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The Hungry Jewish Mother

Erika Duncan

Now they put a baby in her lap. Do not ask me, she would have liked to beg. . . . Unnatural grandmother, not able to make herself embrace a baby . . .

It was not that she had not loved her babies, her children. But when the need was done—oh the power that was lost in the painful damming back and drying up of what still surged, but had nowhere to go . . .

And they put a baby in her lap . . . warm flesh like this had claims and nuzzled away all else and with lovely mouths devoured. . . . the long drunkenness; the drowning into needing and being needed . . .

And all that visit, she could not touch the baby.¹

Thus Tillie Olsen wrote of the old grandmother in *Tell Me a Riddle*, "Mrs. Unpleasant," typical yenta and nag, who in her dying turns away from all those she was forced to nurture in her life. Her husband calls her every mean, degrading name he can because she refuses to move to "The Haven," a rest home where everything will be done and arranged for her. But she will not cooperate in taking the late-offered comfort he has stolen from her all her life. Throughout the story, the husband's hunger mounts in rhythms with the stomach cancer that is eating his wife alive. His own bitter salt tears are all that stay upon the midnight tray he is forced to fetch himself. Dying in bed, she makes up soliloquies that leave him out.

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Too well we know the Jewish mother our male writers have given us, the all-engulfing nurturer who devours the very soul with every spoonful of hot chicken soup she gives, whose every

shakerful of salt contains a curse. Too well we know the feeder whose hard-wrung offerings are imbibed as poisons. Yet we do not know enough of the other hungry one who feeds others because it is the only access she knows to a little bit of love. In Jewish literature by women, mothers are the "bread givers" who try to make feeding into a replenishing, ecstatic act. But the mothers are themselves starved in every way, sucked dry and withered from being asked almost from birth to give a nurturance they never receive. They are starved not only for the actual food they are forced to turn over to others, but for the stuff of self and soul, for love and song. The oldest daughter in *Tell Me a Riddle* cries, "Pay me back, Mother, pay me back for all you took from me. Those others you crowded into your heart. The hands I needed to be for you, the heaviness, the responsibility." But the dying grandmother, her mother, can only chant:

"One pound soup meat . . . one soup bone. . . Bread, day-old. . . Please, in a wooden box . . . for kindling.

I ask for stone; she gives me bread—day-old. . . .

How can I give it. Clara, how can I give it if I don't have?"²

The mother's starvation is, needless to say, scary for the child, who has no choice but to take. For underlying all the taking is the fear of being eaten up alive and the guilt of stealing from the empty one. This, I imagine, is why so many male writers have turned the one who endlessly spoons out the chicken soup into a mad devourer from whom they have to flee lest their identities be eaten up. Thus our Portnoys, knowing on some level that they have been thieves, eliminate their debt by making their tormented mothers into cardboard demons, distancing them by robbing them of their pains and hunger and humanity, so some day they in turn can steal the nurturance they have always counted on from other women. Thus is the demon Jewish mother shrunk and manhood reached.

But for our Jewish women writers the journey is far more complicated, for they are both the takers of the food their mothers do not really have to give, and the future providers. They are at once devourers and the devoured, and it is this extra

layering in their experience which allows them to enter the pain of their mothers all the men are fleeing from:

*from the beginning
she was always dry though
she'd press me close
prying open my lips:
the water warm
the fruit sour brown
apples bruised and soft.
hungry for dark i'd sit
and wait devour dreams
of plain sun and sky
large leaves trunks dark
and wet with sweet thick sap.
but mornings
brought back the space
and cement her weakened
body my head against her
breast: my mouth empty.
yet she was all
my comfort.³*

This is the beginning of Irena Klepfisz's poem from "The Monkey House and Other Cages." Below the title is a heading in parentheses that says, "The voice is that of a female monkey born and raised in a zoo." Irena Klepfisz was born a girl child in Warsaw, Poland where "during the war / germans were known / to pick up infants / by their feet / swing them through the air / and smash their heads / against plaster walls. / somehow / i managed to escape that fate."⁴ She was born in 1941. But the images of violence and incarceration never leave her work. Her monkey poem continues with the daughter's hunger for a warmth and softness that her mother monkey does not have, to the daughter's first rape before the watching mother's eyes.

Mothers turning over their daughters to the hunger of men while they sit by weakly and watch: this occurs over and over in the literature of our Jewish women writers, from Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*, where each of four daughters in turn is sacrificed so that the Talmud scholar father can be free of toil to focus on the holy light: to E. M. Broner's repeated images of women

being sacrificed on altars of men's sexual religious ecstasies in *A Weave of Women*, set in Jerusalem. Though a female baby born in ecstasy can be hammered to death through one man's rage during a ritual Purim rite, the women of "the Land" in *A Weave of Women* are expected to be ever-ready and replenishing. Gerda says:

"My body can walk miles. My feet never get bunions, calluses or plantar warts. My thighs do not rub. . . . I climb Masada up and back down and do it again. I have climbed down Mount Sinai without losing breath, four hours each way. I came down hungry and ready to cook a meal for a crowd."

Another woman asks, "What can't your body do?" Gerda replies:

"It doesn't know how to say, 'I'm sorry. I apologize. Did I hurt you?' . . . It doesn't know how to feel what other people are feeling. Since the camps I have been careful not to know too much about my surroundings."⁵

The Holocaust in all its horror has become the ultimate expression of the violence done to us; the concentration camp, the black barred cage which locks us all from our own nurturance and warmth; the hunger.

Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* is the story of a woman growing up in a Lower East Side ghetto. The book deals with the same hungers passed on from mothers down to daughters, and their helpless rage. The book begins with the narrator in the kitchen trying to peel potatoes and clumsily cutting too much away: "I was about ten years old then. But from always it was heavy on my heart the worries for the house as if I was mother."⁶ In this book, it is the mother who must pay all the bills and somehow find the fat to put into her husband's soup so his attention will be free to concentrate upon the Torah. When the mother enters and sees her two oldest daughters unable to find work, the third only wanting to tie ribbons upon her hat and go hear the free music, she lets her market basket fall from her arm in despair. Her rage at her responsibility, having no better place to go, turns on the youngest and most helpless daughter, the narrator, the teller of the tale:

"Gazlin! Bandit!" her cry broke through the house. She picked up the peelings and shook them free before my eyes. "You'd think potatoes grow free in the street. I eat out my heart, running from pushcart to pushcart, only to bargain down a penny on five pounds, and you cut away my flesh like a murderer."⁷

Out of utter repentance the child goes out to gather bits of unburned coal from ashcans, even though it makes her "feel like a beggar and a thief."⁸ Far better to rob dregs from strangers than to suck the emptiness of one's own source of life.

But the narrator's childish efforts cannot sustain the women in her family. One by one, the narrator watches her mother and sisters weaken as they feed the father and his work:

We sat down to the table. With watering mouths and glistening eyes we watched Mother skimming off every bit of fat from the top soup into Father's big plate, leaving for us only the thin, watery part. We watched Father bite into the sour pickle which was special for him only; and waited, trembling, with hunger, for our portion.⁹

The father thanks God for the food and tells his assembled family not to worry about feeling starved, for "the real food is God's Holy Torah. . . ." At Father's touch, Mother's sad face turned into smiles. His kind look was like the sun shining on her."¹⁰

Each of the three older daughters as they go out to seek men will try to find that touch of magic radiance that deadens direst need. Bessie, the oldest, finds it in the "cutter" from her sweat shop for whom she makes a spread of snow-white oil cloth to cover the greasy table in the single room where they all eat and sleep and live. But though she has no dowry and is already considered old, her father will not let her go, for she is the best worker, the best wage earner, and the "burden bearer" of the family. Later, after she has lost the man she really loves, her father sells her to an old ugly fishmonger who wants her to raise his five unmanageable grieving children whose mother has just died. She almost rebels, the fishmonger repels her so, but the needs of the bereaved little ones soon draw her in.

Masha, the beautiful one, falls in love with a musician, but her father will not let him in because he is not holy enough. The man

her father picks for her, because he makes believe he is a diamond merchant, keeps her half-starved in a hovel.

And the mother, grown old before her time, stands by and watches this, and watches the third daughter, who loved a poet once ("False gods," the father said), sold to a gambler who takes her to empty riches far away on the west coast.

The mother, even as she dies from a gangrenous foot that could have been cut off had anybody cared, had she herself cared, is remembered by the neighbors only by how well she starved herself:

"Such a good mother, such a virtuous wife," wailed a shawled woman with a nursing baby in her arms and two little tots hanging to her skirts. "Never did she allow herself a bit to eat but left-overs, never a dress but the rags her daughters had thrown away."

"... Only two days ago she told me how they cook the fish in her village sweet and sour—and now, she is dead."

At this, all the women began rocking and swaying in a wailing chorus.¹¹

This is one level of the tale, the hungry mother giving all. But in its very unfolding we find a major turning. For the fourth daughter, who has seen her mother and sisters slain by the age-old patterns, rebels. She leaves her father's house amidst his curses and his blows to find an education and a life that she can call her own. She learns to gather strength from all she suffered through, and will not bend her will under the whips of the husbands who enslave her sisters, her teachers in the college she forces her way into, or the soup server in the corner restaurant who only dishes stew with meat in it to men. Using what she has learned in hunger in the ghetto, she rises in school and in the world. And, interestingly, in her self-made rise, she becomes the only daughter who can take their mother's shyly offered new support. Her mother travels miles to bring her bread and herring when she is starving, studying alone and outcast. The others berate her for going to college, leaving her mother alone to die. But her mother, on her deathbed, greets with a radiant joy this last daughter who has turned into a "teacherin." It is a high moment of the book when, at her mother's funeral, this daughter watches

the others let the undertaker slice their clothes to tatters, rending them according to the old biblical law, and refuses to be a part of it: "I don't believe in this. It's my only suit, and I need it for work. Tearing it wouldn't bring Mother back to life again."

Anzia Yeziarska, in her work and in her facing of the hungers that have crippled all women, all mothers in the old tradition, has given us all a chance to carry on the lives our mothers never gave themselves or us.

"Mother, I'm pregnant with a baby girl." This is the ever-varying refrain that lirts and sobs and sings through E. M. Broner's book, *Her Mothers*:

"Mother, I'm giving birth to a baby girl."

"What does she want to do with her life?"

"Be a mother."

"And then what?"

"A grandmother."

"No more?"

"A great-grandmother."

"And what else?"

"Nothing else."¹²

This novel interweaves tales of mothers and daughters in modern times to our most ancient foremothers, through the reclamation of literary "mentor-mothers" who, more often than not, gave their life blood away to men. It is the story of a Jewish mother's search for her own biological daughter, conceived at a time in her life when she could not accept or give. The daughter has now grown into her own nerve-wracking adolescence and runs away. It is the tale of how only through finding the strong mothers of the past, the female power-figures, and the powers in the self, can any mother truly have her daughter back. It is a long and complicated journey, through sob stories, kitsch, and utmost ecstasies, through petty suburban confusions, and the horrors of the Holocaust.

Here is the story of Sarah and Abraham retold in the section entitled "Foremothers" beginning, "Looking for Past Mothers, Way Past Mothers":

Four are the Matriarchs: The First Matriarch

"Mother, I'm pregnant with a baby girl."

"May she be the mother of heroes."

She journeyed to the South for there was a famine in the land. . . .

Avram suffered from thirst, from fear. She like a camel did not seem to have his hunger or his need for water. . . . So he offered her strong body to the passing soldiers to obtain what he could not do without.

They took their pleasure with her while Avram sat outside of the tent, drinking their water, eating their provisions. Then the soldiers brought her to the Great House. They pulled aside her garments from her body. Despite famine, the flesh curved. Despite thirst, the shoulder and buttocks meat was juicy. She was given to Pharaoh, who had her while Avram sat outside of the Great House counting his newly gained sheep, oxen, asses, camels. . . .

The nomadic years passed. Maybe because of the great journey in the desert, or the early famine, or the time she was had by shepherds and soldiers, by princes and pharaoh, Sarai in no way thickened, never bore fruit. All life around her fattened—the camel, the oxen, the she-goat. Trees bore fruit—the date, the fig—but she remained boney.¹³

The great journey in the desert, the early famine, the dryness of the breasts Irena Klepfisz's daughter-monkey first sucked, don't we all know them all? In the larger-than-life biblical stories the women who were emptied too much became quite literally barren. Later on it was only the feelings of giving and receiving that were sucked dry. But recently our women writers, in retracing those old hungry journeys and those thefts, are teaching us how to take in, to suckle and to grow again.

Beatrix, the mother, starts to cook and feed herself. She reads:

"*Embryein* (gr.) to swell inside. Compare to *sauerkraut*. . . . Each leaf is added, each thick, veined sheet. . . ." If an "unhatched young vertebrate," an "embryo," soaks in that female brine, . . . and all of life is pickled and floating and will be sucked by that originator, that fruitful, happy, lucky originator, no wonder that men, not feminine, must hate us. We are the inception, the water jar, the nourishment, the expelling from the Garden of Eden.

How could they not hate us? . . . They grow too big to slip back in through the slits of nipple, the eye of the navel, the mouth of the womb.

So they punish us at birth and give us pain and punish us in life and give us pain.¹⁴

It is only through the disconnection with the life-denying forces that women will be able to have back their lives, their long-lost mothers, and give birth to daughters breathing and alive and strong. This is the theme of *A Lament for Three Women*, a play by Karen Malpede in which women of three generations wait in a special cancer research center for their respective father, son, and husband to complete their dying. They have all lived only for these men. Naomi, the oldest, remembers how when her son was young she used to rise with him.

"to light the fire and make the breakfast, pack his lunch, and get him off to school. What a flurry we would make in the kitchen. He would pull on his trousers standing by the stove, hopping from one foot to the other. I would stir the oatmeal over his jumping head. Sweeten it with jam or honey, pour in rich milk. And bread, big slices of black bread with cheese between them. . . .

The last weekend they let me take him home I made honey cake for him and lentil soup . . . we drank wine together. . . . I would have lit the candles but I was so busy in the kitchen, I missed the sunset. . . . When I sit with him I pretend he has another fever. I sing to him. A grown man. I sing to him and stroke his forehead. Sitting by his bed I half forget and half expect the fever to break suddenly and his eyes to open clear and out of pain."¹⁵

Naomi's memories of mothering her son first come out only in a sensual ecstasy. We feel the fullness of each piece of food she handles to pass on to him. But as the younger women tell their stories, Naomi lets her voice rise in fury that the son she fed so well now moans and only feels that he has been betrayed by her:

"I've prayed to God to end my life instead of his. But with every pain he suffers I am stronger. Every time he cries my determination grows. The joke of motherhood. When her child needs her, she endures. Joke again. The child never feels more abandoned, never turns against her with more bitter rage than he does now, watching his own mother watch him die."¹⁶

Ruth too has always mothered men. She tells of how her father who loved her as he had never loved her mother turned from her in violent rage at having been aroused. But it is Rachel, whose

father cried in her arms when he found out that he was dying, kissed her neck, her ear lobes and her lips and made her cry, who felt betrayed when in his pain he turned back to her mother. It is Rachel who asks the other two women for the mothering she never got from men. She says:

"Naomi, as much as your son needed you when he was young, I need you now. Or more than that. When he was a baby sucking at your breast. No. More. When he was a fetus breathing your blood, taking his form from your flesh. I need you that much. I give up my father as I have to. Come with me now. Give up your son since you must. . . . Fear of death keeps him living. Fear of life keeps you clinging to him. It's not unnatural to be frightened, living is a frightening occupation. But remember, you made children from the center of you where eating, feeling, loving are united. Find the healthy breath inside you that allows you to still his heavy breathing. Take life for yourself from the one who is dying."¹⁷

Lament ends with a mourning, a keening and wailing which is the only way the hurt and hungry women can come close to one another. *Rebecca*, Karen Malpede's second play, starts with a mother smothering an infant son who cries while they hide during a pogrom. It chronicles the mother's struggle to salvage her life with her surviving daughter, after the men turn her out because of what she's done.

Malpede was very young when she started to write her plays. Her early work goes deep into the roots of human tragedy, the horrors done to women by the world of men. But gradually we see how with the strengthening of feminist philosophy, the themes of love and hope and healing are beginning to supplant the hungers and the pain. Her newest play, *Making Peace*, is about the use of the most primal forms of nurture to undo those barren hungers that have made us hate. It is a play affirming all of human possibility through letting in the wild ecstatic loves the world has not allowed. Upon a heavenly mound three spirits of Utopians who have been hungry in their lives meet and undo the sorrows of their personal pasts, then go back down to earth to help the living ones erase denial. The spirit of Mary Wollstonecraft takes Shaker Mother Ann into her arms and says:

"Mother, take my breast, pretend you gave me birth and that I grew without resentment, without fear, strong enough to share that blessed gift with you. Suck, mother, suck. I suckled both my daughters thus. It was only then I understood the wild release that comes from giving love boundless as the ocean's own throbbing underneath the suckling moon."¹⁸

Thus, through learning to suckle herself and other women has the hungry Jewish mother been transformed. From E. M. Broner's reinvention of sacred ceremonies of birthing and feeding among a community of women in the old stone house in *A Weave of Women* to Irena Klepfisz's final poem in *periods of stress*, written to a woman she loves, women are finding new ways of giving birth to life within each other and themselves, of being reborn:

*last night i dreamt i was
a gaunt and lifeless tree
and you climbed into me to nest . . .
wherever your human skin
touched my rough bark i
sprouted branches till
lush with leaves i grew
all green and silver frail
like tinsel holding you
asleep in my wooden arms.*¹⁹

Women are beginning to learn their own softness and their songs. Thus it is a young woman, Jeannie, the granddaughter in *Tell Me a Riddle*, who puts to words the music the dying woman heard but never spoke. She looks so beautiful as she tends her grandmother that her grandfather wonders if she is in love. And, in a way, of course she is, with all the songs of all the generations of women, long buried, maimed and trapped. But through the ardor of her listening, we feel that she might have the strength to set it free.

It is the voice of Tillie Olsen singing hope, through Jeannie, in the last passage of the book:

"Granddaddy, Granddaddy, don't cry. She is not there, she promised me. On the last day, she said she would go back to when she first heard music, a little girl on the road of the village where she was born . . . Leave her there, Granddaddy, it is all right. She promised me. Come back, come back and help her poor body to die."²⁰

Thus shall we all go back to where the music in us is and find the music in our mothers that will help us live. As *Her Mother* ends:

"Mother, I'm pregnant with a baby girl."
 "What is she doing?"
 "She is singing."
 "Why is she singing?"
 "Because she is unafraid."²¹

NOTES

1. Tillie Olsen, *Tell Me a Riddle* (New York: Dell, 1956), pp. 92-93.
2. Olsen, p. 123.
3. Irena Klepfisz, poem from "The Monkey House and Other Cages," *Frontiers* 3, No. 2 (1978), 12.
4. Irena Klepfisz, *periods of stress* (Brooklyn: self-published, 1975), p. 7.
5. E. M. Broner, *A Weave of Women* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978), pp. 258-59.
6. Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (1925; reprint ed., New York: Persea Books, 1975), p. 1.
7. Yezierska, p. 7.
8. Yezierska, p. 7.
9. Yezierska, p. 10.
10. Yezierska, p. 11.
11. Yezierska, p. 254.
12. E. M. Broner, *Her Mothers* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1975), pp. 93-94.
13. Broner, *Her Mothers*, pp. 149-51.
14. Broner, *Her Mothers*, p. 217.
15. Karen Malpede, "A Lament for Three Women," in *A Century of Plays by American Women*, ed. Rachel France (New York: Richard Rosen Press, 1979), p. 206.
16. Malpede, pp. 204-5.
17. Malpede, p. 207.

18. Malpede, "Making Peace: A Fantasy" (unpublished play, performed by the New Cycle Theatre, Brooklyn, New York, 21 February 1979), Scene 7.
19. Klepfisz, *periods of stress*, p. 61.
20. Olsen, p. 125.
21. Broner, *Her Mothers*, p. 241.