

Adam in the New World

ADAM PINCHNIK WAS NOT A SCHOLAR, so he was sent to America. When he was in Zvina, his classmates bent over scrolls, studying as their bodies grew thinner, paler, and more paper-like each day. This was proper work. But when the rabbi dipped Adam's finger into the honey to spell Adam's first Hebrew letter, the Alef, the rabbi instructed Adam to lick his finger, to make learning sweet. Adam faltered. It was summer; the yeshiva's windows were open, and flies had settled into the letter's sticky tangle. Seeing them, Adam shut his jaw and rippled his tongue.

Now, after sixteen more years of similar failure, Adam wrapped his tongue around years of poisoned words and thought of how he should have just eaten the insects. It hadn't been such a great challenge. In the Talmud, men had to wrestle lions, angels, monsters. What were bugs to a four-year-old?

AROUND HIM, others made their way back to boarding houses, more people on every corner than in all of Zvina. Exhaustion was a puppeteer who had made their bodies slack, and, if they looked up at all, their focus led them over the horizon back to the villages they had come from, willingly or not.

In the American settlement society's onion-scented classroom, the English lessons passed through Adam as if he were a pane of glass. The teacher held up objects, asked the class to name them, and all except for Adam sang out the words. A lefl? It was not a lefl. It was a spoon. A vane was not a vane; it was a tub.

Commanded to go out into a foreign world and know its words, Adam felt saddled with a task both impossible and pointless. The holy gossip contained such stories: men sent on missions by a God who forgot them as soon as they left His sight. At least, Adam thought such stories existed. He was not a scholar himself, so he could not be sure.

Outside the classroom, the city birthed goods in torrents, announced on every street the thrilling possibility of more, more, more. But for Adam, there was little means to buy these things. What foreman would want someone who's too good to eat bugs?

The last of Zvina's grudging coins were spent to help Adam succeed in America and send money back to Zvina. Adam imagined the students huddling at the yeshiva's single stove, wondering when the first remission from him would arrive. When nothing came, rumors would abound: he was a thief, he was an apostate, he had perished at sea. If he had had parents, they would have argued on his behalf. But he was an orphan, dispensable to the New World so that Zvina could continue its hard work of understanding the ancient letters.

They had warned him, those who had never strayed a day's walk from the houses in which they were born. America was apple and serpent all at once, so delicious in its possibilities that a man would think it more divine than it really was. Still, here was success, even for one who had failed at everything else. But how could he succeed if he did not even know what a spoon was?

This and other impossibilities had gnawed at him since his sea-sick emergence from the ship's hold. In a shop window he saw his first globe, amazed to discover that the Jews' forty years of wandering had covered no more than a thumb-smudge of the planet. How likely was it that he had come across half a world in just a few fevered days?

Thinking these thoughts, Adam jumped over a slushy puddle, dodged a stooped man yoked to a rag-cart, and looked around. Where Zvina had had sky, there were now rickety teeth of masonry and the arms of chimneys, splinted with clotheslines and covered in fire escapes and bearing a constant, swelling cargo of people, working, yelling, watching, pushed to the edge of air. Where there had been dirt streets, there were cobblestones; where there had been simply Jews and the familiar unknown of Poles, there was now a bewilderment of species. Hairy laborers emerged from excavations in the ground, so dusty that they might themselves have been carved from rock. Yellow men, black men. Impossible smells, wires strung up and torn down, nocturnal illuminations and rumbling trains and billboards thick with advertisements for the theater, the baths, for medications and delicacies and things whose purpose Adam could not discern. Men and women sold wares from carts and from coat pockets, mustachioed police tapped away with their sticks, glancing

about with a bored violence. The unfamiliar grew as he walked and walked.

At a corner, watched over by black-windowed factories, he stopped and saw someone familiar. The hooded figure hurrying down the opposite sidewalk, self-importantly polishing a watch, could be no one but Grosz.

“Hey!” Adam yelled, forgetting all the city had taught him about hiding himself. The man looked up, slipped the watch back into his pocket, and quickened his pace.

“Hey!” yelled Adam again, not surprised by the denial. Grosz the peddler, Zvina’s sole seller of crackers and flour, was a man of great importance. “Grosz!”

“What are you yelling for?” asked the man, his accent slurred but unmistakable. He had paused at the far side of the intersection, one foot arched in front of the other, prepared to flee.

“Grosz!” Adam yelled, “Grosz! You know me! From Zvina!” Adam threw up his arms, the improbability of it all evaporating in this gesture.

The man snorted, pivoted, and was gone, his fat bottom swaying as he disappeared into the sidewalk crowd.

Adam set after Grosz, excitement exploding in him as he shoved through the massed walkers. But before he had gone twenty paces, another recognition came upon him. It was Yassky the cobbler, standing before a barrel of apples and unconvincingly calling out their merits.

“Yassky!” Adam yelled, rushing to embrace the man, burying his face in the tobaccoey scratch of his whiskers. Adam sobbed in joy, unmindful of the pedestrians’ stares.

Yassky’s first knock dropped Adam to the edge of the street, and the second threw him into it. The third and fourth blows were not for Adam but for those watching, to discourage them from repeating the mad stranger’s mistake.

When Adam awoke a few moments later, he began to laugh. Of course it would not be so easy. These apparitions possessed a meaning he had yet to grasp. Something of Zvina was hiding in the city. Would they have shut him away in the dark hold of an imaginary ship as they remade the bright world around him; would they have summoned the city’s swirl of thousands and gone to such fantastic lengths only to give themselves up so readily?

He was being tested. He thought of Jonah, Abraham, Solomon; that much he remembered. Somewhere in the shoulder-thrown anonymity of the narrow streets, there was an answer.

So Adam walked. The city, which he had imagined as monolithic, revealed tiny tears in its surface. Among a thousand birds on a sooty ledge, one would for a moment twitter a song last heard in

Zvina. Two bright eyes on a receding wagon surely belonged to Zalmann and Mandel, half-blinded yeshiva classmates. It was day, then night, then day again. He stopped a man, Kepler for certain, and felt a chunk of bread pressed quickly into his palms. But Kepler himself ran away. Adam tore into the bread and then bent to drink from a cold puddle, his reflection interrupted by an oak-leaf which could only have come from Cohen's tree. The village was everywhere, and everywhere it ran from him.

When he came upon something of Zvina's, he would make a declaration. At a nonsensical corner where six roads knotted themselves like the stranded poke of a tallis, he found Ripkin. "You," Adam exclaimed, "Your cows give sour milk." He glimpsed a figure at the end of an alley, climbing over a wall, and yelled after him, "You are Dubin! You once fasted nineteen days to make a point!"

Days passed, unnoticed, and he learned from his mistakes. His yells became murmurs as he began to guard his recognitions. Work was forgotten; the boarding house vanished from his mind. He saw Kissler and Krenz, Schumacher and Green, Blatt and Blatt and Blatt, members of an obstinate family that refused to recognize all its own branches. He itched to grab them and sometimes was unable to resist, but they always ran. He once grasped Krimsky from behind and pulled urgently at his sleeves. But the man turned, and Adam saw that he was not Krimsky at all, just a black-coated stranger who muttered, "What do you want?"

"Nothing," replied Adam.

"No," said the stranger softly, "You must want something. Tell me what it is and maybe I can help." His companion, a low-slung woman in a red hat, said something to him in a stream of English, which the man waved off. Adam felt his tongue go numb with embarrassment, and he dropped the man's coat and hastened away.

Again and again, he felt himself stepping on Zvina's threshold; the next instant, he found himself wandering through a wasteland. The city's shell was as thin as a fingernail's line of dirt and as hard to remove. Almost, always almost.

He lived on air and water. His recognitions took on the power of revelation, but always he doubted his ability to tear open the world and step through. He imagined them waiting for his money in Zvina, then laughed at the absurdity of this vision. They waited not on the other side of the world but on the other side of the street, and clearly for something beyond money. His thoughts repeated themselves like ancient wisdom, twisting and forming new versions in his mind.

In the neighborhood, many came to recognize the madman and either abused, fed, or ignored him. They became used to his fervid embrace, the explosion in his eyes. He had such insistence, that this

one was Heinbaum and that one Nimoff, that they would find themselves nearly convinced. Shaking off his dream, they would hurry on their way. But later, minds returned to Adam. A wife would look at her husband and imagine another face, untold stories.

When he strayed too close to their wares or their children, the people of the neighborhood would beat Adam. Robbers set upon him, and when they discovered he had no money, they knocked him over and pummeled him. Adam merely pretended to fight back, waving his bread-loaf hands, smacking his chapped lips, and offering such a sadly resigned face that they lost the heart to finish the job.

After this beating, Adam woke to the wet exploration of a pig's tongue on his face. He lifted himself to one elbow and shooed the animal away once, twice, and a third time, but after its final return he relented and allowed himself to be licked. From then on, man and animal roamed together. Adam felt in the bristly bulk of his pig a message from Zvina, one more obscure allusion to be unraveled.

Soon the city turned hot. When Adam awoke each morning, he stumbled on, his shoes gone, his clothes tattered. The pig followed, waiting for him to sleep again so that it could lap up his sweat and nip at the shreds of his pockets in search of an apple core or crumbs.

One day, when Adam opened his eyes from exhausted sleep, he found the weak sunlight blocked by a female form. He lay a moment, savoring the rarity. Women were the first to flee, often before he could be sure they were Zvina's. Stepping daintily forward over Adam's feet, the pig looked up and narrowed its eyes.

She was gray-skinned and bent, with a firm trunk wrapped in a loose black dress and shawl. She squinted down and grimaced, showing a sharp, cunning nose and a mouth of vanished teeth. "So where have you been?" she asked, and kicked him.

"It's quite bold," he replied, finding a tone he had thought vanished from his voice, "for a lady to speak to a strange man like this." He rubbed his leg where the kick had landed and attempted a smile.

She kicked him again, and the pig squealed. She raised her hand and let it crash across his cheek. "A strange man?" she shrieked. "You call yourself that to me?"

Adam nodded, head spinning, frightened at this display of passion. The pig snuffled his ear, and he put a reassuring hand on its neck without taking his eyes off the woman.

"Maybe if you pretend not to recognize me, I shouldn't recognize you, either. I've done long enough without you."

"But who do you recognize?" Adam sucked in the reassuring street through his nose and eyes, uncertain whether he should hope for revelation or just escape.

She crossed her arms and breathed out a sudden puff. She turned her gaze away and blinked, her near eyelid like a black bird diving across a furious sun. "You know who you are."

He shook his head slowly. *How could she say this, this of all things?* "My husband. You are my husband."

"Impossible," Adam whispered, "I've never seen you before."

At this she turned back at him and began to scream and rain blows, but Adam had already scrambled up, the pig at his heels.

Away from her fists, he turned the woman's face over in his mind. In his ceaseless world-building, she was a blind spot. He had no name, no place for her in his creation. He had no wife. But even as he declared this to himself, the certainty vanished. There were so many faces that he had sought and found, again and again. Hers could be the final face, the village's last riddle. A stranger, a woman. He had failed to understand so much already.

He saw her again and was able to flee as her mouth opened, ready to scold. The street corners seemed to push them together, but he resisted. The pig grew tired of running and did not follow as readily. On a day of merciless sun, Adam merely leaned against a building as she appeared in an angry ripple of sidewalk heat.

"Why are you hiding from me?" she asked, eyes popping with anger. "Is this any way to treat a wife?"

"I don't know," he replied. "I have too many questions."

"Wasting your time!" she exclaimed, "I wonder why I came after you."

Adam started off, but paused as she called after him, "Maybe I should just leave you to your questions if this is how you treat me, Adam." There was the street's crashing commotion, his own attenuated senses, the distance from which she called. But still he was certain, almost certain, that she had spoken his name.

Her face was everywhere, crowding out Mandel and Bresloff and Tambow, all those he had so eagerly sought. She appeared a dozen, two dozen, a hundred times a day, stepping from behind junk wagons, navigating the curb in high-laced boots, chatting with merchants, or dragging sullen children by their grimy hands. He always ran before he was sure.

He imagined a return to his shattered routine. The woman was old; her skin was ash, color-leached like the city's buildings. Married? The age difference would be a scandal. How could he forget his wife?

But as he asked himself this, he remembered the blank faces of those he had approached, their frightened lack of recognition. Perhaps there was no secret task from Zvina. Perhaps a balm of forgetting had cast itself over the entire village, settling only lightly on his mind, removing this single fragment. It was possible. It was as if

his memory were a coin he had worn the face from, something of worth debased by simple longing. Could there be space in these cracks for this old woman to slip through? In truth, she was not so old, merely worn, herself.

Thinking this, he did not notice her approach until she was upon him. Her expectant breath pulled Adam from his reverie as her arm snaked forward to grasp his. He looked up, then down at himself. "Please tell me your name," he mumbled.

"You know it already!" she shrieked. "Or have you forgotten?"

"I'm sorry," Adam said, "I did. I forgot everything. I had to leave, to look for work, for money. To send to the village," he finished, hopelessly, the words an echo of impossibility as he spoke them.

Her face softened. He saw that she was perhaps a madwoman but not unkind. How could he deny kindness? Still, he pulled himself away and ran, the woman's silent glare and the pig's squealing heaves dual reproaches.

The next day he did not run and, after approaching him cautiously, she did not touch him. She chewed her lip, spoke softly. "You need money," she said. "Not for the village, but for us."

Adam shrugged, uncertain.

"Get a job. You can send a little money, not right away. We'll find a place to live." She sniffed at the street. "We can't live here anymore."

"There are no jobs."

"You walk the streets with a pig. Of course there are no jobs for you."

He nodded at this. Already, he felt the world recreating itself. Around him, the swirl of the city seemed to pause. For a flickered moment, Adam saw all Zvina arrayed on the sidewalks. The villagers nodded at him, in approval, as confirmation of their suspicions, or simply in agreement at some cosmic wisdom their learning had imparted. Seeing them bid this inscrutable farewell, Adam felt in himself the loneliness of exile—first from his village, now from his madness—and wondered what compensation he would find for it. His bride, whose name he still did not know, stood before him. Behind her the pig meandered away, distracted by the overflowing richness of a capsized garbage pail. And then, tentative but decided, he stepped forward and reached for her hand.