

Nessa Rapoport

The following are excerpts from her published works

From *A Woman's Book of Grieving* (1994)

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From *Objects of the Spirit: Ritual and the Art of Tobi Kahn* by Emily D. Bilski (2004)

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From A Woman's Book of Grieving

UNDO IT, TAKE IT BACK

Undo it, take it back, make every day the previous one until I am returned to the day before the one that made you gone. Or set me on an airplane traveling west, crossing the date line again and again, losing this day, then that, until the day of loss still lies ahead, and you are here instead of sorrow.

SUFFERING

When grief descends, there is no redemption then in suffering, nothing saving or luminous about it, no higher meaning to its torment, not one gleaning of wisdom or grace. Every moment's pain, like a parody of first love, afflicts for hours, and every day flaunts its eternity. If we could choose our lot, who would not say: Woman, when you see suffering, run, flee from it. But we cannot choose.

In those days a woman would give all she has to get just one thing back. No one wants to learn from pain. When first the ship founders, who thinks of booty? In a catastrophe, who conceives of profit? No, she bewails her fate. Night after night, she reviews her case: Had I even the faintest augury? She compares in stealth her own plight to her neighbors': Surely I've lost the most, all others seem unscathed.

When you meet such a woman, do not speak of inner sustenance, of benefit from sorrow or of healing. Nothing but restoration would suffice, and every day the anguish, rather than abating, multiplies. Do not say that time repairs, or talk of moving forward or of growing. Such consolations are absurd. Offer only this: I, too, have suffered and endured.

A woman who has suffered sees that all the striv-

ing in the world, all the material fruits of ardent labor, cannot buy a day's forgetting or one night's peace. She has thrust her fingers into tiny crevices of hope and clutched at the indifferent wall, but when she is compelled to let it go: what a shaming relief to stop trying. In the end, the fiercest love cannot avert the hour of dying.

As slowly as the slowest progression, the infinitesimal turning of the earth, time transports her from that day to this, with many detours, several flagrantly unfair. A month and then a year and then two pass, and it is possible to look back, admit: None of what I've understood replaces what is gone, and yet I have been forced, against my will, to learn. As vehemently as ever I protest the instrument of its acquisition, but I'll not reject a knowledge so hard-won. Now I can begin to use it and forgive the woman I was, pay tribute to her innocence.

This is the teaching of suffering, if you allow it, as if in a great stroke the world you occupy divides itself: Here is what matters, the rest—no.

Like a dancer who offers years of bloodied feet and tender injury toward a gift, a moment of perfect, elusive grace, we proceed through our buffeted lives, trying to make of ill fortune and random blows one small and beautiful thing, which all of us deserve not because of talent or means but simply because we live.

It is the hardest of all learning that the opposite of depression is not happiness—a radiant, receding goal—but vitality, to feel alive each minute you are given. Then when sweetness comes it is most sweet, and when sorrow comes you know its name. In the aftermath of suffering, you chart each day as an explorer preceding map or compass, and what you find is shockingly alloyed: All happiness is dappled, and even bleakest tragedy has moments of strange praise.

THREE YEARS LATER

Basking in the simplest things, silky feet of the children, the way the morning light, let in, flings itself, anointing everything, rich sleep, no dreams, language for forgotten things, order and grace satisfying, music exultant, hope, shy at the door, not yet daring to come in, acrid taste of bitterness an amulet in my pocket, warding off cowardice, memory's assault defused, no longer lethal at first blast, the future tense, giving without exacting vengeance, less impatience, real hunger, fists unclenched, believable devotion making a return appearance: I, in my own name, assemble the shards into a clumsy pot, a vessel once exclusively for priests more suited now to daily transportation, taking me from here to there, useful confirmation that even when buried deep enough to resist all salvation, harder than elemental substance, not yielding to the most delicate solicitation, I can be found, fragment by fragment, uncovered by the tiny brushes of your kindness and attention, able after time to resurrect my voice, the world atoning for bereavement, delivering secret gifts, allowing me to make this declaration.

LOVE AS STRONG AS DEATH

Unquenched after all these years, a thirst for love that is not consumed, incarnate and transcendent, carnal and immaculate, innocent. Can I embody you, be a dwelling place for a spirit that partakes of all that lasts, encompassing mistakes, and appetites, and prodigal generosity, and terror and absolution, and whatever is most frightening about becoming human. You, carrying your pail ahead of me, spilling mercy and forgiveness daily, calling my name at the same moment I am conjuring you, a voice of unpolluted clarity, half a world away, beside, within me. You, my theological relief, my proof that even in the midst of unslaked cruelty at the end of a barbaric century, nothing less than a divinity could have tendered what you give me, and allowed that in my being on earth I give to you.

From House on the River: A Summer Journey

Here in the Ontario countryside, it is possible to imagine a flight from Jewish destiny. But on my tongue, the words of praise for my Creator are Hebrew, acquired through my mother, who insisted on our Jewish literacy. They arise as naturally as the concord between sky and water amid which we float at twilight.

I sit on the deck, the crickets making their sum-

mer racket beside me. The serenity of evening casts a careless grace on everything. What do I see? It is almost dark at Nassau Mills, where we are moored for the night. The trees on the shoreline facing me are black, with only a tincture of green remaining. The sky is bleached of color, pale blue above my head but fading imperceptibly to white over the woods. The lake is not transparent but a moiré of black, in which the trees are reflected, long and dusky in the rippled water.

There is a signal beauty to the end of a day on water. The Jewish calendar is lunar, and so the new day begins at dusk. Although I live in Western time, my inner life is aligned with the moon. When I walk toward home at the end of my workday, amidst men with their ties askew and women looking harried, the Jewish day is being born.

The liturgy's chants of evening and morning praise the Creator for the beauty of a renewed world. How guileless and immediate is the desire to exalt the One who made us with love as we contemplate the gorgeous gifts of creation.

When it is truly dark, Nat leads us in a procession to look at the stars. With one of the children's powerful flashlights he points out the Big Dipper, pouring invisible water over us. He shows us the W of Cassiopeia and steadies himself against a picnic table to peer through my binoculars in the hope of seeing Jupiter's moons.

The grandeur of the universe, soaring away from us in infinite solitude. The heavens, revealing God's handiwork. Walking back to the boat, Jake stays close to me; the vast darkness is so different from night in New York City. But Ella walks jauntily at the water's edge, provoked to daring by the firmament's expanse.

Both children are asleep in seconds. I watch my uncle kiss them each good night in their bunks and compose my psalm: to dwell in the house of this love forever.

And I? Awake for a second night with the child not yet born, I do not review my disappointments or anticipate sorrow. Instead, I taste these words: *peace, wonder, light, calm, peace.*

When we are born, God pours into each of us the eternity that partakes of the divine image, each person gifted in unique measure.

What is our task? To pour forth fully, all our lives, whatever measure we were given, to redeem the pledge of our birth, the image in which we are wrought. If, when we die, a mourner can stand before the community and

proclaim that the gifts, in all their glory, were spilled forth, can there be any higher purpose to our creation?

The brimming cup, the water through our hands. As it was bequeathed to us, so we must return it, measure for measure, augmented by the beauty of our transience, the pool at daybreak, the waterfall at dusk.

This is aristocracy.

From Objects of the Spirit: Ritual and the Art of Tobi Kahn
by Emily Bilski

Meditations by Nessa Rapoport

S H A B B A T Braid my soul, amplified, to You, sustain me with
C H A L L A H abundance multiplied, the desert leavened, sifting
T R A Y wilderness for providence, releasing from earth the
 gifts of heaven.

R O S H Awaken to the year as it is born, the aleph bet
H A S H A N A H beginning, writing our destiny. Sovereign of sweetness,
A P P L E - A N D - refute severity, remember us as we return to You,
H O N E Y S E T word by word, assemble us, Scribe, let us hear Your call
as we summon You into our lives.

Y A H R Z E I T Unconsumed through the night like the love you
C A N D L E offered, constant in a darkened house where I, longing
for light, remember you, the walls and ceiling kindled,
your soul, undying before me, incandescent, dazzling.

SHALOM BAT Leap into our lives, from the hidden places to the hills

CHAIRS of spice, garden of pomegranate, apple of paradise,
awakened by the perfume of your name, we sing you
into our mothers' house and listen for your voice.