

THE DAY OF THE GORGON

One overcast day after fierce storms, while walking along the beach in Southern California, suddenly, sensing danger, Marek grasped Katya's arm. "What is it Marek? What is it?" she cried.

On that day he was with his wife Katherine collecting stones by the sea, as was his habit. Most often he found them on the shores of Lake Simcoe where he and Katherine live, away from the city he fears, seeing everywhere hooligans in alleyways and under streetlamps; brown shirts overrunning night. Here, by the lake, away from the wail of sirens, shouts and shrill laughter, he writes fiction, a labor of most of his 74 years, searching to make sense of non-sense. Ultimately words fail.

But this time, they were in San Diego for the worst of the winter months. He remembers the beach that day, sand and sea and sky tilting, seaweed at his feet shivering, shifting, rising and rolling. Remembers breaking into a cold sweat, how he passed his hand over his eyes, thinking, I am having one of my dizzy spells!

Night terrors.

He's enclosed in a small windowless space hot as an incinerator or a brick oven baking in desert sun, herded in, crushed from all sides, a stench like that of human waste or burning flesh so present and vile, he gags even as he sleeps; rumbling fills his head and wailing and high-pitched cries and screams mingled with his own weak *Help!* but try as he might his plea is strangled and again and again he tries, each time straining louder but only a thin feeble whimper escapes. No one answers. He's sick from heat and the smell and what like seems constant motion, and the rumbling. Suddenly, a deep voice commands, "***Bist du ein Jude?***"

Bist du ein Jude! ... He jolts awake, in a sweat, dizzy and terrified. Shadows loom, wiry lines slash walls. Several moments of white panic pass before he recognizes them as slats of venetian blinds Katherine has used as window cover, the room's light not the focussed glare of a spotlight, but the wash of the moon.

Slowly, the ticking of the clock at the foot of the stairs enters his consciousness and he lies awake listening for its chime through the long night into morning when day breaks and he's reassured once more the sun will rise.

When Katherine, his Katya, is away at her sister's in Montreal, he is alone and the house is quiet. Younger than he, a handsome woman of confidence and energy, she bumps around the cottage filling it with the sound of her voice, "Ah! Of *course!* ... *It's extraooo-rd'nary!*" Running upstairs, long skirts flowing about her legs, she calls, "Marek? Monsieur

Markeovitch!" and bounds into his room, her feet coming firmly down, splayed and flat-footed, the gait of ballerinas.

The clock chimes three thirty. No use lying here, he thinks, getting up, sleep will be no haven, reading no comfort, nor writing down his thoughts. Ach! these murderous thoughts he wishes to tear from his brain. He will make a list. Another habit, some call it compulsion, like gathering stones from the beach. Once in his den, surrounded by his books, the familiar touch of warm wood under his hand, his nerves at last begin to settle. I can only tell you, he is fond of saying, I *love* it, this secure feeling.

Yes, his list, he'll make several: under A, those he can depend on absolutely; under B, most of the time; C, sometimes, *maybe*, but he'll shift them from list to list as he sees fit. Katherine of course is in the A column. Should she not be well, or here? Here at all, that is, one never knows.

Did he forget to say he has children? The question is, on which list does he place them? Surely not A. Rubbing his eyes, he stares at the silent phone. It's not rung since his wife called from her sisters two days ago. Ah! the wire twists! he observes, righting the receiver in its cradle. Finally, he writes his sons' names in the space under B; reflecting a moment, moves them to C. Then turns to friends. Friends by appointment ... *Lunch next Saturday, one o'clock?* He is too harsh; surely a few deserve to be under B ... Steinberg, Miller, Knellman. He writes in their names all the while doubting, his mind a mass of confusion. Lists imply efficiency, no? *Another* time, he thinks and passes his hand again over his eyes. Later, he will finish the lists later, choose then.

His father made lists: **Who Owes Money** ... goods received, credit extended; money borrowed. Needed coin to purchase freedom. Who can we count on? Yes, Who. Customer Gorczyn? Dr. Wolf? Neighbor Zielinski? To his father everyone was an A. He made *one* such list, then another to replace the first, and another and another until it became clear his question was not reasonable, only one mattered.

Bist du ein Jude?

No, Marek will have *three* lists, for he is not so optimistic and will move names around, relocate them, so to speak. Of course all must be judged by just one criterion, who can be counted, who will come to his aid. Other lists have been far more discriminating, a matter of choosing, sorting, classifying: young, old, weak, strong, sick, disabled; ugly, *schone*, fat, stupid; useful ... whore. Then the relocating ... *ubersiedlung*: you to rot, you get shot, you starve, you die; you to work ... **ARBEIT MACHT FREI!**

Well, others are right, what good to dwell, to see so many ghosts? What drives him to, how should he say it ... take inventory? To make a long story short, the phone does *not* ring anymore. He tried to tell his own father once, *Be done with your lists! There is no one.* Finally, he was himself on a list, to make a long story short.

*

Marek leaves his list-making, and in dawn's half-light huddles before bookshelves in his den, studying the dictionary, thesaurus, hunting for words or expressions to relax more his English; help his writing sound more natural. If only he could write *in Polish* what he has to tell, if only others could understand *his* language. Well, he keeps hoping, this day or the

next, or next, he'll find the right words to tell of these horrors, purge shadow places his eye folds in upon.

There are people who say Marek Wronski is obsessed with only one subject, that which terrorizes him. Dwells too much in the past, they say, it isn't healthy. Of course, they said these things even back when his books were being published. Write an autobiography and be done with it! they said. They understand little. *Fiction* distances him, allows him to tell the truth.

You see, he *must* dwell ...

Arranging words, compiling names, assembling stones ...

*

Words miscarry memory; lists lie, unreliable.

And so, he abandons these efforts, and drawn by the full light of morning, cloudless blue sky and shimmering lake, goes out to his workshed by the water's edge and turns his energy to making small sculptures from stones he'd gathered that frightening day by the sea.

A twig for an arm, piece of branch a leg, acorn feet; polished pebble a nose, berries for eyes; birds' feathers, fungi, dried leaves and flowers, outlandish hat! Strong glue, shellac, a few touches of red paint. "I can only tell you," he confides to Katherine, "this gives me such pleasure! I feel ... I don't know, how can I put it? ... lighter!" She says she sees how his eyes brighten, his ruddy cheeks flush as if from too much wine. He thinks he looks like a slight bird with his sharp bones and small beaked nose, an old, straight-backed tipsy bird, foolish as his creations!

Who would guess Marek Wronski possesses such whimsy! Certainly Katherine and her friends don't understand his humour. They are Canadian, brought up on US culture: cowboys and Indians, and what she calls 'sitcoms' and 'slapstick'. "Tell me, Katharina" ... addressing her as he would a Russian princess ... "What do these shows stand for? What is their purpose?" "Why, entertainment!" she cries, and clasping her hands to her heart, croons, "*Stop! In the name of love ... The Sixties! The Supremes, Marek!*" ... and laughs at him for not getting it. What planet has he been on?

Now, on this cloudless morning, in his workshop by the water's edge, he contemplates his crafted bit of fancy and chuckling begs her examine it. What to use for a *shlong*? This closed-up-tight pine cone, shameful shy little-one tinier than his baby fingernail? This medium one, opened wide like the kiss of flower petals? Or this long, grandiose holder of seed? Only the wistful little one folded into itself seems right. Still, Marek thinks, examining it, it *does* have potential, even if all seems barren.

"This is one of Marek's attempts to be funny," Katherine tells everyone and they force a smile. "*Shlong* is a perfectly good German word," he protests. AOh, Marek, stop being silly!" she chides, reddening. But it is important, what could be more, this question of manhood? Puny or well-hung? To be or not to be? "It *isn't* funny, Marek," she grumbles, putting an end to it.

But not all his stonemen are so amusing! These he works on, just look how sorrow-sick, weary, dumb with grief, the suffering *in* the stone worn down and shaped by sun and sand, wind and rain, ocean waters. That happens over time. Mournful as the overcast

afternoon Marek and Katherine found the stones amongst hundreds strewn between cliff and sea; the day he grew faint from fright and gulls swooped low, warning.

Walking by the sea, Marek and Katherine stopped short, bewildered. Blown-out tires, an old bar fridge, a gas range, litter the exposed beach at low tide. “Where have all these castaways come from?” she asks, but of course he also wants to know. She takes him by the arm and they pick their way among empty seed casings and clumps of yellow-brown seaweed snaked across their path in strands, Medusa’s tresses, then stop again to look around, taking in the scene.

Above the strewn junk, gliding gulls squawk and a sandpiper scuttles past on stilts hinged backward. Suddenly, the earth tilting, spinning ... A dizzy spell, Marek thinks, passing his hands over his eyes ... but no, the clump of seaweed at his feet quivers, shifts and swells, undulating. A sound, at first innocent as the keening of cicadas on a summer’s eve, then intruding, insistent, blocking out the ocean’s roar, the seagulls’ squawk ... like a *grogger*, Purim noisemaker, metal, you twirl it fast ... Katya hears it too!

At once the mound heaves, and perfectly camouflaged by the yellow-brown-green colour of kelp, a snake shoots its head upward! Draws back, preparing to strike, stares them down, rattles growing louder, upper jaw pulled up, face made sharp and arrow-like by deep pits on either side from eye to nostril. Its body slithers smooth as rain on satin, its massive coils uncoiling.

A rattlesnake on the beach?

Marek hears Katya’s sharp intake of breath, the snake’s rattles *clack-clack-clacking* like the revving of an engine, sounding over breaking waves and seagulls’ cries, stifling the scream in his throat. The pits in its face radiate hot fire, its tongue flicks, fangs bared, its yellow sloe eyes breathe evil. He’s seen the Gorgon Medusa herself, and is turned to stone.

His grip on Katya’s arm tightens ... her heavy breathing ... serpent’s rattles *grog-grogging* ... coils sidling, seaweed undulating ... He grows weak, his chest squeezes, and then she’s pulling at him, jolting him out of inaction. Together they run.

Making its way toward them across the sand, a jeep pulls alongside and a blonde young man in a wet suit calls out, “*Hi there!*” ... so American! ... and flashes a smile white as seagulls. “You all right, sir?” he asks, seeing Marek so pale and shaky. “We’re warning people not to walk in that,” he says, and points to the kelp, then tells them the storm last night washed everything down from the river, junk, driftwood, bullfrogs, turtles ... rattlesnakes. “Won’t last long in salt water, but we’ll have ‘em outa here before then,” he assures. “*Really!*” Katherine exclaims. Then he knocks twice on the outside of the jeep door, saying, “Take care now,” and drives off.

Relieved, they laugh and laugh and start up toward dry sand clear of seaweed and debris. “Ah! It’s *extraoooo-rd’nary!*” Katherine exults. They will have a good story to tell! Holding hands, they walk on for a bit then pause, again taking everything in. The sunless sky hangs low, overcast, and seamless joins with the sea, vast and flat gray, the color of slate. Marek squints, peering out at the water, searching for ... what? A glimmer of caring. Does he have to tell you he finds none?

So much life in the ocean! ... sea bass and flounder, shark and shrimp, starfish and anemones, and far below the surface, yellow and pink coral *teeming* with life! Even at night, before a storm, the froth on breakers *glows*, a green iridescence shooting like mercury across the water. "So much *life*, Marek!" Katya exclaims, giving voice to his thoughts. So much life. But when the sun is not out to light his imagination, he cannot see it.

A helicopter flies low over the ocean, making its chop-chop-churning sound, and hovers, a hummingbird. Taking Katya by the arm and avoiding the kelp, he walks back over water-darkened sand toward the ocean's edge and watches their footsteps make mudprints, then fill up. A molted snakeskin remains and someone has built a sand castle with those new turret-like molds, recently he would think, since it's still intact, and left bucket and shovel behind. In great white letters painted on boulders in sandstone cliffs, some gravity-defying tagger has left his message ... *Kato Kalin for President!* "I can only tell you, I *love* it! Ah! I can breathe!" Marek exults, taking it all in. Washed-up seashells crunching underfoot, they once head up toward dry sand.

It was here Marek collected stones, between cliff and sea where sleek seals sun themselves on rocks and people look out toward the horizon for dolphins and the spouting of a whale. Here, where hundreds of stones and countless pebbles cushion gull and tern and the feet of men walking the beach as Marek does. He'd felt these once-rough rocks in his palm and remembered how his father and mother so long ago took him to the cemetery in Lwow to his grandparents' grave ... *Here lies Anna and Louis Wronski, Beloved Mother and Father* ... how after a moment of silent communion they searched the grounds for stones and finding each their own, approached and placed them on the headstone ... one, two, three, four, five ... six, seven, eight ... Calling cards, to be counted: This many, Anna and Louis, this many in your A list.

This gnaws at him: Where to leave his visiting card for *them*, his own mother and father? Sisters? Brothers? Aunts and Uncles and Cousins? All of them? Where place this marker?

No way for them to know who can be counted on.

No way to say "I remember."

Late at night, words failing, and fearing sleep, or awaking in a sweat, Marek will again sit at his desk, pencil in hand, hunched over his lists, analysing, pulling names together from here and there. And his stonemen? They are what they are, stones gathered at a beach, random findings from field and forest, glued together into some kind of order.

* *The Day of the Gorgon* was first published in *Jewish Currents*, November 1999