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Stripping the Memoir

Late at night when I can't sleep, I think about stories: why certain memoirists pull me close, surrendering a life's worth of certainty and confusion while others tell me a story that seems too familiar, too predictable, a linear tagging of traumatic events. What I've come to see is that it's not merely a case of subject matter, but a question of the intimacy and judgment that accompanies self-revelation. Intimacy is the most difficult act of creation in the memoir because it depends on a narrative honesty that balances on the razor's edge of self-knowledge. The lure in the memoir isn't: *open your life to me*, but something more difficult: *create a melody of your contradictions*.

Contradiction is at the heart of confession. Look, for example, at the narrator of Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*: the narrator desires merger with the father and, in equal measure, longs for release from his grip; she desires heightened visibility while simultaneously seeking annihilation. The book itself is a fever of contradictory purposes, beginning with the father's megalomaniac need to consume the daughter and the daughter's desire to be needed and loved for herself. The story, a long unraveling of the transgression initiated by the kiss, demands a retrospective gaze back to childhood, to the mother, to the place where the mother "*refuses consciousness of me: I do not exist.*" The grip of the story is whether the daughter can save herself after her fall from grace into the landscape of self-loathing and moral despair.

In another memoir, Carolyn Slaughter's *Before the Knife*, the narrator seeks release from the seething violence of her colonialist family in British-ruled Botswana and simultaneously longs only to fit into the orbit of her mother, even as that mother retreats behind her mosquito net. For the narrator, violence (to self, to others, from others) alternates with the need for beauty, for the solace of wilderness and the more pagan life of instinct which the bush demands. Without the pleasures of the bush, the daughter is lost to the cruelty and violence of the father and the neglect and passivity of the mother. Although the story relates the last days of colonialist rule in Africa, *Before the Knife* takes its narrative landscape from perverted

passion and pathological silence. Again, the question is: will the narrator survive not just the circumstances that surround her, but the way her consciousness has interpreted their weight?

Both books narrate a chilling and compelling exorcism.

In many ways the memoir—like poetry—is the genre of exorcism.

It is in the realm of self-knowledge that so many memoirs lose credibility. This happens because they do no shadow-boxing with the self, that unwieldy persona who comes to us late at night and demands her due. In a recent memoir, *The Men in My Country* (University of Iowa Press), Marilyn Abildskov doesn't flinch from such demands, but lets down her guard and pulls the reader into her own dark corners. *The Men in My Country* is a thoughtful, humorous look at love and the inevitable contradictions of desire. Early in the book, Abildskov tells us that she has taught English in Matsumoto, Japan for three years and has fallen in love with a Japanese lawyer, Nozaki, a man who, like the country, can never be fully known, can never be fully hers. Nozaki is lovable but remote, insightful but distant, a cerebral partner who, for a time, holds the narrator close, then becomes a shadow, a rubbed out emblem of desire. He is a lure and a trap, a breath and a suffocation, and yet the narrator doesn't—*can't*—resist falling in love. She recognizes that love always carries this risk: it might end. To my mind, risk is the subject of this book: the risk of living rather than visiting in Japan, learning the rhythms of its cultural tides, “the curve of its rivers, the bright red of its Shinto shrines, the sound of its ambulances, dissonant and low” (2); the risk of loving because love is an act of faith in which neither good intentions nor lofty desires will guarantee success. Most of us like to pretend that love can be understood, or at the very least, managed—as the self-help books so often preach—but our individual lives teach us that falling in love is a gamble, and that erotic relationships sustain themselves by some combination of trust, need, and fulfillment: part timing, part insight, part old-fashioned luck.

Having fallen in love, the narrator does what heroes and heroines have always done: first, she loses herself, surrenders to the intensity of emotion, the truth of the body, discounting all odds against her. She follows the heart though the heart leads her into a wilderness, a place of confusion and despair. As in all good books,

the test for the heroine is never to solve the puzzle but to ask the right question. For the narrator, ultimately, the question becomes: what does it mean to love? And for her, love becomes not only the passion of desire but the reverence of loss, the mystical notion that every aspect of love is to be sanctioned, blessed with insight and perspective because every aspect confirms our being-in-the-world, in essence, *our holiness*. This does not mean that the narrator doesn't fall through the cracks of herself. She does. When Nozaki neglects to return her calls just days before she is leaving Japan, she goes crazy, inhabits a restlessness that reaches fever pitch. In one of the finest passages in the book, the narrator describes—through stream-of-consciousness narration—how she begins to dissemble. Everything is frantic, rushed, coming undone, a sequence of actions relieved only by her entrance into a dark theater where a chorus of women whoop it up in praise of Jesus, “in celebration of God, or so the words suggest, though to my mind, it's a celebration of song itself” (136).

The fever breaks. Restlessness comes to a halt. Now the narrator enters a different zone, a place where she blesses each moment, each action, each thought though the pain of loss remains. And yet here is the difference: the pain of loss is subtly shifting to the realm of memory, the narrator taking that first tentative step from immediacy to retrospection.

Anyone reading *The Men in My Country* would probably chastise me, “But you've left out the other two men.” It's true, the title is plural—*men*, not man, and the story circles the narrator's involvement with two other men in Japan who complicate the plot. Besides Nozaki, there is a Japanese professor of sociology who falls in love with the narrator, and Amir, a charming Iranian who works in a noodle factory. It's also true that each man teaches Abildskov a different thing. The professor teaches her the limitations of cerebral seduction, how two people can talk their infatuation to death. Amir teaches her the pleasures of the body along with the joys of simplicity and spontaneity, “loving her in an ordinary and beautiful and bodily way” (142). But each of these men is a prelude to the love interest, Nozaki: “*the one who will change me,*” the one who leaves her bereft and awed by the situation, and by herself.

As the narrator is leaving Japan she blurts her story to a female priest who sits beside her on the plane back to America. The

woman touches her, presses her fingers into her flesh. “*You’ve been impressed,*” she says. “*Literally impressed.*”

And that’s what a good book should do: leave us impressed, marked in some primal way by the depth and complexity of the feelings, imprinted by the implied questions, which now buzz in a larger, more insistent circle.

The imprint of such implied questions is often a new language, a new way of seeing what has been written before. The contemporary memoir need not be stranded on the shores of predictable trauma, need not be a familiar way station of plot, but can be illuminated by the narrator’s insight into the contradictions of her quest and by the awareness with which she seeks exorcism. This occurs, most often, when the writer recognizes that beauty and terror are never quite separate, but joined together in instinct and memory and defined by language that reveals, through detail and image, that the aim of the memoir is always spiritual insight, never mere fluency.