brother a name that means 'sword' in Arabic? Should a name equip a child for battle?

Most of the novel was written before Uri's death. Grossman says he continued working on the novel after a period of mourning. "What changed, above all, was the echo of the reality in which the final draft was written."

As one long prepared...

Perhaps one should always start grieving in good time.

XIV

On the Aegean shores, I found a light-green stone. It was the same shape as the island upon which it lay. The shape of Hydra.

Seen from the shore, it looked as though the mountain rising up in the middle of the island had drawn a line to demarcate itself from the sky. I felt the weight of the stone in the palm of my hand, and a nightmare flashed through my mind, one that I often had when my brother was still alive.

In the dream I'm carrying him in my arms and running along a narrow pathway slithering up the side of a steep mountain. Beneath me is a sheer, bottomless drop, it is cold, dark and foggy. I'm running as fast as I can, but I'm afraid I won't get to my destination in time. My legs feel heavy, my lungs ache, the earth is crumbling away beneath me and there's a falling sensation in my gut. My brother is shrinking in my arms, becoming smaller and smaller all the while. Eventually he is so small and light that I'm holding him in one hand, and before long he disappears altogether.

XV

If my brother had still been alive, he would have turned 33 this year. I'd like to imagine what kind of person he might have grown to become, but I can't.

His absence, his non-existence, is all-consuming. It is impossible to think beyond the loss.

It is where everything starts, where everything returns, and ever shall be thus.

XVI

Yet, some people still ask: tell me something about him.

Even though I have already said: the absent presence is the most present of all.

Even though I have tried to say that this text is not about my brother; it is about the fact that he no longer exists.

That is why he is absent from this text.

XVII

David, David and David. Did your name gift you the art of loss?

Once Uriah was killed in action, King David too was forced to give up his son, for his deed had "displeased the Lord". At first the servants did not dare tell their master what had happened, so afraid they were that he might do something desperate. But the King of Judah did not observe a period of mourning: "But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

My compatriot, the Persian poet Mawlana Rumi has said the opposite: there is no need to grieve, because everything that has been lost *will return* in another form.

How long does it take, and is what returns as immense as the feeling of loss itself ?

Translated from the Finnish by David Hackston

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