Guernica Tabula Rasa

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Guernica

In the beginning was her voice, impervious as an egg, white and cool and rolling down my body, sticky caterpillar milk all down the length of me, guileless as air, and when I looked at my arm or leg or palms, no voice showed. “Your father made Ady fuck her dog. He used sticks and vegetables on her. She bled. She had to go to the hospital where they sewed her up.”

How could I be so much and always the same, this girl in a Midwestern summer listening to my mother, legs folded underneath like a little yogi in a lawn chair as we sat blanketed in the humid Illinois afternoon drinking iced tea spritzed with juice from a plastic lemon. A plastic lemon with a green top stored in its proper place between the catsup and horseradish. Plum-colored horseradish. While my mother talked, I thought about horseradish and catsup and wonderbread. My brother liked to take a whole loaf, knead it, work it by some backwards alchemy into a ball of dough, and pop it into his mouth like a big gumball.

She told me things. “My lover’s sperm is thick and sweet.” I had to get close to hear and nobody did, but I did, in her bedroom, in our backyard, in the shopping mall, as she turned to me, as she washed glasses, as she poured tea, as she let ice cubes tumble from her hands. I can’t tell now how much of my life was just waiting to hear what kept breaking me into a Guernica tableau, and how much was the actual hearing.

We lay soaked in Coppertone at the Twin Pools and I walked, wetting my feet in the gutters and leaving prints on the concrete that vanished in the heat, waiting at the high dive, standing at the very tippy-toe edge of the board and making it spring a little, then jumping in that glory of rebellion, legs scissoring, and smashing gently into the chlorine-wafting water, sinking down out of hearing with my hair floating up. I'd stay down as long as I could, until it was time to swim to the side and lie down next to my mother again.

"You see that man on the other side of the pool? That is my man. Look at him. Look at the curls of hair on his chest. He says I have a great body. He's looking at you. He does look at you. He says your body is almost as good as my body. He says I give the best blow jobs in Highland Park. I taught Bev how to give a blow job on a banana. Don't tell her I said so when you babysit her girls. Your father wouldn't have sex with me for the first week we were married. Your father says I'm like a sister and his dog is like his mate. My best friend did it with ice cubes. Your brother's girlfriend has a problem. Her clitoris is too high."

She might have stopped talking by then, and weeks and months had passed; I'd buy a Milky Way from the vending machine. Milky Way. I could stand on the driveway at night and gaze upon the Milky Way and that was nothing like the chewy chocolate in a candy bar. Words can go anywhere faster than Superman himself. The things she told me cut, cut, cut scars in my heart. A white egg rolling down me soft and unnoticed. Lapse drop. Surge die. Plunge dive. Dance cry. Sick well. Please don't tell me anything ever again. I thought of running away. I packed my suitcase and sat in the woods behind my house. Irises poked green butterknives up through the earth.

Tabula Rasa

And what did my father say? I tried telling him about my mother on college break, at a bar. He looked miserable for a moment and said to the waiter, raising his empty scotch glass, "Another glass of piss, please, on the rocks," and then changed the subject.

"I'm an ingénue," my father said once the waiter brought piss on the rocks, "I wake up every morning and life is a tabula rasa."

My dad liked to mail me cassette tapes, in the day of cassette tapes, talking into a recorder with one hand on the wheel, driving back from Chicago or Waukegan at night in an old Firebird that wouldn't go in reverse. He wouldn't look back. The tapes contained stories, and sometimes he'd leave the recorder on when he stopped at the 7-Eleven for a coke and hotdog. He liked to talk of himself in the dark in the Firebird to a lost daughter as he toured the towns along Lake Michigan: how he first saw that white Firebird with its red tail lights and a glowing dashboard and silver spokes and thought, "Oh God." And then saw a black Plymouth Oldsmobile. "And I liked it. I liked it very much. The dealer said, 'Paul, the Olds is you.' And I agreed. 'I know, I know. The firebird is who I want to be. But if I buy the Olds, I'll wake up in

the morning and say, Where is my Firebird?' So I bought both. People stopped in their tracks for the Firebird. It was spooky gorgeous. I figured I'd drive it all summer then sell it for the same cash I'd paid, but my Firebird just keeps going."

He told jokes. "I want to die in my sleep at the age of ninety like my father, and unlike the other seven passengers in his car at the time…actually I don't want to die in my sleep at all. I want to have the few people I really care about around me when I die, say a few meaningful words to each, and after I've said those words I want to close my eyes, get some sleep and get up in the morning."

He told the truth. "When my brother and I were kids he got hurt a lot, and I never got hurt. He fell off his bike and cracked his head hard and was dizzy. He was lying in bed and everybody was crowding around him and they brought him a coke with ice. I said, 'I want a coke with ice.' So they brought me my coke with ice, and I felt his glass and his was colder than mine. I switched our glasses. I had to have the coldest glass. Even in a moment of extreme crisis when someone I loved was injured, my personal needs had to be met first. I'm not happy with that, but I try to do that at no cost to others."

Here's how he did it with no cost to others: When he went to sleep, he knew the cost. When he woke up, the cost had gone in the night, like death. He was a tabula rasa. He never went in reverse. But it did him in. He had wanted to be a legendary writer. He had wanted to be a Firebird.

Ubi Sunt

It took five minutes for the television to warm up.

No one owned a purebred.

Milk was delivered twice a week at the back door. You'd peel off the corrugated cardboard top to drink the cream. When milk went up a cent we talked about it for weeks.

Hidden inside the box of laundry detergent were free glasses and dishes.

My brother was found one morning curled up asleep in a kitchen cabinet with an empty carton of ice cream.

We wore fishnet stockings that matched our skirts. We bought penny candy in a brown paper bag. Jacks and hula hoops, wax lips and moustaches. Lemon coke from the fountain. Pickles in a barrel and greasy fat french fries. Cops and robbers, sitting on the curb, jumping down the steps, bouncing on the bed, rolls of white paper that unfurled with colored candy dots to peel off and eat. Twelve cent comics. Tar so soft on a summer day. Screaming at Godzilla. Root beer floats and silver maples. Sandcastles with terraces and foot soldiers that can survive high tide.

I'm going to survive high tide. I'm going to hide. I'm going to fight. I'm going away. I'm going to New York. I'm not coming home. Don't say a prayer for me ever, because I am grown up now and know how to turn your prayers into arrows and aim them at your eyes.

Fugam Fecit

I did.
I am. I can.
(I cry). I shine.



Jill Neimark is an author of adult and children's fiction and nonfiction. Her novel, *Bloodsong*, was published in hard and softcover, translated into German, Italian and Hebrew and optioned for film. Her essays, poems and reviews have been published in *Aeon*, *The Rumpus*, *Los Angeles Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Cimarron Review* and others.