

MARK HALPERIN

Falling Through the
MUSIC

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READING AT THE BEACH

I believe Celan because he jumped into the Seine and drowned,
and Dickinson because she didn't marry,
and Mandelstam because he tried to write a poem for Stalin that would
save his wife and maybe himself, and did write one, though he per-
ished all the same.

And I believe Stevens because he continued to live in a large brick house
with a wife who didn't love him or he didn't love, and went to the
office everyday;
and I believe Bishop because when the money ran out, she found work,
and Baudelaire for keeping to one book, like Whitman, at about the same
time too.

I believe Rilke because looking, for him, was looking into, and so I
overlook his fascination with titled women,
and believe Yeats for making the aristocratic seem noble,
and Tsvetaeva for coming back to rage at everyone, even while the Terror
was raging around her, even if she hanged herself with the piece of
rope Pasternak reputedly gave her to tie her bags,
and Williams for living in Paterson, New Jersey of all places, dancing like
an uncle, while doing some serious fooling around,
and Auden for being generous after he was disappointed in love, and for
drinking martinis in England, which was very American.

Without the verification of their lives, how could I trust them?
So what if Donne, born a Catholic, ended up the head of the Anglican
Church?
So what if Baratinski, who died shortly after his beloved wife, worshiped
Goethe?

And I withhold judgment on the living, as I read toward twilight;
I don't ask how long will I turn back to this one or that one.

The roar of the sea drowns out questions,
it goes on and on where I am;
the sun hangs above the water, laying down a path like a set of stepping-
stones that shimmer even as they grow small, shrinking to a single
point of light.

POP

He had been Austrian, he told me, and when I was young, I imagined him in Vienna, its waltzes and tankards of foaming beer. The few times I was taken to his apartment, confined to the kitchen, I would peer at the living room, always dim in late afternoon sunlight, and study the furniture, the hulking sofa and easy chairs covered in thick, cloudy vinyl, the room no one used.

Sunday mornings, when he ate with us, there were bagels, butter or cream cheese, and whitefish, lox, sardines, big cups of coffee with milk and sugar. Finished, well-chewed cigar between his teeth, he'd climb into a DeSoto or Dodge the rich maroon of gravy, one stop completed on the rounds of his three children, and disappear.

His actual birthplace, I learned, was on the frontier of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czernowitz—city of Paul Celan, who wrote in German, Rumanian, translated Mandelstam, who, family murdered by the Nazis, fled to Bucharest, and finally, in 1970, the Seine.

After Pop, as my mother called him, died, I studied the remote corners of Europe for a city that kept moving: to Rumania, Moldavia, Ukraine, the Soviet Union. I scanned maps for mysterious Bessarabia, which I adorned with palm trees, then the adjacent Bukovina, of which it was the capital, until I'd pinned it down: Czernowitz, city on the River Bug, Cernauti, city with the changing name, Chernivts of five languages, Cernauti cleansed by Nazis, Soviets, Rumanians, Cernivtsi, like Pop, irrecoverable.

MY MOTHER'S WORDS

When Mother called to say
father was dying, I didn't ask
for time to make arrangements.
My wife said she'd inform
my boss. I packed, drove to
the airport and flew cross-
country, feeling proud I'd
thought of him and her before
myself, although I'd paused
on the phone and mother must
have heard. When, years later,
my sister called and said, *Sit down*
I knew before a word, Mother
had died. This time I left with-
out false self-congratulations,
wanting Mother to be proud,
to hear her say "You did well"
who'd sent me back then, before
my father died. *You've a wife,
a child, another life: go home.*

GROWING UP

1.

I believed my father was a spy. He had been born in Russia, he had an accent, and he was older than other dads, which confirmed it. He was always disappearing into the basement—to work, he said. I guessed he sent secret messages to Moscow late at night. If they caught him, I would defend him, but I knew what he was doing was wrong. I loved him *though* he was a spy.

In the Soviet Union, I had learned at school, people had no liberty, but he argued education was free there: college, even medical-school. Later, when I asserted the superiority of the Soviet Union's treatment of women, he angrily informed me that women doctors were paid less than men who dug ditches. He kept me unbalanced, uncertain. No matter which side I took, he took the other. No matter what I believed, what I believed was wrong and based on insufficient knowledge. Father knew if you knew more . . .

2.

My father wasn't a spy, though he did spend a lot of time in the basement, where he worked on plaster casts, the furnace, and making cabinets. He could have been thinking. Maybe English didn't feel comfortable or we didn't in those days, in his late forties. Then I was almost grown and he was old. He stayed upstairs, even more a mystery. Polite, handsome in an Old World way, with generous, deep, sad eyes, he could be mercilessly ironic with me.

3•

Since Father was never a regular dad, that role devolved to Mother, a native-born American and accentless. I fought with her rather than my father. She liked the brio of engagement, the stir of conflict, but our disputing horrified him, who was the youngest, last and twelfth, or the twelfth of thirteen. He had been raised by sisters he loved absolutely. How could a child argue with his mother?

I lost regularly and the battles were drawn out, but I'd find a wedge of Swiss-cheese in the refrigerator, a peace offering.

4•

After my father died, I thought of everything I didn't know about him and never would. I still do. His distance remained as if it were all that could be saved. One day, after my mother died, I came across my camera. What did I need it for? Who would I send pictures to?

LYING

Why you might feel uncomfortable
with elaborate weavings, when
they're as apt to catch on hard fact
as to unravel or become one
more maze you'd forgotten the way out
of, any one could understand.
The prudent shun a purely gratuitous

complexity. But this reluctance
to pretend you enjoyed a meal, a book—
to say to someone you may not
like, *nice to see you*, when it's to your advantage
to do so, this pulling back as from
a foul smell or window ledge. . . . Why
fudge, why resort to a “modified

version,” mislead, concoct, invent, rather
than simply lie? Do we intuitively
regard the false, not as unreal, but unclean?

Are the keenly ironic, ambiguous
phrases we toss off—our evasions and/or
shufflings, those clever side-steps
we do in dancing—done to hide the truth, to

keep it from harm's way, secure it
a place for safekeeping? From whom or what?

Or is it us? Discretely bending
the data, smearing a line you'd just as soon
not cross, you're not a fraud
so much as someone hedging his bets, testing
the ground, noting a nearest window,

door in case an unexpected exit's called for.

When was it that simplicity sufficed
and like a captured soldier all you had to give
was a name, rank, and serial number,
and gentlemen—their sacred word? Before
the invention of torture, was honor
worth more? Was it all there was to lose?

SINCERITY

There are those who shake
at the thought of being obscure,
ingenuous, and turn to memory
as a wall they can lean against,
rock solid, its guarantees basic
as desire's gutturals. The facts
and their significance they trust

blindly. Still, I recall the taste of
my own stomach's churning, hot
breath in my face. Squeamishness
felt then fled, and I reached down
deeper than I ever had before for
any scraps to feed the laboring
engine of my ingenuity. Say

"Freedom is the recognition
of necessity," as Benedict Spinoza
did, who never taught, but bought
his own with a shorter life by
grinding glass. Sincerity may
just be the overrated ballast,
to jettison when you need speed.

GUILDENSTERN TO HORATIO

Nothing fit but you, as tranquil as
a lake, and your biography, like glass,

transparent. You were always handy, tame,
forgettable, without a second name—

and for the aristocracy, friend
and servant are so close they seem to blend.

You might have penned a more reliable
version of events, played down your role until

the epilogue, bloody but tidy. Who
else could the young Fortinbras turn to?