

That Roar on the Other Side of Silence

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If we had a keen vision and feeling for all ordinary life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.

—George Eliott

I. IN A HOTEL ROOM WHERE TWO PEOPLE GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER

“It’s a little bit dark,” he says to the woman.

On her knees, she nods. A woman outside herself whose short, thick hair is damp, whose small breasts are exposed. A woman with a string of pearls doubled around her neck and red velour socks that slouch on her ankles, accessories that only serve to heighten her exposure. The light of the city—a blue light from office buildings, the street and its traffic on this moonless night—comes in through the window whose curtain the man has parted. Indigo spreads across the woman’s nakedness.

Do you see her? You may be her; I may be her, neither of us may be her. But what if we all were that woman on her knees who waits for the next minute of darkness to descend? Who watches the man’s eyes for a signal that tells her to hang her head obediently or defy him and face the consequences? How would you think or talk about it, if you talked about it? How would you contextualize such a scene? Is this pornography? Eroticism? A lifestyle? Or is it simply a lesson in something that cannot be properly named, another example of language’s inadequacy?

A man stands over a woman who is on her knees, whose hands are bound with the scarf (*too red*, she thinks, but only for a second) she wore to dinner. He will remove her belt, then his, and he will use them on her flanks. And she will agree to this because she believes there is some kind of truth about trust in how leather and flesh collide. Because they both know he will never buckle his belt without thinking of her and she will never slide the black leather of hers through the loops of her jeans without thinking of him. Because they know that this belongs to them: the dark, the belt, the bruise.

“Are you sure?” he asks. (Do you think he already knows that she is sure?)

She nods, a woman inside herself who looks out, who looks up at a man who has traveled this far, she thinking he never knew he would indulge this desire, he knowing all along he had to assuage it, she a woman outside herself looking in, knowing there is safety in darkness. And not. And too. And yes, she says to her own skin and flesh and heart.

“Yes,” she tells him, “I want that, I want you to bring me over the edge into that dark place,” but to herself she says, Don’t forget, don’t turn back, don’t look down, don’t blink, don’t deny that *this* is happening.

His face mirrors how *this* feels to her. Reflected in his eyes, in his skin tinted vaguely blue, is a part of them dredged up from that place where they have hidden things. This discovery plays out on his face: it softens his eyelids (but only momentarily), deepens the crease between his nose and lips, and is as substantial as the gap between his teeth. This mask will dissolve for an instant, and then she sees how ugly he might become, how his eyes are hard and almost lashless, his lips thin and dried into a grimace, but she pushes those images from her mind and concentrates instead on the gleam of his eyes, telling herself that in that sheen she sees their mutual wish that he mark her as his. *This*, she thinks, is entirely separate from how she describes herself—politically accurate where women are concerned, incensed by pornography and violence, able to name any exploitation and get it right. Separate from how she has drawn him in her mind to justify all *this*—a man who respects women, who considers the wrongs made in the name of beauty, who understands how the culture has tricked men and women into roles they’d kill each other to escape.

This: a bruise will flower on her flesh by tomorrow. As if the light of this city where no one knows them, the light of buildings and cars and the street, seeping through the window well past midnight, has tinted her skin instead of the belt he weilds. *This*: it's the kind of thing that always occurs in the early hours of morning we erroneously call night, as if there were some clear boundary between one time of day and another, as if we'd forgotten what it was like to be children yearning to blend day for night and night for day, as if we'd never been bruised before.

But she is bruised by his hand, by her belt and his, bruised in trust and longing so old it makes Stonehenge look young. And she will wear this mark through tomorrow, and the next day. *Like a medal*, she'll think as she sits, shifting to accommodate that dull ache.

Weeks later he will tell her that indulging *this* was overwhelming. She will wonder if he ever considered her point of view. She'll slip her belt through the loops of her jeans, wrap the scarf (its red faded, she notices, where it was tied) around her neck, and she'll tremble just a little bit, the mark long since faded.

He will say one thing and do another. The words he utters will include *love*, *profound*, *lodge*—nouns, modifiers, and verbs—promises of the abstract habitation she hopes to have set up in his heart. His actions will include contradictions: he'll retreat, not respond, never call. She'll be left hanging, in a limbo where the memory of that blue light exposes her loneliness and her bruise, which is fast hardening into a scar on her stripped psyche. She'll begin to hate him, to wonder why she bothered, and she'll write letter after letter that she'll never send, or she'll spend a cycle of their daily contact in absence, hoping he'll wonder what happened, where she is, but returning before she's completed such distancing, unable to cut him off. It's not him she's trying to cut off; it's her.

And what about him? Have you guessed, that he's already on the trail of the next pursuit, or perhaps he's finishing up with the conquest who would explain all his absences? That one is not enough, and she, our bruised and betrayed woman wearing pearls and socks in the indigo light, is not his first or last. Or second or third. That his appetite cannot be sated. That he is, to put it colloquially, *full of shit*. That

she and others in her predicament, in some future time none of them can imagine, will actually say, "What was I thinking? How could I have been duped like that?"

That never, ever, will she say to anyone, "I let him bruise me and I liked it."

II. GENESSEE RIVER KILLER DIES AT SIXTY-THREE

We passed them driving home late at night and we cursed them under our breath. They were streetwalkers and we didn't want them around. They were homeless and they shamed us. When he killed them, we were silent. Someone was cleaning up our community. They were dirt. They were lower than dirt. *Good riddance*, we thought.

When we learned their names—Patricia, Frances, June, Darlene, Anna Marie, Dorothy (two of them), Kimberly, June, Marie, and Elizabeth—we felt a little uncomfortable. Those were the names of our wives, our little girls, our sisters, our mothers and grandmothers, our aunts and cousins, our secretaries and nurses and grocery store clerks and teachers. We never thought of those women he killed as someone's wife or daughter or sister or mother or aunt. Still, we said nothing.

And then he was caught. He had returned to the scene of the crime. It was January. The body of this last victim was frozen. The police arrested him. We showed outrage when we learned he had killed two children before he came to our city and murdered these eleven women.

We listened to the news of his trial. We wanted to believe that he couldn't help what he had done because he was brain injured, had suffered abuse during childhood, and went to Vietnam. We wanted to believe that the kind of hatred implicit in his crimes was impossible, though at moments—especially on Friday and Saturday nights, when we worried about our own children who stayed out too late—we knew, even if it was only for a passing second, that such hatred is not only impossible, it's like a virus. We despised those women too.

Now he's dead. We are older; some of our daughters have run away and are on the streets; some of our friends are homeless. Some of us are more tolerant now. Some of us speak now, even if only to whisper the names of the dead in prayer.

III. IN THE SHELTER FOR BATTERED WOMEN

Women arrive here bruised. Some with emotional contusions you can feel across the room and cannot see, some with all variation of blue, brown, russet, and ochre marking their skin. Around the eyes where he's hit her. On the arms where he's grabbed her. On the buttocks where he's kicked her. On the neck where he's tried to choke her. On the knees when he demanded that she beg for mercy, for the dog's life, for the safety of her kids. For her life.

Children arrive bruised: wrists and ankles, the back, legs, and face. And deeper still: their child hearts and livers and kidneys and spleens and lungs and stomachs. And deeper yet: their child genitals, still hairless most of them, still waiting for something gentle to happen there.

If you worked here with these women and these children, you might go home and make a mental inventory of injury. You might do this every night (and if you've never prayed formally, you may begin to confuse this exercise of reviewing the hurt of others as a kind of prayer). There's Carla with two black eyes and Jane with asthma and insomnia and irritable bowel syndrome and Alice with a busted rib and Gina with a nose broken twenty times and Sally with clumps of hair torn out and fingertips bloody from where she's chewed them and Ellen, so quiet you suspect her vocal chords were damaged when her *lover* tried to strangle her.

You will get nervous about whether they are safe at night in the shelter (its location is confidential, but everyone knows where it is), not just from the husbands and boyfriends and partners and fathers and brothers who inflicted the bruises, but with themselves, with each other.

Consider Elaine, a woman in her late thirties, who, with her bleached-blond hair showing its roots, and her creased face that makes her look like she's pushing fifty, the one waving the knife as she speaks, the one who nods when you tell her she can't use drugs or alcohol while she's staying here (under the beneficent eaves of the state-funded, federally-mandated safe house), who has her stash and her dealer ("I give him head, he gives me a nickel bag," she'll announce later in blatant disregard for the rules), and besides, she's a grown woman, and who are you to tell her she can't snort a line or smoke a jay or down a shot of tequila? And then there's Angie, the mother of two who will abandon her three-year-old daughter and try to cross

the Canadian border with her infant son, a young woman who has lived in communes and on the streets of New York City and in shelters from Florida to Maine, whose hair is now red but probably started out brown, who cuts herself regularly, favoring the soft flesh of the belly, a part of her body she reveals whenever she can. And who can forget Tanya, the overweight ten year old who pees on the floor and throws such violent tantrums no one can restrain her. Or Bobby, the toddler who knows how to get what he wants by smashing his hand in a face—his mother's, his infant sister's, yours even.

And there's the Ojibwe woman whose nickname is Cricket, who has four kids, the oldest of whom is anorexic and darkly beautiful and so sad there should be a real law that prevents all this damage from being inflicted. If you look into this woman's eyes, you'll understand why they called her Cricket, that it's not about some cute cartoon bug with a top hat, but because she has the potential to summon the fearsome sound of ten thousand crickets trapped in your living room. You will understand all this only when you hear her scream, hear her voice lift up and out of her (like a beacon, or maybe, you'll think later, the sound of a demon) when the social worker from Child Protective Services, accompanied by a cop, orders you to open the door so they can take away Cricket's children because, says the social worker, Cricket has *failed* to protect them. You may have trouble understanding how Cricket has failed since she has, after all, left the scene of too many crimes and come here, finally, to this safe house, even if she did mention that she wants to go home. They all want to go home. The social worker does not mince words. And though she doesn't say it, you can feel her need to rush this transaction. She knows a nice family waiting to adopt a baby boy, this baby boy whom Cricket will not relinquish. By the end of the day, the whole family will be fractured, Cricket's three girls ferried off to separate foster homes, places where no one speaks Anishinabe and where no one checks to make sure they're being fed and clothed and bathed. The older one will perish quickly, falling through a crack so wide you'd need a truck full of concrete to fill it in. She'll be abused in foster care, she'll run away, she'll be caught, she'll turn eighteen and be freed from the system, and in ten years, when she is the age her mother is now, she'll call the shelter hotline and then open this very door

through which the social worker and the cop are waiting to escort her now. As this hour of your life passes, this travesty of justice, this wrongness, the police officer keeps shaking his head and telling you and the rest of the staff that he wishes he were anywhere but here. Every time you think of Cricket, her bruises—especially the ones you can't see—will grow larger. You will never forget her kids, the oldest locked in the bathroom with her two sisters, the baby crying, Cricket holding him tighter and tighter, sobbing and begging the white social worker for a second chance, the social worker saying over and over again that Cricket is making this *transition* more difficult than it has to be, the cop outside the locked bathroom door talking the oldest girl into unlocking it, you helping the two youngest girls throw their meager belongings into a black garbage bag. And when you ask the youngest of the sisters if she knows what's happening, you'll see her stare into a place past any heart, a place that chills you just to think of it. Later on this evening, the children gone and the shelter quiet, Cricket will tell you how she's going to fight to get those kids back and you'll tell her you'll help, but she'll be gone in the morning, no note, no forwarding address, and you will feel what it's like to fail to protect someone. Several months later, you'll learn that she's in jail for soliciting; Cricket will not see her kids until they are grown and she is much older than she ever imagined living. She will become an aged and ragged Cricket, her loveliness hidden beneath tattered clothes, discarded with the leg lost to diabetes, buried beneath skin sallowed by cigarette smoke and too few days outside in the sun.

Late at night, as you catalog their faces and names, their ailments and idiosyncrasies, their lives and loves gone sour, you'll remember that all you can give them is the promise of acceptance, which means that all you can give them is your ability to listen, and to tell them, when the time comes, that they don't deserve the bruises they've sustained. This small assurance is so very tiny, especially when you imagine what you might do if you could take all the money used to keep the shelter in compliance with the ten thousand rules imposed by the state and the feds and give it to Carla and Alice and Jane and Gina and Sally and Ellen and Elaine and Angie and Tanya and Bobby and Cricket.

IV. LIKE A WOMAN SITTING IN AN EMPTY CHAIR

What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.

—Muriel Rukeyser

Dear Muriel,

When the world splits open, I hope you will catch me when I fall through the crack.

Every time I tell people the story of how my husband treated me, I can feel them thinking, *at least he didn't hit you*. The truth: I wish he *had*. You get hit and it's over. A bruise results; there's evidence. And once the fist has made contact with flesh, the cycle reaches its peak, even if it happens again and again. You see that fist coming.

In my world, there was no peak, there were only constant eggshells under foot . . . I'd set the table and come into the dining room to discover the place settings removed, or wake in the morning to find the contents of the kitchen cabinets rearranged, all the cupboard doors left wide open. Gifts I placed under the Christmas tree for my two sons would disappear. Not one day passed when I wasn't called stupid. "You're going crazy," he'd tell me, every night before bed. The words would seep into my dreams and distill them into nightmares. I became afraid to fall asleep, to enter those worlds in which boxes of cereal and salt cellars and cans of soup would grow legs and faces and arms and march out of the kitchen past me, giving me the finger or spitting at my feet. Once in a nightmare, all the frying pans exploded and the grease splattered me everywhere.

He'd tell me I said things I didn't remember saying: "You called Mrs. James a hag when we went to the PTA meeting; you told our neighbor you were going to dye your hair green. Why do you say such things? You probably have Tourette's." And then he'd tell me I had forgotten saying all this, that I probably had early Alzheimer's too. He'd glare at me when the breakfast I cooked wound up in the trash, though I hadn't put it there. "You're going crazy. Maybe I should commit you," he'd say. And then he'd make me get completely undressed and cook a new breakfast: bacon, crispy, and eggs, over medium. I'd have to stand there and watch him eat. And when he was done, he'd put his plate on the floor and make me get down on all fours to scarf up the crumbs and lick the egg yolk. He forbid me to read, to watch television without him, to make phone calls. He

never allowed me to drive anywhere alone. We lived at the end of a long road and had no neighbors. Most weekends, he'd take the boys to his camp in the woods, but not before emptying the kitchen, leaving me with only a big box of saltines and a case of beer and instructions to finish them both. He'd turn off the water and shut off the electricity and record the numbers from the meters so if I dared turn them on again, he'd know. I suppose there was always the threat he'd hurt me physically, and that fear was worse than if he had simply hit me. As it was, I developed sleeping disorders and an ulcer and I lost weight and my hair started coming out in clumps and by the time I finally left him, after thirteen years of marriage, I was malnourished, had stopped menstruating, and was a nervous wreck.

One day, I packed a small bag and walked out. I couldn't believe how easy it was even though I was scared and I didn't want to leave the kids like that, with him. I went to the shelter. They were nice to me. They even helped me get into a place of my own. Transitional housing, it's called. Because, I guess, you're making a transition from the unreal world to the real one. The thing is, living in that house, as nice as it was, I started to go crazy for real. I heard his voice telling me he'd find me, telling our two sons how I'd abandoned them, telling the police I needed to be locked up. Each night, I'd check the cupboards and fridge and draw pictures of where everything was. I'd check them again in the morning. I became obsessed with doing this. I saw doctors. They gave me Valium and Xanax and sleeping pills and antidepressants, but nothing eased my nerves. I'd dream of him breathing on the back of my neck. Awake, I was always looking over my shoulder, expecting him to be behind me. One day, I couldn't take it any more, so I took all the pills. If it wasn't for the nice lady from the shelter, who came in that day to bring some new curtains, I'd have died on the kitchen floor. After that, I wasn't allowed to stay in transitional housing. I went back to the shelter. Eventually though, I found my own apartment. I was hired as a receptionist in a health center. People there looked out for me. They gave me covered dishes of good food. They called to make sure I wasn't alone too often. They helped me find a free lawyer, who worked with me to get custody of my kids, something I thought I'd never be able to do since I believed I really was crazy. I joined a group of women, and we talked about what had happened to each of us and, just like everyone kept saying, I realized I

wasn't alone. But sometimes, instead of comforting me, it made me very sad, that so many women had these stories. Still, I started to get better. After two years, I gained some weight and even had my hair colored and cut. I bought new clothes, the kinds of things he never let me wear, like V-neck sweaters and skirts. People told me I looked good. My lawyer had advised seeing a therapist, that it would help my case. I learned I wasn't crazy after all. A social worker came to visit me every week and although I was afraid of her at first and the reports she was writing, eventually she told me that I was as fit a mother as she'd ever seen and she recommended to the judge that I be granted custody. The day before the hearing, my husband called me at work. "Insane people can't care for children. I'm going to kill you," he said and hung up. I went into the bathroom and cried so hard my mascara ran all over my cheeks and when I looked in the mirror, I saw the face of a crazy woman and I cried until I vomited and vomited until I retched and retched until I was drained. When I went back to my desk, I felt like a woman sitting in an empty chair.

Finally, I was divorced and my sons came to live with me. The oldest, who was fifteen, was very angry. He tried to push me down the stairs. He repeated the kinds of things his father used to say to me, and I was scared of him. But I persevered. I found help for my son. I felt solid working a good job and having my boys at home. I even had friends. I wasn't going to let anyone take me away from this new life.

On the first-year anniversary of my divorce, they found me in my bedroom, with a shotgun positioned between my knees. Everyone thought my death was suspicious though eventually it was listed as a suicide and the case was closed. "Women rarely use guns to kill themselves. She was too short to have used that gun," the state police officer in charge of the investigation told the district attorney. My ex-husband had a foolproof alibi. But my oldest son, he was home when I died. The theory of the crime is that his father talked him into shooting me and then set things up to make it look like I took my own life.

No one but me is sure how I died. And I don't want to tell you because either way—whether I committed suicide or was killed by my own child—neither of us was guilty. Either way, I was murdered. And my husband, he never laid a hand on me.

Catch me if you can, Muriel.