

THIS IS THE BOOK OF LOVE---

A NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS

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You will be listening to excerpts from a manuscript seeking an audience: *This Is the Book of Love.* This reading is not a

condensation...it's an introduction to some characters I admire and the gifts they bear. I think of this CD as a verbal mosaic in progress. Today I lay tile of varying shape --- the portions you will hear are gathered from different parts of the novel. In order to make this reading comprehensible, I have constructed a few bridges of prose---consider them mortar---between the tiles. They do not look or sound like tiles. But the mortar serves, humbly, to take us from one cluster of tiles to another array, related ---albeit distant.

I should like to say at the outset...

that the visitors are not all Americans, as the villagers first suppose. In this CD, you will meet the foreign film crew, but only barely. You will not enjoy their individuality and compassion, their inner voices and outer generosity, their sterling pilgrimage over bleak terrain---

I find much to admire in these characters, and it does not surprise me that they volunteer to be slighted here so that we may focus on a man named Pyet. On his wife, Ludmilla. And their parents and teachers, long dead.

All unglamorous folk whom the foreigners were quick to dismiss and slow to value.....at the outset.

In this novel, revelation and redemption come from within.

So mind the mortar, generous auditors; understand that the “Americans” are not just that and far more than that, but beginnings are beginnings; and admire the crew, as they deserve, for you will not hear them in their splendor in this recording, and this they generously concede if you but honor the loving hearts and valiant beings who so greatly, and so improbably, stirred their hearts, and thus, their passage. Our common passage...The beauty that we daily enter into....

The Book of Love.

Chapter One: Begun.

It had begun.

**In bubbling yellow dawn leap,
it had begun.**

**In
fairy tale high C
honey chant and nursery music.
It had begun
In sugar milk chorus and jonquil glow.**

**Bounce Burp Beam
delighted doer's light
they were.**

Thus, it had begun...

He sat.

He sat very still.

As requested.

Still, this did not please the Americans.

**They smiled at him encouragingly. But failure wafted
between their clenched teeth and through their**

exasperated smiles, shrouding the dingy mayoral suite.

The tall one shouted. Again.

The machines hushed. Again.

And, again, like ants possessed, thirteen Americans, gods and goddesses all, formed a murmuring cloud not ten feet from the object of their dissatisfaction: he, Pyet Durenost.

He had failed them. Again.

How he did not know.

He had sat very still, as requested.

It had seemed an easy thing to do.

And what would he NOT do to oblige the bustling beings who had traveled so far to see him? To chronicle his life, they said.

Still, Pyet could have sworn that his very repose agitated them. Over that long morning, the foreigners would knot in the middle of the room, buzzing, the tall one at their hub, orchestrating. Then they would scatter, aiming machines, anxieties and jewel-like smiles on Pyet-sitting-oh-so-still.

The interviewer would intone; the translator translate. And as Pyet sat, and as he spoke, wisps of

failure would leak from twenty-six American eyes,
rousing them ineluctably to their ritual dance.

If they were not such earnest souls, these Americans,
and so hard working, he would joke with them. He
would NOT SIT STILL. Pyet would lead them from
these walls, steeped in pretense and self-loathing, to
air and living green.

He would bid them breathe.

He would soothe their Potemkin smiles and hidden
frowns until something real, until life called them
forth.

But Pyet was in no position to advise.

He sat very still.

As requested.

Throughout.

*Throughout the long morning and into the charmed afternoon,
Pyet had done his best.*

*Vibrant, these Americans. Male and female, they were tall, taut,
electric.*

In his land of want and worn and was,

they loomed as creatures from a distant planet, gods and goddesses, all.

They smiled.

They smiled when amused.

When uneasy.

When distraught.

Oh, Pyet was a smiler, too.

And he had known many a grin without a beam; for many a smirking official had sharked in and out of the Durenost's lives.

But he had never encountered anything like American smiles.

Even when belligerent brows betrayed lips artfully parted, even as throats snaked and eyes snarled, they beamed bonhomie.

At first, Pyet had been puzzled to see grins dress anguish, frustration, dissent, and incomprehension. Even when set of spine and jut of jaw had belied the bared, impeccable teeth, the divinities smiled.

But they were NOT happy.

**Sitting-very-still-as requested,
diligently-doing-nothing-as-demanded,
Pyet's stillness,**

**THIS it was
that set off
round after round
of buzzing, swarming,
and smile-draped disquiet
in the town's much admired guests.**

**What would he NOT DO
for these bottled lightning foreigners
who,
however sad inside,
had swept beam and bustle,
impudence and riot,
into this bastion of dispirit?
Into the lives of breathless villagers,
now recklessly alive,
excited, giddy with their specialness,
now clumped outside the town hall,
waiting for a glimpse
of the "film people,"
the film people who have come here.**

**Two-thirds into this day of miracles and revelation,
unknowing their language,
and pierced by unaccustomed attention,
Pyet could only conclude that sweet health and white
teeth and boundless zeal bred smilers,
a whole nation
of them,
perhaps.**

Sitting-oh-so-still,

**Pyet did what he could.
Warmed the will in them,
softened their dispirit,
amplified high purpose,
wafted ire,
and soothed chaffed pride,
as best he could.
He wanted to tell these connectors
how they had lifted his people;
how they had breathed
exponential expression and
vigor vital
into folks un-linked
to can do,
to will,
to is,
to life,
for too long.**

**Pyet smiled.
Sweet foreigners, I feel your sunshine,
he smiled it in.
Your lemon lilted gift of the gods
Enthusiasm...
the gifts you bring.
You are loved,
needed.
Unknowing saviors,
Be yourselves.
Extraordinary.**

If he were but permitted,

**Pyet would listen to their jokes,
the ones beneath the skin,
the ones that spill out in color, tone, and arc;
he'd listen to their every fear,
and every tale they'd wish to tell
if they had hope of being loved.
Pyet would listen
until,
sure of being loved,
they'd be.
THEN what they came to do
would utter forth
impeccably.
They'd smile
truly
then.**

Listen...

Pyet sat very still.

As requested.

He listened.

**What had begun
in bubbling yellow dawn leap, fairy tale and nursery
music,
in honey chant and jonquil glow,
bumptious high C ditty
and spark of crimson birth
clumped and
grayed
as
tendrils**

wispy
wiry
gray and lacy
seeped from beings doused by...
failure?
Disappointment?
Fear?

Wispy
wiry
gray and lacy,
like singed spider webs,
they spun,
like cyclones,
in dusty slow motion,
sour notes dripped dour damp
corona
around each
head.
And pulsed a single note,
short and soft,
bleak like a grimace,
at once hurt and astonished.

Pyet listened.
They were used to hope.
They believed in each other.
They thrived on purpose.
He listened. They smiled.
Pretense...
Pyet listened

**the strain of suffusing frustration and near defeat
beneath endless bobbing glee and desperate
efficiency, where was there a space for real to visit?
Listen...
wanting**

He sat very still.

As requested.

Still, this did not please the Americans.

They smiled at him encouragingly. But failure wafted between their clenched teeth and through their exasperated smiles, shrouding the dingy mayoral suite. Again.

The tall one shouted. Again.

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The interviewer would intone; the translator translate. And, as Pyet sat; and, as he spoke, wisps of failure would leak from fourteen American eyes, rousing them ineluctably to their ritual dance.

If they were not such earnest souls, these Americans, and so hard working, he would joke with them. He would NOT sit still. Pyet would lead them from these walls, steeped in pretense and self-loathing, to air and living green.

He would bid them breathe. He would soothe their Potemkin smiles and hidden frowns until something real, until life called them forth.

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As requested.

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John was about to implode.

Deanna knew the signs.

The director has ranted, cajoled, bustled, improvised, terrorized, and now he was nearly hollow. He had no direction to give.

Sensing the void, fearing it, the others chattered.

“Let’s just embalm the guy and get it over with,” Hal grunted. Rare for him to break a lull. Hal loved silences, the more awkward the better. Cockney by birth, James Dean by affectation, and head camera by sheer talent, Hal sneered. “No charisma. I swear, every time I get him in the lens, he shrinks.”

Silence, tense and tired.

Mervin, the well-tailored interviewer, took the baton. “They say he’s a new Ghandi. Was Ghandi telegenic?” he purred in his expensive voice.

“Ghandi did not have to play to the tube, dearies.” Chuck, chief writer and minor prophet, chimed in: “For entertainment value, the silver screen beats the real thing hands down. I imagine saints and martyrs are hard as hell to package. But we’re all saps deep down. We need to think some real goodness survives our machinations. Remember, Mother Theresa was no starlet, but she was loved the world over. And her ratings...”

“It’ll take a miracle to extract a decent interview from this one,” Mervin interrupted, telegraphing one of his luminous grins to Pyet the still, Pyet the silent.

Tall, lean, impish, volatile, John the director bobbed to life. He pranced.

“That’s it!! Mother Theresa!!! Mingling with the poor. Feeding the masses. That’s it! You don’t interview saints, you work around them.”

Thirteen jet-lagged Americans dared to breathe. The man was back in charge.

Orders flowed as pictures formed in John’s mind, as a script wrote itself and schedules reconfigured to fit the master’s plan

“All right,” he rasped, “we’ll go on location. He’s had a harrowing life. Lots of footage. Let’s see...the prison, the orphanage, wherever...Hal, we’ll need lots of shots. Set them up carefully. Give us atmosphere. And Mervin, you’ll interview everybody and anybody who looks alive. Kids, we’ll package this saint! We’ll splice this man together.”

Thirteen revitalized Americans had seen it all before. Magic.

“Deanna, “ cooed John. “Go over Pyet’s biography. Find us locations and some locals to interview. And see what you can do about that wife of his. A physician, isn’t she? Check out the hospital. Maybe some shots of her with patients or something. Focus on the patients; she’s no looker. You’ll have to be creative, sweetie. These saints of ours are no stars.”

“Come on, kids,” he ordered. “Get cracking!”

John smiled.

Deanna smiled.

They all smiled.

Tall, thin, blonde, tan, ever pert, omnicompetent, exhausted, unloved, and utterly taken for granted, Deanna trained her formidable will on the impossible.

Again.

As requested.

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The Americans had trailed her daily.

She had to admire their endurance, and distrust their endless cheer. Ludmilla did it for Pyet, her husband. They said he was a great man, these Americans; they called him a philosopher of the people. He never questioned, her husband, the philosopher.

"Philosophers are supposed to question," she used to tell him, long ago when they were courting. "Remember Socrates! So many questions!"

They killed him for it, of course.

She was glad that she had never teased him into questioning. Ludmilla's father, of whom she retained not even a memory, had been killed for questioning the government. Pyet and she were both suspect genetically. She had the taint of rebellion in her, he the stain of aristocracy.

But it was neither fear nor sense that dammed his inquiry.

Questioning presupposes intelligibility.

Intelligibility confers possibility.

And such things genetic pariahs learn
neither to posit nor create.

Pyet was a man of continuing now. A now,
she must admit, a little otherworldly, but
neither evasive nor superior. A man who
waited for some restoration to imprint his
mental paradise on the shabby exterior
world he refused to accept as his reality.

Ludmilla was motion.

She taught, mothered, healed, held. Daily,
for decades, she had gathered her brood of
young doctors and whirled them from bed to
bed, through surgery and conferences, ever
energetic, the eye of their storms, their
strength and stay. So resolutely, so
recklessly did she fix each student and
each patient within her orb that they might
be forgiven for thinking that they counted;
that they had hope and value. So she
believed. So she willed.

And thus it came to be.

Oh the poor Americans. They had tripped
again, ensnared by the tilting floor. She
willed her students to warm to the
foreigners, to inhale their confidence,
their bonhomie. For theirs was the wider
world. The new world. And while her
students must lose their innocence---must

learn that they were the sons and daughters of killers in a backward land---they might hope; they might expand.

The young American woman, the Amazon whose eyes had brimmed with tears these last days, herded her flock with a ferocity which Ludmilla identified easily. They were both on the run. From questions.

Deana had been charged to extract detailed biographies from the Durenosts. And the searing questions of the last week had aroused in both women furies of love and grief they could assuage only in work, service, duty. Plain, dour, worn, Ludmilla, for whom questions killed, had answered this young pretty foreigner as simply and quickly as possible. Thereafter, both had used perpetual motion to keep the unbearable at bay.

“Tony,” hissed Deanna. “Are you all right?” “Can we just keep going, guys?” she entreated.

This strange, damned place. This hospital, for Christ sake, was a menace. Crumbling. Dirty. Tattered. How could they not know it was no place to heal or die?

She knows it, Deanna concluded.

Knows it and keeps her babes in the protective cocoon of her swirling light and energy. She is human radar. An elemental force.

A healer.

Can she touch me, too? Deanna wondered. Can she save me as well?

“All right, fellahs. Back to work. And mind the potholes. This is a hospital after all. And don’t let them see what you think of this place.

Smile and get on with it. Good work, guys.”

Ludmilla knew it was shabby.

Knew it indirectly.

Theirs was a showcase hospital: a showcase for the bureaucrats. As international relations thawed, visitors appeared. Ludmilla valued the professional contacts and exchanges, the journals and equipment brought in. And, for the sake of her charges, so long isolated and censored, Ludmilla solicited contraband---intangible, infectious, and distinctly foreign goods---smuggled in by unsuspecting guests of the state. The scent of beyond. The phenomenology of planet. And the dignity of regard. Under her tutelage, such outside influences were quickly, and very quietly, metabolized.

At the same time, it was through the eyes of well-heeled foreigners, that Ludmilla saw it: her world was shabby. Their eyes widened and snapped as did hers when she saw a messy bandage, a sloppy diagnosis, a

half-washed floor. Shabby. Ludmilla saw in the embarrassed and utterly involuntary inner grimaces of traveled men what the prancing bureaucrats could not apprehend: it was dingy, this world.

Painfully, unaesthetically worn.

Patched, ripped, shredded. Oh, but not picturesquely.

No. Killingly, crudely shabby.

Ludmilla did not mourn the loss of beauty in her physical world. These floors were not important. These walls were inessential. The young people---future doctors and nurses---they were important. She willed the visitors to see their beauty, sweet hopes and common humanity.

Look at their eyes, Ludmilla conjured.

See the light. See their naïve pleasure at showing off, their barely constrained desire to embrace visitors. To say: I am human. I. I. You are human. Are we not alike, you and I? Can we not eat together? Talk together? Save lives together? Will our children, like yours, grow healthy and free?

Ludmilla charged them. Marched them up and down. Caught and mixed the gaze of all. And in such magic they went as one.

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Deanna felt the older woman's panic. John had insisted that they film the nursery. He had wanted shots of Ludmilla cradling babies. Thought that would humanize her.

Deanna could not fail John.

But she had felt Ludmilla's fear, her retraction. What had made this woman, so fiercely loving to her husband and students, recoil from babies?

Deanna herself felt nothing for babies.

Couldn't afford to. Not with her job and aspirations.

As for love, Deanna did not think of it.

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But I don't touch babies.

And I don't speak of love.

I distrust the word. Fear it.

For I have seen so much love quashed. And I have seen so much hatred corrode its sweet sanctity.

Oh you healthy boisterous Americans. Smiling plunderers. Oblivious. Well-meaning.

First, you invade with your questions.

About our families. The orphanage. Our jobs. Marriage. Prison. The new state.

You don't understand: questions kill.

And now babies...babies hurt worse than death.

Babies inspire love.

I teach my students to love babies from their very first breaths. I make my students watch like mother eagles lest the little ones learn of neglect, of pain from us. Not on these floors, I tell them. Not between these walls. My students croon to babies and thus receive the full and fragrant blessings of innocence: of all possibility.

I bid them: do not question.

Do not question why in a world of butchery and unreason we want these sweet ones with us.

I appeal to reason, God forgive me. My students learn of mutual solace in the arms of babies.

Film my students. Not me.

I can't caress babies.

I used to. And the beauty of them nearly broke me.

I would lie awake at night and agonize over the fate of the beautiful creatures who had touched me that day. Would his parents maim him? Would her mother be sent away? Would he bash Jews? Would she play the music in her soul or would I hold her in twenty years time, tubercular and dying?

I feared they would not be loved.

I pre-mourned them.

Make me the doctor of their bodies, I prayed, but keep their sweet souls from my worried heart. We were a land of cruelty for so long. Of cruelty and programmed hate. I could not stand to think that any of their naked beauty would be extinguished. Twisted. Betrayed. I stifled my yearning for the touch of innocence as I urged my students to mingle with beauty, hope, and love.

Where are they now?

All those babies? Do they remember being loved, at some slight distance, with true passion and concern, during their earliest hours?

Looking back, I must say I gave away the universe's greatest gift: beckoning innocents. I thrust them from me, I admit. Still, I engineered great foolishness. I let my students be the fools they must learn to be if we are to survive and they to lead a human life.

God forgive me for my coldness.

I am an indirect being with savage passions. The love I feel is so great, it overwhelms me. I fear it will kill me. So I love in ways that are not tactile, soft, invasive. What an inept mother I am, shielding myself from the beauties of love, day after day, as I take on the armor that strengthens many.

They need me hard in love. Invincible. I absorb their weakness in my strength. And I give these, my children, the gift of being soft.

They didn't make it in my day: soft ones.

So you must look deeper; deeper and keener; you must look at the corners and angles for my loving. For I did not dare extinguish myself in beauty, although I always lived for love, and moved through its beam onto the plain hard surface of the ward, the street, the shop. The gray everyday. I was the mother warrior. The eagle strengthener.

But I quiver, I tell you, at the very thought of holding babies.

Hal was pleased.

Ludmilla held baby after baby. She appeared to forget the cameras. Forget they were strangers. Ludmilla had let her guard down. Invited them in.

She wasn't such a bad old bird, after all, thought Hal. There was beauty in her ferocious nurturance, all-seeing compassion beneath the brusque façade. I want to do her justice, Hal wished.

Would to God, if only the camera could reach to the soul...

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Nothing in this story was trite. Nothing simple.

Weeks of questioning.

Such simple questions.

Such simple answers.

Shattering simplicity. And evil.

Where did you meet?

How did you get to the orphanage?

What of the other children?

What did you do all day?

Who were your teachers?

Where are they now?

Can we interview them?

*Why were you sent to
prison?*

Were you worried about your husband? Your wife?

*Were you ever
afraid?*

Such questions comprise a life, John reflected.

The Durenosts had shared a brutal, intense life. So why did they make simple questions into emotional Everests? Things that had been faced can be recalled and articulated. The backers expect profit and prizes, the viewers a gripping show.

None of which could John deliver at present.

Failure. Not in my vocabulary, he muttered.

Failure. I've been stiffed by slimy rustics in bad suits, he fumed.

Stalking the elusive pizzazz, John had transported Pyet, Ludmilla, crew, and support staff to the farm. Or the camp, or the school, or the orphanage, as the prison for children had been mislabeled variously. The director had planned to film the remaining buildings and burial grounds in stark, macabre detail. He wanted exhaustive footage: inside, outside, wherever horrific atmosphere could be preserved or manufactured. Around the footage---and despite the deadly dull Durenosts---John had planned to spin a film.

But the work site was not as anticipated.

Bulldozers. Fresh work. Failure.

From early days, smiling officials had cautioned Deanna against the treacherous weather, the rugged terrain, poor roads, lack of services, and remoteness of the facility. Needed passes could not be issued, out of concern for the health and safety of esteemed visitors. Desperate, John had charmed, schmoozed, dined, and gifted important men, their wives, and families. Scores of meetings had devoured the director's time and fed his frustration. In the end, over vodka and cash emoluments, the

ruddy-faced politicians had obliged with permits to film the former "refuge for children."

Indeed, the roads, terrain, site, amenities, and clime had been, as advertised, hellish. But, at journey's end, there was to be found no there there.

The orphanage was gone.

Instead, crushed and twisted debris of grounds and buildings very recently razed taunted the tired crew. Expensive permits in hand, John faced ravaged land, scattered stones, and abandoned bulldozers.

Failure. I won't do failure, John vowed. There is always a way. There has always been, there will always be, a way.

The material is here. I feel it. The material is right before me

...in these boring, backward people, the director scowled. For John, Pyet the Dull and Ludmilla the Unappealing remained closed books with worn covers. Allied against him. With failure.

Stalking him now, materializing everywhere, pulverizing prospects, vaporizing potential---failure. So recently a media magus, John stood on ruins with a galloping deadline, a pillaged location, a pilfered shooting plan, a mutinied crew, and the dull as dirt Durenosts. Alone. He and his shadow: failure.

What had happened to his people?

Veterans all, the production team had changed over this endless, kaleidoscopic month. Veterans all, they had grown sober. Subdued. Even Merwin had become unreasonably protective of Pyet and Ludmilla and, with the others, strangely critical of John's undimmed resolve to disinter the past.

Standing in this terrible place, this orphanage where children had been herded to die, John, too, was silent. Was no one watching? he inquired of a tattered tree.

Silence. Everywhere was silence. The crew had wandered off with Pyet and Ludmilla. Silence. So much silence. Everywhere.

A penny for your thoughts, he sighed.

You two met here. You must remember something.

Spine first, a chill embraced John.

Atmosphere, he murmured.

What had happened here?

Although he denied it with all vigor, the lanky director was not sure he wanted to know.

John distracted himself by framing shots around a scar of bedraggled trees. They even bulldoze violently, he muttered. Stop! A visual metaphor for the entire experience!!! Scars. A scarred landscape. Bones upturned. Shattered lives. YEESSS. Just what we need...

Where is my crew? Where's Deanna? I can't believe this: the Kahuna's on a roll...and his people are unavailable! On a ramble with mine adversaries the Durenosts, no less. Sweet...Well, John said to the trees, I hope you appreciate being present at this moment of greatness. Your contributions shall not go unrecorded. I would like to thank all the little people... Stop.

Not funny.

John forced himself to view the fields in which children and teachers had been buried. No one knows how many.

Making of the doomed examples was, it seems, a hobby of the captors. So many examples. No one knows how many. And, of course, not all were buried.

Flung upon the snow in winter, there to stay, within sight of the living; grotesquely frozen or decomposing, there to tear the heart out of any soul with heart remaining within those walls---not people, examples. Frozen defiled corpses. On display. There to torture the living skeletons inside. And perhaps to incite rebellion, thereby eliminating a few more fellow examples. So lifeless were the inmates that guards grew bored. But, with ingenuity, even a pointless world might be provoked to provide some amusement. Night buriers---inmates who mingled earth with beloved flesh---doomed themselves. Give last rites to the damned and you take their place. Disobey and we escort you outside, to the playground. Midnight suits us. On our way home then. We'll lock you out and see how frisky you feel at dawn.

Stop! John's heart cried out. Stop this torment. Stop, imagination. It was a long time ago.

Stop, John turned on the tree. Did you watch it?

What are you hiding?

Stop. I don't want to know.

John straightened. Let the tree remain a tree, not a witness. I do want to know, he challenged failure. Focus, he commanded himself. Present time. Whatever happened here is over and done, past tense, irreparable.

John forced himself to view the fields in which children and teachers, no one knows how many, had been buried. He could see bits of bone among the sullen stones and clots of impoverished earth. John did not believe that he had grown callous, nor did he believe, core-deep, that these remains had been once, well, human, just as he. Had been vital. Had been terrified; extinguished.

Here lay all of Ludmilla's brothers and sisters, all of their teachers, and nearly all of their fellow orphans. Why can I not take it in? John wondered. Perhaps because the place is so bleak. No offense intended to arboreal companions, but he could not imagine anything alive ever having existed here.

No land for angels, surely.

For what was it Pyet had said about their teachers? "Some came in heavy, but they left as angels." John had scoffed at that remark. It was the only thing Pyet would say about the young women who had taken care of the orphans, or had murdered them. Stories varied.

John made Deanna press Ludmilla on that point. She was a scientist, after all, and had shown no inclination to acknowledge the Divine or superstitious. Clinically literal in other matters, Ludmilla concurred with Pyet on this astonishing, impossible point. "They were just teenagers," the physician recalled, "ripped from their own lives, and silent, as we were all required to be. But Pyet is right. Some were angels. We saw them fly at last."

John had bridled at Ludmilla's passionate refusal to discuss the matter further. Astounded, confounded, the director had brooded over her Delphic rebuff: "Interview their bones, if you will. We cannot speak of our dearest teachers. We had no words then. We have none now."

“I can’t make a film on silence,” John protested. The tree was silent. The land was silent. Bits of bone were silent as death. “A penny for your thoughts,” he implored them.

A penny for your thoughts.

*

*

*

There were gaps in his recall.

Pyet could remember nothing from a bright day in the study at home until another, gray and desolate, in a children’s barracks.

And there were gaps after that.

His parents had dubbed him “the philosopher.” Even before he could read, young Pyet would study. He would beg for a thick book from the library, cradle it carefully with his stubby body, slowly turn the pages, and nod. He learned to scan the pages from left to right, pausing reverently at each grove of prose. Always, Pyet marked the last page “read” with a gold-embossed leather bookmark.

The books were his father’s, and they had been his father’s father’s, and before that, many fathers’ fathers.’ They were the legacy that Pyet preserved from the lost line of his family.

The leather covers were beauty itself. Some were forest green leather with gold

stampings. Others were brown, almost orange; some nearly tan; and there were covers of a brown almost red, and rich earth brown, too. Some had gold leaf pages, tall, tall pages, thick and magical. There were volumes of musical notes. And picture books as well. These he thought beneath him. He was a philosopher, after all. In love with words and wisdom.

Even before young Pyet could read, the books he loved most were filled with words. And around the books spun the rest..Oriental carpets, the sun-filled room in which his father played the piano and his mother blessed with roses, where love was song and light, philosophy.

Pyet's childhood was a tincture of light-dappled Oriental rugs, books that smelled of dust and leather, music, smiles and his treasured parents. Ah yes, Pyet was their little philosopher. Father had spun music 'round their heads and mother smelled of baths and roses. They sang as one.

Pyet could not say at what age he had been removed from the books and his mother and father. There had been a war. And then a purge. Or so he had been told.

He was sent to school in the country. Or so he had been told.

There were no books there.

No scent of leather or many-colored robes of music. No Oriental carpets in sunlight.

No roses. No embraces or smiles. Pyet labored, with the others, in ice-stricken soil.

There were gaps in his recall.

Who had told him that his father had died in prison? Pyet could not say. Who had said that Pyet's father was an intellectual, the son of his father's fathers, and for such crimes, had duly perished? No clear memory. And when had Pyet known that his mother, his beautiful, beautiful mother had died, far from the frozen camp?

Pyet of the farm knew precisely where his parents were: under the earth. But Pyet of the ancient house knew better. Pyet the philosopher knew that what had swirled around his parents---that cumulus of love, warmth, smells and sounds---had surely risen above ice and stones. No one informed Pyet where they had buried his books: the bones of his far-flung fathers. And so they remained, just as his mother had christened them: Pyet's books of the mind.

And, therefore, real.

There were other children at the farm and they, too, were told, now and again, what crimes had felled their loved ones and what sins they carried to this dank, forbidding place. The children could not speak to each other. Troublesome ones were denied

*blankets, and the earth took them.
Teachers came and went.*

*But, for Pyet, his father's music, his
mother's smile and flowery warmth, the
penetratingly real universe of gold-
embossed leather, were all he had. And
these existed now in his mind only. They
in no way prepared him for a world of chill
earth and doomed fellow creatures. But to
speak to Pyet of his parents and crime was
absurd. Obscene. His young mind rejected
it.*

*Pyet moved in this harsh, desolate
universe, an exile. Reverently, the boy
scanned his many books. Pyet's books of
the mind. And around the books spun the
rest. He did not mourn his parents in any
conventional way. They were real. As real
as his books of the mind. As real as love.*

In mind inviolate.

*For that which cannot be touched cannot be
taken.*

Pyet was sensitive to love, even there.

He was sensitive to fear.

*Pyet saw love. And heard it, occasionally.
Light. Grace. Shadows of smiles and
embraces. This real thing. Even there.*

*And he saw fear in shades of darkness and
degrees of constriction.*

*In memory of his mother and father, as a
tribute to what they were, Pyet remained
sensitive to love. To fear, belligerence,
and bile, he turned his head. Pyet did not
deny their existence. He disclaimed them.
This he did to preserve the real of his
parents, their essence: Love.*

*As a young child, Pyet could little
distinguish spirit from flesh. Later, in
the killing camp for children, Pyet nursed
his attunement to inner light, which he
identified with his lost legacy. He had
been given these immense gifts at a young
age, and the world had set them aside.
But Pyet vowed to hallow them.*

And this he did all his life.

*In silence, Pyet wrote them in his book of
love.*

*

*

*

Ludmilla noticed Pyet who had no name.

She looked after him.

*He could remember very little, it seemed.
She, too much.*

Ludmilla did the forbidden: she loved. In so doing, the girl supplied her telos: her aim, end, purpose, and fulfillment. When Pyet first came to the school, he could not speak. Nor did he observe, act or react. The teachers herded him around. Impatiently but not cruelly. Ludmilla, who had grown to discern, without wanting to, which newcomers were destined to resist and which to fade away, could not read a future on his face.

He was alive but not vital. He was absent but not stupid.

It was as if he were a blurry human being, a little boy underwater. And if he did not move or react as expected, she still recognized a human child, but one adapted to the ocean bottom, and newly brought to land.

They were not allowed to speak.

But Ludmilla watched him.

She saw no meanness in Pyet. No anger, pride, or evil thing. And if in her young life Ludmilla had known sweetness, and she could not say at this point that she really

remembered sweetness, he had it. Ludmilla became Pyet's guardian angel and he her redeemer. She entered his orb, infusing every molecule with the greatest protective wishes, strong, desperately and deliberately conjured, night and day. Ludmilla willed Pyet to carry his aquatic mind lightly, with the least injury from this harsh world. Ludmilla was too old, at eight, to wish him happiness.

For that would be to wish him death.

And to wish the boy death would be unwish Ludmilla's reason for living.

So young Ludmilla focused her stolid, furious will on the considerable task of willing young Pyet the otherworldly to breathe and think and move without great pain.

He felt her. He thanked her. Pyet accepted her watchful light. It was the closest either could imagine, then, to kindness; or companionship; or other good things that might die.

* * *

Of course, he felt her.

She was light.

A small, orange-ish globe, fierce, stricken, constant.

Of course, he felt her.

Neither a mad child nor an idiot, Pyet retreated to his books. He re-read them, re-smelled them, and, when he felt it was time to go, Pyet re-shelved them---taking care to mark his place, each time, with a marker of leather smelling of roses emblazoned with love of his father's fathers in glowing gold.

Pyet felt her.

He needed her.

And had he spoken, it would have been to her.

Pyet counted it a good thing that language was no longer his instrument. For the boy would have put it all wrong. Pyet thanked Ludmilla, who had no name but light, for her benediction. He knew that had anyone wronged him, she would have swept on them, and, for that, Ludmilla would have been hurled beneath the soil. He was not wrong. But here---and here is where words would have ruined expression---nameless Pyet took nameless Ludmilla for granted.

Her light came with the place.

As if the universe which took way the good things left a light for you, even in such an awful hole, a light that let you know you were watched, cared for, willed into being. The light was not of the earth but of the mind. Real like books. She was in

his mind. The real of her. The light of his mind through night and day.

Pyet accepted Ludmilla's watchful constancy, although he was not to know for some time how courageous his champion had been. Not until the first teacher broke into light did Pyet see that Ludmilla had chosen to love and, in so doing, had imperiled herself daily.

She was there for him. To bless him into life.

And it did not occur to young Pyet that anything else could have been possible. Could it have been that Ludmilla was not there? What kind of a universe would that have been: a universe in which children are robbed, and left without light? It was well that this possibility had not occurred to young Pyet.

As for Ludmilla, the universe of possibilities, the dread, dread universe of spiraling horrors, was pinioned by her devotion to the most innocent---and, therefore, the most vulnerable, courageous, and independent---being she had ever known. The girl had seen her siblings slip from life, one by one. She still recalled them: tender, piercing eyes. And Ludmilla greatly feared that eyes like Pyet's could not last.

Had his eyes changed; had he been taken; had they killed him, Ludmilla would have

unleashed her formidable pent strength, screaming until they killed her. And, as if he knew, the first thing, daily, Pyet would seek her eyes. He bowed, showing no movement. Pyet bowed in his mind. As if he knew, the very first thing each day, displaying no movement, Pyet bowed. I'm here. Thank you,

The teachers watched them.

Watched, and let them be.

He is no trouble they said. As for her, she'll be a teacher, too. After we have gone. Let her exercise some quiet maternity in silence and submission.

The teachers acceded. They, too, had been wrenched from their lives.

Peasant girls or daughters of the deposed and despised, they too had been sent from afar to die. Oh at first they believed their diligence would save them, as the cold dark men had promised. But without proper food, garb, or medicine, with nothing but labor for lessons and no word from loved ones captured and dispersed, the teachers had died one by one. As they were meant to. New teachers would appear, serve, wither, and find the earth. The small universe of the school went on. With little food. Little talk. Little solace.

But Pyet had his books. And his light.

Ludmilla had his gaze and her vigilance.

And even the teachers had their salvation: they were not nearly as cruel as they had been required to be; and, thus, learned to love the little ones; and, before the stony ground sheltered them at last, would radiate more beauty, grace, and courage than the dark designs of men or their own imprisoned maternity could have been reckoned to produce.

By and by, the officials closed the school, consigning survivors to menial jobs in capitol cities, where they could be watched. For regressive tendencies. The watchers had wanted to exorcise religion, rebellion, and hereditary privilege from this generation. And, surely, not even the most eloquent of tempters could have persuaded these emptied souls of Eternal Wisdom, Divine Mercy, Cosmic Justice, Original Sin, redemption, or resurrection.

Just as well.

For Pyet and Ludmilla, the goodness that grew was pure and true and had no reward but itself and its multiplication; and no better can be said of a battered race, no greater triumph achieved, than love which breeds of its own accord.

Merwin paced.

He had not wanted to come here.

To stand in this place of purgation. Child murder for which the Party men could find no remorse.

It was a difficult time, all had intoned. A time of change. Change is not easy. In such times, one must be brutal to survive...and would the interviewer care for vodka and fine local cheese?

What had Ludmilla told him?

“If you can interview bones, you will find many with a tale to tell. Here they rest. And yes, before they died, some had turned to angels.”

What to make of it?

*

*

*

Who can say

*who will come and who will
go?*

Who can say

who will exit next,

who will linger, who
revive?

Who can say
what new arrangement dawn
may bring?

Or whose life twist in the tangled
skein of Fate

or human
agency?

Have we no say?

Were our daily lives not testament
to our desire
to be,
to our right to live,
unscathed by violent disregard?

Where are the watchers?

Those who look on,

who report,
who
decide?

Where is that place
or when was that time
when we lived,
ate, planned or dreamed
cocooned, private, inviolate?

Or was there no world like that?

Did all life lead to this

waiting room for death,
hoped-for release?

Who was watching then?

In those distant days when we did not
feel
the breath of extinction
on our backs.

Who placed us here?

And why?

And who was spared?

*And why not
US?*

*Was it our stupidity which placed us
here?
our village ways?*

What marked us as unsuitable?

Are there different watchers here?

Do they float above

and determine in some watchful
hour

who will come and
who

will

go?

Will any say that we deserved
the next hour,
the next year?

Or does some contest, some grisly
competition, determine who will come,
who will go
...next?

We ask: what are the dimensions
of a human life?

In days of freedom,
we had few pretensions:
our dreams were peasant dreams,
small and tinged with
doubt.

*We came from practical folk:
large families with many children,
much work,
and few idle words.*

*Were we
marked even then?*

*Were we, even then, evident to the
watchers?*

*Oh, who can say who will come and
who will go
and what prisons,
better or worse,
will house us next?*

And who among us will suffer more?

*And who, oh please, be
spared this poignant, painful
longing to be free...*

*this unkilld fear of dying
this uncertainty of worse to come.
and the endless self-reproach..
the knowing that each day that
should be precious
is loathsome
for its ruthless lack of living
and the very heaviness of our daily
selves*

*Our cringing souls
confirm for us daily
that we are marked. Soiled.
Guilty.*

*That we lack the grace to live,
the fullness of ones
who would live the prison day
precious.*

*It should follow
that we hate the fine ones,
that we, invested now with perverse
power,
should hurl at them
our molten anger and leaden self-
reproach;
should crush their glow.*

*But that we will not do.
And that not-doing is our redemption.
is our attempt to beacon better
watchers.
to better the evil ones.
We give these little ones our best:*

*for we know too much to want it for
ourselves.
Oh yes, in utter silence and seeming
submission,*

**we
defy:**

*we transform our only space and
time
to such regard
of them
they glow.*

*Let whosoever comes and goes be
loved,
watched by loving eyes.*

*We cannot say who will come and who
will go.*

We are not to talk to the little ones.

We are not to show them any warmth.
And so we make of silence balm.
This is our rebellion.
We watch in our way.
We turn the tables.
We will live with our eyes, with our
sweet liquid care.

We will tell them to know we care.

We will tell them to feel
that whosoever comes or goes,
they are worth
every care.

Funny, really...

What we now see so clearly:

We are the most beautiful
people
they will ever
see,
will ever
know.

**We are
angelic.**

**Self-willed
angels.**

*Defiant, rebellious souls,
nearly empty ourselves,
who fill our hollows with this
astounding devotion, precious,
transmuting...*

*Who, indeed, had expected such power
and fulfillment
from a peasant life?*

*And to think
that we, who knew so early,
that we were meant for so little
count
for these little ones*

for so much.

And we

who expected to have so little to do
of real moment,
matter.

Transfixed watchers,
we watch with joyous madness
with fierce, protective
benediction,
we spirit sing to the little ones.

And even as we peasants weep,
we sense
we have
all we could have
wanted:
significance;
justice;
the proud rage of
beings
who must believe
they counted
against evil.

Daily now we affirm a sacredness
that otherwise we would not have
dared

to believe

we know.

* * *

OH DEAR ONES

*How deep is your purity of heart
you*

*who have not betrayed your brother
eaten your friend,
soured your fragrant beauty,
turned crabby, sullen vicious.*

OH DEAR ONES

*You give us
the feeling
that we are missed
that we are loved.*

*Give us,
please,
the feeling*

*that life
would have been oh so much
sweeter,*

*the world ever so graced, had we
lived.*

*We are so in need
of the loving
soothing
sheer cherishing
of possibility
we have,*

oh so dearly,

*lavished
on you
daily.*

*You have become our goodness
and we not the despair
which once made us*

*cruel
servants
of the cruelest
masters,
reflecti
ng
their
disdain for
sweet
being.*

AND OH, OH DEAR ONES,

we cannot undo

*what we once
inflicted.*

*But now
that we have found
our lives,*

we live

*to cherish
your unique
unblemished possibility
of goodness
and grace.*

*You are our confidantes
because
only in the sacred depths,
only in the void
which sure death has granted us,
do we feel
safe
to speak
our hope
of beauty
of our defiant making.*

OH

*OH
DEAR
ONES,*

*You who will not betray
please
tell us
that we, too, are worthy
of love.
Of remembrance.
Of tears.*

*We love
you.*

We dare to

*as we find ourselves
by dint of constant struggle
unworthy
of the easy existence
of the dead.*

*For we have eyes to see
the dark plans of the
watchers.
You, fortunate creatures, do not.*

*Oh hopeless ones, oh pity full ones,
DEAR ONES of misbegotten men
and decimated
women,*

*know that you are fully
worthy.*

OH

OH

LOVE

*To love is
soft.*

*And we have
softened mightily.*

Ungodly transformation.

*To believe in God is painful.
The Ultimate Watcher:
we cannot pray to Him anymore.*

*We pray to be spared
no more.*

*We pray to be taken
more. no*

*We pray
to be in a place we deserve,
our sins cleansed by our watchful
labors,*

no more.

*No.
Too painful that.
Too fierce the betrayal.*

*Thus we don our angels' wings
and make this hell
the nearest thing to heaven
the little ones could know.*

What a sublime scheme...

*one too subtle,
too ironic and thrilling,
one would think,
for ones so dull,
marked,
and unwanted*

as we.

* * *

Who can say what time will bring?

And who can say
what dark days
will dawn
here in the dark
where
we find ourselves?

And who can say
what dark god sends us forth day
by day
to slaughter?

And who can say
what dark men,
uniformed and confident,
weave our undoing,
and for what cause
we are so lightly
condemned?

*Who can say
what has
happened
to those we
loved?*

*Who or what has wrestled
them into the earth,
into a dark hole
from which they will not likely
rise,
loving and
free?*

*Who has taken
their beauty, their promise,
their sense of life
waiting to unfold in its own good
time,
in sweet time,
sweet
sweet time?*

*Was there a man
waiting*

*in the corner of his life
waiting
for me
to join him in time's rush,
in Providential order?*

Or was that a myth?

Another myth?

*For what was waiting for me,
hiding in time's corner
waiting to pounce
on the bumptious hopeful self
I was?*

*It was this,
was it not?*

Death.

It was death.

Death, of course.

*But worse: it was
inconsequence.
Knowing I don't count.*

*Waiting to
die.*

*But not important enough
to die first
or quickly
or with drama.*

***Still of
use.***

*For dark ends
in a dark time.*

*The soul should darken,
The spirit depart.*

They tried.

*Of course, they tried.
to kill the spirit
early on,
as the brutal order settled in.*

*But there was time again,
 holding the unexpected in
its gauzy folds.*

And now in such dark times,

I find

this sweet

light.

Who can say

but that

I

am

a saint?

I feel

I am.

*Like in the picture books, I float
with hunger.*

I am

*Spirit's
child.*

Light spills from my eyes.

My hands are magic.

My lips move rarely, speak wisdom.

They bless.

I am God's instrument.

*No more do I wait
for the man
around the corner,
my suitor.*

*I have released him
to a peaceful place
where no torment
mars his sweet, sweet
time.*

*And I,
no more weighed down
by youth, property, desires,
plans,*

*I
incandesce.*

I

burn.

*Weightless,
I
move
to light.*

*Who can say
what makes
a peasant
a
saint?*

Who can say

*what dark
plan*

*relieved me
of the fear,
drives,
and connections of the merely
earthly?*

So that
now,
until I go,
I serve
Holy Cause.

I deserve my holy
death
and resurrection.

For I am
too light
for earth to hold me.

Too strong
and radiant
to suppress
in clotted soil.

And I need no
Eternal Rest.

I am
Tireless,
All-consuming Energy,
Holy desire.

*I no longer make sense to the
bosses.*

*They see me
slip.*

But I am

*so docile,
so full,
their ire cannot
stick..*

I have become

SO

Light.

*I desire only to serve and die.
And the masters expect of me
only that.*

*Who could have imagined such
accord?*

*Who can say
why
I rise?*

*I am
Moved.*

*Who can say
why
I touch
one and not another
just
now?*

*Why
I soothe
this whimpering one
just now?*

*Why
I look into all their eyes with
such sublime*

Love--

-

as if

they mattered.

*My pith melts into theirs,
Essence floating in,*

*I charge them
Positively,*

I

In

Form

Them:

You,

You, too,

***radiate
light.***

You,

you, too,

can

become

*It's starvation, some say.
I used to say that myself,
of the ones who incandesced.
It's giving in, surrendering,
I used to say.*

*I vowed to
survive.*

Oh yes, I survived.

*I became
a person
my mother could not have loved,
so punctiliously harsh was I;*

fear-driven, unloving.

*I feared what I saw
in the others.*

*I won't slip away, I said. I want
life.*

*I want my family. I want my
youth.*

*I want that young suitor,
lurking in time's fold.*

wanted *I*

counted *to be*

dear.
To value my fate and feelings.
It was so important then
to fuel
the will

to live.

*The obedience,
the outrage,
the cunning,*

died

•

*All that
has nearly died.*

*But mine is no willed death.
No death of will.
No soul surrender.*

*Who can say
when I stepped out of
the skin
and started walking
spirit-like,
spiraling saintly
visions,
and feeling
my warm heart*

*pulse light
through my hands?*

*I
sensed
my mission
moment
to
moment.
Time,
which weakens,
became a carpet of air,
a floating invitation,
as I took my holy place
and did my blessed work
with exquisite purpose
and superhuman touch.*

Starvation?

Withdrawal?

*I am light as air.
I breathe fumes of
intoxicating joy.
My feet move above the
earth.
My body pulses with
love.
Eyes to eyes, light to
light,
I am
Light
Now.*

*I seek light
in the little ones.*

*I radiate it from every
pore.*

*Soon,
oh soon perhaps,
I will melt into light.
I feel the pull
already.*

The warm, sweet, full Pull.

*When all is over
and done,*

who can say

what dark will

made

Saints

of so many peasant girls

with no love

*around
the corner?*

*Time's folds are weaving new
eternities.*

*I have blessed
the world.*

And if I burn myself away,

*who can say
the cause
was unworthy?*

Because

a Saint,

after all,

rises.

***She becomes
more than her
mother's
child:***

God's skin.

*A saint's bones
heal*

forever

...

Eternal

Afterthought.