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Excerpt from a Prose Poem Memoir  
Chapter 2: The Dark Soul of the Accordion  
Sean Thomas Dougherty

*For Joseph Kriesler*



My grandfather does not sleep among the roots. His ashes are in an urn. His ashes are hidden in my grandmother's downturned eyes. My grandmother sits and stares out at the garden in my aunt Nora's house. She is waiting for the crocuses to bloom. She is waiting for the tulips to open the palms of their petals to cup the milky light. What does it mean to die in winter?

My grandfather died in late summer and all winter was our own death. We walked among the scattered children shouting as they pulled their plastic sleds carving up the hillsides at Frontier park. Red mitten blossoms in the snow, hats pulled low down to eyes, able to sit at Avanti's over a dark cup of coffee, flip through a book of Spanish poems, arguing with the translation's inept understanding of the vagaries of Lorca's syntax. To die in winter is to translate the cold sorrow of the heart into the slumber of the grass, to hear its one note quiet breathing beneath the snow. To know the sailboats moored as hulls to part the water toward the line where sky becomes the world. Sailboats: palmed hands of wind. To heal in winter requires forgetting, the way the snow turns the landscape into sleep. For in winter the world forgets its grieving. For in winter, the world becomes a silence made of snow. A silence made of breathing, the crunch of ice and salt beneath your boots. In the falling sky, we are able to re-find our womb-shape, our shape of solitude against the noise and detritus of grieving. In that silence we are able to unlisten and so begin to live again in the simple ways that living calls, to get up each day, to break the eggs at breakfast. Boil a pot of black coffee and not begin to weep for the

sudden recollection of his hand, the black hairs brushing your face, and the strong coffee breath of his kiss as he lifted you as a child in the morning. Once again you are able to tie our shoes.

*One must forget to continue to live.*



The rain outside has increased and my grandfather has fallen asleep. We can hear him wheeze in his morphine laced utterances. I sat downstairs on the couch with my father randomly clicking the television with the sound off, getting up to stare out at the streetlight lit street, the sounds of traffic from Congress, cars in the rain, destinations under their treads. I stood in the doorway half a dozen times smoking a cigarette, watching the smoke spiral up into the rain. More than once my grandfather woke and was calling to a name I couldn't understand.

The snow of my grandfather's eyebrows, the passing streets, endlessly fenced yards and children who run in their own wilderness. My grandfather's hands are the edge of somewhere weighed by its own rage, a voice shadowed with the blue of saying goodbye. Abandoned lots. Where there is the weight of hunger, my grandfather is there. My grandfather's reaching hand is an answer to all the bitterness, to the tongue's eating, and the stone's fatal flaw. Where there is the dismissive, he is the stutter in their speech. My grandfather's hands are a dark dusting, the raw faces, the stumped.

For which rules are cages, my grandfather crosses out. Walking down Congress Street the men call his name. His face opens a city block, his face is a braid against the hours spent searching for loose change. His face is a cup of coffee and a place to smoke. A place to smoke is not much to ask from the world for a man's life. My grandfather worked his life to create rooms of light and smoke and bread. To lean into them against the splintered wind.

*If one leans against the splintered wind...*



In the summer the runaway children gather on the streets of Portland, Maine. Their torn jeans, their blue hair, their tattoos.



The day my grandfather died.

Birds. When I cup my hands over my face and try to remember that day I see birds in the blue distance. I am standing in the kitchen holding the receiver and my father is telling me I need to return. I am angry with my father because I was just back visiting with my wife and son and the visit went bad. Everyone was so grief stricken and sad that no one knew how to talk to one another. We had wanted to stay with my grandfather but ended up leaving because we thought there wasn't room at the house. So typical of my family, of my own life, this inability to say what we need, what we want. Even at such an important time.

And then my grandmother called and I heard in her voice birds. Such a far away sight, they were rising into the sky over the lake. And it was as if I could see myself outside myself. I was standing there in the kitchen holding the receiver but in my mind I was already returning, already returning to where I was from like birds flying over the Great Lake, headed towards the nesting grounds. I hung up and called the airline. The next day I was sitting in a small silver jet rising up over the Great Lake.



My grandfather's eyes are rain across countless coun-

tries. My grandfather's eyes are closed.



Leaning back into my seat, closing my eyes—what I remember most about that flight, no one sat next to me.



The nighttime is an endless August of sirens and rain. I am walking past the closed shops of Congress Street, the used book stores and dive bars. I am walking past the brewery and the shipyard, past the boutiques and the bathing suit models, the mannequins in their perfect gestures. I am walking past the yellow blur of taxis, and the last drunks, stumbling home, I am walking past the rain. I am walking because my grandfather is dying and I cannot sleep. The insomnia of the grieving. The insomnia of third-shift workers laid off now home watching TV. The insomnia of women walking to sell their bodies along the bay. The insomnia of old women whose husbands are dying, can you hear them as they rise to walk into the bathroom and run the water of the sink, hear them fill the glass and drink slowly, hear them flick off the light. Can you hear them fold their bodies like paper cranes beside their dying husbands? Can you hear them lying with their eyes awake through the night? Can you hear the insomnia of daughters who talk in their sleep?

Or this—the insomnia of the rain, how it loses its lullaby, how it calls the teenage girls outside to climb over the cemetery steps and sit smoking cigarettes on the tombs of the long dead. The insomnia of car tires in the distance. The insomnia of the rough betrayals. Of late night Laundromats. The shabby insomnia of hospital waiting rooms, of restaurant windows, smoky with human breathing, the insomnia of cars at stoplights, of bad girls and incantations. The insomnia of the doll's open eyes, out in the alleyway's trash. Of working and recollections. The insomnia of afternoons before the rain began. Before pawn

shops and Edith Piaf. Before the haunting metro of Hart Crane and Lorca's last laugh. Before a cigar store in Amsterdam and here in America the music of fears. Before his mother brought milk. And he couldn't move. Before the Angel who wrestled with Jacob, and the mountain, brilliant and frowning. The insomnia of the mountain. Before temples and photographs of W.C. Fields. Before Fritos. Before baseball cards. Before stumbling drunk without teeth. The insomnia of waking no one. The insomnia of awaiting the dead.



Golem, come to me tonight and save my grandfather. Lift him with your clay hands. Golem, how far have you traveled? Golem, you do not answer. Golem, you stand by the side of the bed. Your massive clay head, your Dutch boy haircut. Golem you have come but you can do nothing against Death. Death rides the razor'd rain. Golem, you are merely clay.



*I have come for you my child.*

*See me, my dark hair my eyes. Feel my hands across your rough cheeks. I will lift you like water. Into the cradle of my two arms. We will rock across the great ocean. We will fly through the palace steeples. Across the mountains and the rivers, the chaotic streets, the wars. See me, my dark hair my eyes. Hear my lullabies, let them lift you from the bed. Help me tie the sheets into a sail. We will fill it with our breathing. See it billow. We are sailing on the wind of our leaving. See me, my dark hair my eyes. Why do you cry? There is no more weeping. Let the ashes of our bodies become the Braille the wind spills. Let it spell the shapes of song. Touch the earth. It is a last leaving. Touch my hand. Find your name in my palm. Place your arms around my neck. You are my first child, my precious grieving. See me, my dark hair my eyes. We are never*

*leaving. Into the cradle of my two arms you are climbing. Through the window we are flying. Over the great sea, the wars, the palaces. The children are all finally sleeping. The rain is carrying us over the streets, the forgotten streets, I am bandaging your bruised shin, where I wiped your chin, where I nursed. Open your eyes and see me. My dark hair my eyes. My fever has broken. I am here. My child, I am calling. I was never gone.*



Wires and tubes. His body thin as wind. His collar a cave. It was hard to see my grandfather like that. It was hard to see him struggling to shape sounds, to make words work. It was hard to hear. The morphine stuttered. The pain eased, then gripped. He closed his eyes. As if losing his sense. His sense of tense. Then he was back. Beside me.

“Papa?”

“I don’t want to leave...I will miss everyone. She was smart you know.” I went to touch his arm.

“Who, Papa?”

“My mother.” He turned and looked at me.

“Regina, you mean—?”

“She traveled here alone...I don’t know. I can’t blame them. They were peasants. What did they know. They didn’t know anything. The village followed them. They brought the ways of not trying. There were no books in the house, you know only prayer books—”

“Wouldn’t your mother read to you?”

He mumbled something I couldn’t understand. His head nodding, his eyes closing again. I can’t help staring at the tubes, the oxygen tank beside him like a nightmare. I can’t help wanting to hold him and yet he looks so fragile, thin as paper. Thin as wind.



Hours pass and I can't remember my mother not crying.



Papa, why do they come to you at night?  
*They come to bring me black bread and holy wine.*

Papa, what do you hear when you close your eyes?  
*I hear her at the window singing Yiddish lullabies.*

Papa, why is the light of the dead yellow as a sunflower's face?

*It is the fields of the dead we walk through on the way to our childhoods. Each flower sways with the love of someone we are leaving.*

Papa, what does the rain spell for you?  
*It spells the lost name of my mother's mother. It spells why did you desert us.*

Whose voice is the rain, Papa?  
*It is my voice. It is the voices which carry me away from you. If you listen you can hear your voice. A chorus. The temple is full of sparrows, it is saying. It is the voice of every human, which is to say, it is the voice of every Jew.*

Papa, who is the woman pushing the cartload of bread?  
*She has no name, only an echo.*

Is she is coming to feed us?  
*She is awaiting all of our dead.*



All my life the dead have called to me. And now my



grandfather is among them.



Can you hear the accordion? Its golden keys. The opening wheeze of its bellows, and then the orchestra of its breath. There were accordions on the Death trains, that sewed the rain into a shawl to cover the dead. Smashed accordions littered the barbed wire ditches upon arrival. What were those last songs? Those last sorrow songs the people of Uzhorod sang? Did they already whisper Kaddish for the dead? Accordion of the dead children. Accordion of the gypsy and the gavel. Say can you hear the accordion this night on 6<sup>th</sup> street? Someone is stopped at a red light with their windows down, and a song in Spanish, Cumbia from Colombia, is filling the night with cabaret. An accordion is a kind of lungs that speaks the language of the dispossessed, the dead. This is why it is the instrument of Argentina, with its duende and atrocity. And in the Polish Polka there rises a joy against the dying, the occupation. With each step the room shudders and shifts. Once in a Polish bar in Buffalo, New York, I witnessed the accordion player lean into the keys, high on his stool, beside him the drummer's brushes shimmering the drum tops into rain across Ellis Island. We were all drunk and forgetting.

And here in the hollow hall at Ellis Island I hear the accordion begin to play and the Magyars spinning in their Bohemian dresses. See the beautiful girl posed on the wall in black and white, the billowing folds of hand-woven intricate thread. The accordion my grandfather heard when he was a child and rode the haycart through Uzhorhod. The accordions they played on the George Washington as it departed from a German port in 1912 on the edge of war, and Regina Moscowitz leaned on the rail to watch the Lutheran steeples and the dock workers fade into the fog. Was there anyone there for her to wave goodbye to? What did she carry in her hands? Perhaps she wore a new hat she had just bought in a little shop in Budapest, a dozen

blocks from the Imperial Palace. She kept it in its box all the way to Germany, carried it like a child, rested it like a lapdog on top of her black trunk. On the boat, in the fog of late summer, she closed her eyes and dreamed of pigeons eating bread from her outstretched hands.



My great-grandmother's signature on the Ellis Island website: its curvatures, swirls, its wrist whip and press. Its hand weight. This signing that signifies the arrival of a part of who I am here on this earth. I am the first one in my family to witness these words, this name. No one else has seen it. For a long time I sit staring at the screen, and then the tears fall for no reason I can name. The remembrance of my grandfather dying, and the unbearable weight of him as a child watching a room full of strangers weep for the death of his mother. And it is this weeping that I realize calls me to find out about Regina. How I watched my own mother weep uncontrollably, her body shuddering with grief for the death of her father. And in this: there is no solace, no consoling story for this grief. But there is a calling, and the calling is this name, spoken by my grandfather as he merged halfway between this world and the next, or nothing.

For the wind is whipping the rain tonight. And I get up and walk to the room of my sleeping son, the light from the hallway falling across half of his face, his eyes closed gently as doves.



Erika writes, "being a Jew is being an outsider—being a Jew is about suffering, yes..."



When a Jew dies, "he must die whole. Wrapped in a white cloth." The family drops a handful of dirt to signify the finality of death. If there is a coffin, it is a plain one made of wood, so that the body can return to the earth.

My grandfather asked for his body to be cremated. He asked for no service. This was as far from a Jewish burial as could be requested. Only afterwards did I think of this of his final refusal, his final turn from his childhood identity.

Once, a good year before he died, for a reason I cannot remember I asked him, "Do you ever still consider yourself a Jew?" He didn't hesitate. "What is it to be a Jew? Why not simply a human being?" Despite this, he was a committed Zionist. He was a believer in the "workings of the world." He breathed Tikkun, and believed to live is to fight for Righteousness and the betterment of all others.



I leave my grandfather's murmurous sleep, walk through the hallway to the bathroom. I cup my palms beneath the faucet, hold the cold water and stare into my hands. What has history eaten? In listening for who we are, we come to some decisions about who we are not. And the negotiation of what *I am* means... For some, that signifier of Tribe outweighs a more ontological presence, or makes itself manifest and obvious. I am a Jew. I am a Black Man. *Yo soy Latino*. But what in an assimilated culture are Non-Jews, Non-Blacks, whites whose identity of whiteness is a secondary concern. In my family the awareness of white privilege was manifest due to our politics. As a category of conception, or identity, even now after my grandfather's death, even after 60 years of disjunctions and disowning by his Jewish relatives, it seems secondary. I have the privilege of seeing it as secondary by the value of my white skin, perhaps the value of my gender. But that is the easy academic answer. What I am most interested in is how assimilation is both necessary and antithetical. The lost silences and the gains.

And for my own family, it was not the assimilated who disowned, who unloved themselves from those who shared their own blood—but it was the Jewish relatives I have never met who denied a member of their own family, how even on his death bed refused to talk to him, to visit, to care because he had married my gentile grandmother. My grandfather's brother Milton carried an anger to my grandfather's grave, and this who can forgive or understand. And in my imagination I picture my grandfather's mother, the woman who combed the hair out of his eyes as a child, staring down at Milton, feeling shame. For all these years the lives that have become fragments. For in the dead, there are only two tribes. The living and the dead. And in my skin I feel her all around me, carrying the falling leaves for me to wear as a crown of red and yellow. Sometimes she speaks in a language I can never understand. For in her, in her story, I hear something resembling redemption. Something that moves me toward a history and people I know almost nothing about. To reclaim my story. And by doing so to try and understand how human beings can disown the people that they care about. And by doing so theorize how her death, the tragedy of her death, enabled them to do so. If she had lived, would my life be my life? In her death, I seek the childhood of my dead grandfather. I seek a blessing. I seek hallowed ground.



My wife and I have been fighting on and off all day. At the last moment, with both of us inches from each other's faces, I caught the sight of my five-year-old son Gabriel hiding beneath the couch.



Their: have you ever noticed how it includes heir? Heir:  
1. A person who inherits or is legally entitled to inherit another's property or title upon the other's death. 2. Anyone who inher-

its any part of another's property, either by the provisions of a will or by the natural selection of the law. 3. A person who appears to get some trait from a predecessor or seems to carry on in his tradition.

Heir (v): to inherit, to succeed to. Their: belonging to them. Theism: belief in God.

So here I have the three linguistic markers. These three simple words are a structure and form, the questions that I have been living with since my grandfather's death.



*Clocks and maps change to the falling rain. In the absence between things. The space between branches, as much the branches as the wood itself. One must listen. The armies rise and fall, the broken waves. The children crying on the starboard port. Bombs dive from planes, trains slow departure, the last callings. Can you hear? Can you see the rails now overgrown, see the yellow pages of the bureaucrat's handwriting? What lotus blossom wilts? What temple do we find overgrown with vines and weeds? The statues falter, the rain worn eyes of Emperors. Look for me in the absence between things.*



Evening came and he heard his mother calling. It is this intangibility of answers, a kind of awareness of presence that was evoked by my grandfather's dying speech that I cannot let go—a collage of fragments, almost felt perceptions, continuously unraveling threads that shimmer like rain. A novel of not arrivings. An autobiography of *absence*. *Not a memoir*. For without *absence* there is no *is*. This is *not* recollection. But transformation. A collaged history. The horizontal spatiality of memory that does not actually exist. The imagination's many mirrors: A brown button. A ripped ticket. A signature. A mass grave. An accordion. A lullaby. An ocean liner. A witness.



*The waiting, and the longing, the leaving, and the night's embrace. The last embers that rise from the fires, and the gathering at day's end. The women walking heads down from the textile shops, their heads wrapped in sweat and babushkas, their husbands' beards clean and swaying as they talk with their hands. The nodding and the translating, the bread and the bartered fish, the books in my small hands, my belly growing.*