

A SHOE LIKE ANY OTHER

George Blecher

*There was an Old Woman who lived in a Shoe
She had so many Children she didn't know what to do
She gave them Broth without any Bread
She whipped them all soundly and put them to Bed.*

WHERE WAS I when she snatched me? Rocked in a carriage by a bored Jamaican nanny? Crying salty tears as my teenage Mom watched the Jerry Springer show? Had the Old Woman been observing us for weeks, deciding in that fierce single-minded way of hers that I needed to be snatched and deserved to be? Did she love me even then? Why else would she have taken the risk or inflicted the pain? But then she loved risk almost as much as she loved us: you could tell from the way sweat poured off her like a basketball player: if she couldn't find the passion, she'd invent it.

She must have lifted me toward the sky. A relief, an escape from everything confining, a lightening into pure light. If there was a moment of panic, I don't recall it: all I remember is the floating. Maybe she'd had so much practice snatching that she knew how to make us feel safe, even as she tore us from our mothers' arms—more than safe, secure in the knowledge that this was the freedom we were born for.

Then I remember being stuffed. Lowering me against flesh as resilient as mine, she pressed my body into a crevice, enfolded space with other breathing bodies whose hearts I could hear beating close and far away. How long did I stay there? Time became our mother, our bed and blanket; it was over and under us, all around us. How could it hurt us or slip through our fingers? It was our lives and sleep its sugar fields.

Why had she picked my sibs and me? Was she trying to save us from something? I believe it was cold: we were cold and would die without her. How could she tell from just a casual stroll past our carriages or a glance over our caregivers' shoulders? Grayness. Stiffness. Bluish lips. A look of suspicion beyond our years. Isn't that how cold babies always look?

She put us in piles and warmed us. For the first days she must have walked around like an oyster farmer, plucking this one or that when we made little mewling sounds of hunger. When she pulled me out, emptiness swooped around me, as

big as sleep was safe. I felt her lap beneath me, her thighs bobbing up and down. "Little Mr. Delicious." She massaged my arms and legs until my blood hummed. "So how is your life, Monsieur? I think pretty all right. I love this part here." She squeezed my inner thigh. "So white for a boy! That's all right; gorgeousness knows no gender. And look at those ruddy sleepy cheeks. There's plenty of blood in that body!" She offered me milk and a Three Musketeers bar. "Don't tell anyone. This is the treat that daren't speak its name. Must life consist only of righteousness? I do not think so. How else will you learn how good the bad things are?"

After she'd examined every fold, orifice, hair follicle—and kissed them all, rubbed them all, hugged me like someone sighing over rich food—she curled me in her arms. She couldn't carry a tune. That was okay: her voice wandered into murmuring caverns where you tried to follow but got drowsy and listened from a distance, like someone moaning five houses away. But not a painful moan, just the sound of living. When she put me back in the pile, I found my place as if I'd never been away.

II

AN OLD WOMAN? Hardly. Not even at the very end could you say that she wasn't the youngest of us all. Not ugly or witchy either. A beautiful big-boned hippie who must have grown so fast so early that her parents looked at her with bewilderment and awe. Her hair was a briar patch, freckles covered every inch of her skin, her voice had twenty different registers. But it was her face with its wide mouth, nose that sneezed like a French horn, eyes that kept searching ours that made us swoon with longing even as it calmed us. Maybe we loved her because who she was was so inescapable: emotions swept over her so violently that you wanted to cry and crawl up against her breast.

We did. Over and over. We were bees sucking at her, drinking her in. Thirty mouths and pairs of hands and little thighs fastened to her, her eyes closed but upturned and dreamy: you might think that this outrageous fate that she'd concocted was just a way to keep herself aroused.

A shoe? Maybe yes, maybe no. One can't really tell from the inside. Even from the outside, scale changes the familiar into abstraction. Maybe it was a multi-level shack, something that Frank Gehry and the Los Angeles School later cleaned up and cashed in on. Or maybe her parental home, a Victorian monstrosity that she'd let go to seed to terrify the neighborhood kids: certainly she herself on her shop-

ping trips must have hissed and waved her fist like a gorgeous witch in tie dye dresses and granny glasses. So why not a shoe, a vacuum cleaner, a Cornflakes box—anything they could laugh at to dispel the strangeness?

It could have been a shoe. It felt like one, like something that had taken organic rather than geometric shape. The lights were always dim (Did she keep the wattage low to teach us to navigate by our hearts and imaginations, as she herself tried so hard to do?) so that we felt and smelled our way along the corridors, up and down the catwalks and stairs, brushing against walls as fuzzy as hide.

People had lived there before us. Lots of them. The corners, closets, folds of drapery—places that other children had made their own, under stairs and inside hampers, abandoned dumbwaiters and attic rooms taller than they were wide—were filled with ghost families, not scary ones, shadows of children that we could almost speak to and touch. The Old Woman never disturbed us there. We hid as long as we wanted—hours, days. Consciously or not, she tried to make the Inside so various and self-replenishing that we'd never miss the Outside.

So many Children she didn't know what to do? Fed them Broth without any Bread? Whipped them soundly and put them to Bed? Old wives' tales, myths of the envious.

She'd put each new child on the kitchen table, step back and look. He or she would be bawling—blind crying that we knew was just a way to contain the thrill of change. She didn't move, just let him be. She smiled. We smiled. Under the heat of our eyes the little one sat shivering, heaving, terrified but not completely—something in him already sensed that his luck had changed. Soon sleep bled up through his body until, with an apologetic sigh, he collapsed with his hands under his head, the table his private bed. There was no difference between Inside and Outside then. She'd pick him up and put him in a pile.

She never punished us. Just stopped loving us. The skin on her face lost its sheen, her eyes turned inward, she became a cut-out of herself. In that moment, everything changed. We wandered up and down the treacherous stairs, through the empty accusing rooms. Voices rose up behind our heads. At any moment we might be sent screaming into the cold world, the place without her. With the others she acted doubly happy, vivacious; she whipped cream into towers, devised games that never ended. Grateful to be in her charmed circle, my sibs stood up taller, more beautiful. Now every moment without her was a highway of broken glass.

Trying to fall asleep in a lonely corner, I'd strain my ears, hoping to feel her breath against my cheek, her fingers combing through my hair, her eyes checking

anxiously to see if I was frozen. How could anyone change so absolutely? If she returned to her old self, could I trust it, or was it a prelude to something far worse?

III

THE OLD WOMAN BEFORE AN EASEL and a crumbling pad of paper, hands covered with charcoal and pastels:

“This thing I’m trying to draw here is a pomegranate (*Punica granatum*). See if I can get the red right: a burning red yet kind of a dying fire, the color of poison oak and ivy in the fall—which I’d show you if I could but I’m not sure they exist, anyway not our concern—and inside, under the leathery skin, packed together a little like your teeth Joshua, yes you, in beautifully intimate bunches, separated by a thin white membrane, are seeds, partly transparent, partly pink, bursting with a tart liquid that wakes you up like a blast of cold water. Now the most interesting thing about these seeds is what you could call their popping potential—not that they make a sound when they pop, except in the tiny nerves of the molars, but when your teeth rest on them they feel a promise of bursting, of absolute fullness, and maybe one’s teeth actually hesitate before biting down, wanting to prolong the pleasure, sort of like...squeezing these cheeks here.” (She grabbed Elliot’s or Allen’s cheeks and squeezed.)

“If I could show you a pomegranate, I would. But I don’t run across them much these days. They take us back to our old friends the Greeks, you remember them? The pomegranate was the favorite fruit of the King of the Underworld, the place which we give other names to don’t we Carson, and which we try to avoid by doing yoga and exercise but can’t avoid forever though we intend to for a long time and which, though filled with lots of people, must have been a little lonely for the old King. So he decided to find the best and brightest goddess in the Upper World, one who looked like Tahisha here—or Arlene and Darlene—and take her back to be his Queen. I think that she fell in love with him. Don’t you? Why else would she have stayed down there? I think he must have been handsome and wise, but maybe gloomy too. Anyway, in the Underworld she grew up to be herself, the person in the mirror you come to recognize over the years. Sometimes she did get homesick, and once her Mom managed to get down there and ask her to come back. But the King couldn’t let her go. She brightened things up so much that he just couldn’t imagine being without her. Finally he agreed to let her go home for a visit, but he gave her a couple of pomegranate seeds before she left. Her tongue played with

them a long time. She could feel how they'd burst and the taste would fill her mouth the way you feel when I tell you a sweet sad story. She looked at him. He looked a little like the Beast, you know, handsome but not handsome? Handsome to her but not to everyone? She knew that if she ate them she'd belong to him forever, and she knew that if she spit them out she could go back to her old life. But she couldn't really *remember* her old life, that was the trouble. Though she did remember some of the feelings—the open spaces, the surprises. She looked at her sad Mom, and she looked at her sad husband the King, and she realized that she couldn't leave either of them. She belonged to both places, Inside and Outside, above and below, part child, part grown-up. Just like me. Just like you. Except I don't go back."

You see, she never exactly said that the Outside didn't exist. It was always there, the place we'd go to once we were ready—if we ever were. Pomegranates and ice cream, Volvos and sunrises and track meets—the world of objects and events tantalized her even more than it did us.

The center of our education was the Expeditions. Every few weeks she packed our backpacks and lined us up: "Today we will visit Africa, children, ancient and modern: the ruins of Aksum and the mythical Kasch, the valley of the Pharaohs at Luxor, once Thebes, the slums of Timbuktu, before traveling south to Victoria Falls and the Serengeti Plains. This is another one of our reconnaissance expeditions: no need to take notes.

"Those of you on our earlier Expeditions" (she meant everybody) "will recall not only the relentless sun, the diet of cactus juice and matzoh, the tsetse flies, recalcitrant camels—but the bandits, the communication problems, the understandable yet frustrating reluctance of the indigenous peoples to allow us into their sacred places. Now I can hear some of you saying that as outsiders we should respect their privacy, civilization has ruined enough. To a great extent I agree with you. But it is our mission, don't you see, yours and mine, to learn everything—sacred and profane, inner and outer—about the world as we imagine it. In order to save it from extinction, we must preserve it in our imaginations before our destructive era turns it all into advertising and photo-ops."

Too obscure for kids who couldn't even recall sunlight? Every stirring incomprehensible phrase fired us up: we were her personal troops in a crusade to restore the world to its former innocence simply by imagining it. Who could resist?

Not that it was easy. We trudged up and down stairs, in and out of rooms, climbed ropes, slid down poles. A regular Inward Bound. And talked. And talked.

A chain gang of voices, we marched with our hands to our brows, trying to force pictures from the material she'd supplied us:

"It's too hot, and the sand has scorpions in it!...What's that cackling sound? Sounds like birds that pick your eyes out or maybe hyenas...There's camel drool all over me, and the camel breath smells like armpits!...The Sphinx's eyes look totally Chinese, why do you suppose that is? Did I ever tell you about King Oedipus and the Sphinx?...Don't tell us about another king, tell us what they ate, did they have kitchens in the pyramids, we're so *hungry!*..."

Though we knew the bannisters and catwalks by heart, in the dark (she'd turned out all the lights) nothing was familiar. In the house—the shoe, whatever—the darkness reached up to the sky, it was the sky.

She'd provided us with stories and pictures. But had she also imbedded tape decks or CD-ROMs and loudspeakers in the walls so that as the hours passed, we came to believe that we weren't making up the sounds but actually heard live monkeys or coyotes or cawing grackles? Was it because she didn't let us sleep—"We have so much ground to cover, kiddies!"—that in the end we saw whatever she wanted us to see, Luxor or Copenhagen or Outer Space, the images in our heads overpowered our senses, and reality could be altered by the modulation of her voice? When we got back, we were exhausted but proud: everything she'd told us, everything we'd come to believe had proved to be true.

Yet not for everybody.

"Why can't we go there?" a few of my bolder sibs complained.

"Because it's not there anymore. Not exactly. If you saw it, you'd think it was. But it's not. Take it from me. It's all just plastic and malice."

"I'd give my nose to see it anyway."

"Be my guest."

If we left, we'd lose her. Even if she took us back, we'd be grown-ups, and grown-ups were what she hated or feared or pitied. It was only children she loved, we knew that, and who wanted to live without her love? Instead of leaving, we waddled behind her, her baggy clothes slipping from our hips, mops and towels on our heads. Pieces of her appeared everywhere in us: in the sharpness of the light in Cora's eyes; in the way James laughed, a rush of warm sound, as comforting as corduroy or baked potatoes; in the way the Twins stuck out their elbows like ski poles as they sped from room to room. But even this wasn't enough. We wanted to graft ourselves to her—at least to convince her that we were her real children so that we wouldn't ever have to contemplate leaving.

After the Expeditions we couldn't make it to our beds. We sprawled in a heap like the ones we'd been stacked in as babies. Smiles itched on our faces. We heard her above us, prying off our shoes and shaking out army blankets, whispering how well we'd done and how much more there was to see. With our eyes closed, we looked up at the stars and the spotlight of a moon, which stayed in the sky as long as we wanted it to.

IV

HOW DID WE SURVIVE all those years without sunlight? Were we actually living inside her crazed mind? In her youth had she bombed a bank or recruiting center, and was this her idea of hiding underground? Why didn't we leave?

We loved her, we hated her, we didn't leave.

V

I FOUND a hole in the wall. A filament of light so thin you could almost strum it. I tried to roll it up in my hand but it resisted. I let it play against my palm, sensing its warm tip like a whisper. I tried pushing it back through the hole: it telescoped. I let it go and watched it spread and disappear into the gloom. But it didn't quite vanish: it kept filling the darkness with tiny dancing animals, and when I put it against my hand again it was still alive. I knew what it was—I wasn't stupid!—and recognized that I should be afraid of it. It was an outlaw: all it did was shine and thrust, shine and thrust again. The Old Woman had told us that she was an outlaw too, anybody who didn't like things as they are was an outlaw—but not this kind of outlaw. It had no principles, it just did what it wanted.

I put my eye against the hole. All I could see was whiteness. You could walk into whiteness like that and never come back. It was so much bigger than us that it was really a kind of laughter: the Old Woman kept it out because she didn't want to be laughed at.

She seemed to sense what I'd seen. I felt the sharp edge of her stare and I ran back to the hole and plugged it up. Now I was in a prison that I wished more than anything else could keep me in.

When she came in the middle of the night, I was whimpering.

"What's the matter, baby?"

"Don't leave."

“Did I say I was leaving?”

“I don’t want you to leave.”

“I’ll never leave. You’ll leave.”

“I won’t ever leave.”

“Tell me what’s on your mind.”

I poured out lies about how I saw ghosts and hated my sibs and how I felt so sad, so sad. My lies were like the songs she sang to us, no directions or tune. They were nothing but fear and the need to conceal.

She slung me over her shoulder and carried me to her crowded room at the top of the stairs. She took out a book of photos—pictures with much more darkness in them than the ones she drew. There she was, sitting on steps in front of a house that wasn’t so special because it was exactly as she’d described it, she hadn’t lied, there were trees and grass, telephone poles and garbage cans, except that somehow it was smaller than our imaginations, and less interesting. I didn’t care about any of it; all I could think of was how hard she was breathing. As she flipped the pages, I brushed away her tears; I didn’t want to look. But in all the pictures she was the easiest to find. Though her hair was held down by barrettes and her body squeezed into dresses that puffed up from underneath, she looked like she wanted to run through the photos right out of that world into ours.

“You look pretty,” I said.

“I look like one of them! I never was. Don’t get the wrong idea. Can’t you see that?”

I could but didn’t want to say: it meant losing that world completely.

“Had enough?”

She was almost howling.

“What was so wrong with it?” I asked.

“Here.” She pointed to her heart. “They didn’t have it here. I told you already!”

“Please tell me more, Mom.” The word made me shiver. “I won’t tell anyone.”

Her face was so dark I couldn’t look at it. So I went a little crazy. I got up and danced. “Are they Emperors or commoners? Are they in China or Tibet? Are you Chinese or Ethiopian? I do believe you’re Ethiopian! Is that a ship with wheels? Can you eat the roses? I do believe you can!”

“My little madman!”

Now her face was full of delight—and worry. I felt so relieved.

She shook me by the chin.

“What are you so afraid of? What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing, Mom. Absolutely nothing. Am I afraid? Oh, no, look, I’m full of happiness and joy.”

“I’m keeping this one.” She hugged me so hard I was sure I’d saved us all. “This one is mine forever.”

That was when I knew I’d leave.

VI

COULD ONE SAY that she taught us too well, and in the end the dreams she wanted us to dream overpowered our need of her? Or is it that Nature abhors a shoe that is an ark but also a prison?

When the dreams came, they caught us by surprise. One day we were normal children, the next living in a world of smoke and tentacles. The nights rocked with groans, sighs, tossing and turning, sheets being ripped out of hospital corners. All we wanted was sleep, not in our beds—too much safety was anathema—but dangling upside down from the rafters and catwalks that held our lives together!

In my dreams I built one perfect little Greek temple after another in full sunlight and spent whole dream-days painting stripes and swirls on the columns. I breathed in air so fresh it tasted like chilled plums. The sun and sky were the yellow and blue of our easel painting: the whiteness I’d seen through the hole had flared into the entire spectrum, and in no time that bright garishness blocked out the Old Woman’s loving dimness.

It was the same for my sibs. We walked around with goofy smiles, gently bumping into each other, the shiny new hairs on our bodies giving off sparks. Of course we didn’t tell her. Why confuse her, they were only dreams, weren’t we doing what she’d always wanted us to do? But we knew this was a lie: these weren’t dreams of obedience but of subversion.

We suspended the Expeditions. Not exactly stopped, not exactly protested: we were too clever and guilty, too immersed in ourselves to attempt anything like honesty. We lowered our eyes, slouched, stuffed hands in pockets, complained about sore knees. We slept late and called it the flu. Finally we blurted out everything. Why not? She *was* our mother, we *were* proud, we *did* believe in our righteousness even as we deceived her. She listened so hard that the insides of our skulls hurt. At night, when she brushed our heads together like wind chimes, she did it with as much pride and sadness as anger.

But we were dazzled by our dreams! Temples, jazz quintets, the smell of sweat and perfume at the court of Louis XVI—how did we think up such things? (We'd forgotten completely who'd been our Muse.)

Instead of just touching, we fell in love. Were we beautiful inside *and* outside? Now our curiosity about each other was even greater than our dreams: instead of swinging lazily from our perches, we writhed around in the dark, groping for each other's hands.

We woke up exhausted but poised to swagger. "Look out, motherfuckers." What the hell had we been doing the whole night? Our PJs were stained with strange stuff. Every one of us was covered with glitter.

We broke up into couples, cliques, blood pacts. Everything that had been common ground became contested territory. Yet our dreams held us together. We stuffed our faces so that they'd have more action and substance; the more alarming the nightmare, the better we liked it. If only I could tell you how powerful we felt; the dreams, ever expanding, expanded our bodies too, and in a matter of months even the mirrors didn't recognize us. Our hair, muscles, voices grew wildly. Each dream upped the ante: Erik dreamed an ocean of butter, Belinda a roundhouse of locomotives, Georges a fish on every cast, Henry a creamy river gushing from the side of a tree!

We started to construct what you'd have to call our past. Before, nothing had ever replaced anything; we'd just kept adding to a store of wishes and experience. Now, sitting around, stroking our skin and moustaches, we discovered how to reminisce:

"God, remember the days when we did everything she wanted us to? Did you see the look on her face when she caught you playing with yourself? How did we ever sleep in fucking *beds*?"

Jesse was the first to bolt. He hugged his clothes and books, which kept slithering out of his arms.

"I'm outta here, Old Woman."

"If that's what you really want, my love."

"I can leave anytime I want."

"Don't feel that I'm standing in your way."

"You hate me, don't you, Old Woman? You think I'm shit."

"No, I love you."

"You love the others more!"

"No, you are my absolute favorite."

"I could leave if I wanted to."

"No one would dispute that."

"And I wouldn't come back."

"That would be very sad."

"I'd be on my own...."

"I can see the attractiveness of that."

"...but I'm fucking hungry!"

"Dinner's at the usual time. You are all my absolute favorites."

We sat before our bowls, trying to believe that nothing had changed; the Old Woman loved us and we loved her; the Family was still intact. Why did we have to choose between humiliation and losing her? Crying crocodile tears, we begged for forgiveness.

"Let's go on an expedition!" one genius of denial volunteered.

The chorus was deafening.

"Don't move. Just close your eyes." The Old Woman's voice was so weary it echoed. The strain of her self-control surrounded her like an evil aura.

"I'll lead!" said Jesse.

But that night she did all the talking; we just huddled together, afraid that she'd stop. There was so much that we didn't want to know that it took all our efforts to keep it out. As her voice droned on, we puffed up our cheeks and squeezed our eyes shut. But through the slits we could see her skin, pale as the inside of cucumbers. Truth had the softest voice: *You have destroyed the only home you ever had.*

VII

WHEN SHE ROUSED us one midnight, her face was covered with cobwebs.

"Get up, all of you. You heard me. *Machen Sie schnell.*"

She paced back and forth before our ragged lines. When her eyes turned to look at us, they didn't have whites.

"This *is* what you wanted, Henry and Claire? Admit it!"

"We're so sleepy, Mom. Can't we please go back to bed?"

"No more sleeping here. Plenty of sleep east of Eden. Kerry, get your head up!"

Even as we stood together, our bodies kept touching. Brushing. Teasing. Turning present into past. Telling us that only the future mattered.

She marched us up the stairs and along the catwalks until we reached the exact place where I'd found the hole. My gum was still there, petrified. Spreading her arms, she threw herself in front of us.

"Hey, what's this? Why aren't all of you in bed? This is total insanity. How do you expect to excel in school? I beg to differ with you. Quite vehemently! Have you no respect for the rules of the game?"

If this was a play, who'd written it?

From then on, the shoe was too small; our shoulders sloped, our heads bumped the ceiling. We inhaled each other's garlicky, canned corn breaths and listened to thirty stomachs rumbling. What we liked most was fighting. No pretext was too ridiculous—"Your elbow pisses me off!"—to grab someone, throw him against a wall, take secret pride in the gathering crowd, give each other bear hugs that lasted far too long. Discontent was our aphrodisiac: we snarled in the shadows, then exchanged hot kisses! But we always stopped before losing control, we weren't ready for *that*. The nights were filled with sibs falling from their perches: "Oh, help me I'm bleeding." "That's piss, not blood." "Eat me, fuckface." "I don't like the taste of shit." "So hop on a spoon." "Say that to my face and you're dog meat." "Bow wow, you asshole." "You want a mouthful of fist?"

We were a moaning tree, a chorus of lost kids, but it kept us on fire: we loved every minute.

True barbarians, one morning we woke up with the taste of blood on our lips.

"Where's the Old Woman?"

"What difference does it make? We don't need her. *We're leaving her.*"

"But don't we have to at least say good-bye?"

"She doesn't give a shit about us. Why should we give a shit about her?"

"Maybe she was a mirage, maybe we made her up."

"Then who changed the sheets?"

"She'll come back if we wait long enough."

"We've been waiting our whole fucking lives!"

"What if it's horrible out there?"

"Then we die."

"What's 'die?'"

All this time we'd been heading up the stairs. Gradually our anxiety turned into petty arguments, our true area of expertise. But our cheeks were livid with excitement, and we smelled like well cared-for children: irresistible. How could we

help being in love with our ability to hurt? It was the main thing that would carry us through.

Finally we'd gone as far as we could go. Far, far below us, almost lost to us, were the empty tables, the deserted easels, the open books, the beds we hadn't slept in for months. All of it looked very peaceful in a dusty, totally irrelevant way.



IS LIFE AFTER CHILDHOOD an anti-climax? How can it not be?

After we left, we saw pieces of the Old Woman everywhere. The burning bush of her hair, her big strides, her freckled skin: everyone seemed to have a little of her in them. This was both alarming and comforting. Things would never be as good as we'd imagined but never as bad as we feared.

In time we got used to a place where terror and ecstasy gave way to taste and competence—a world in which you build your house brick by brick. Our memories of the Old Woman faded. Life became pleasantly two-dimensional.

Sometimes, though, she appeared before one or another of us in all her brassy glory, grinning, on the move, talking a blue streak: a reminder of how intensely one can feel. But we never tried to imitate her again; maybe because we'd grown up on the extremes, it was the middle—the rational, knowable middle—that we clung to and inhabited like an old shoe.