

IMPOSSIBLE THINGS



MILLER
OBERMAN

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MILLER OBERMAN

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Only when our memories have turned to blood within us, to glance and gesture, nameless and no longer to be distinguished from ourselves—only then can it happen that in a most rare hour the first word of poem arises.

—RILKE, from *Journal of My Other Self*

I've always felt sorry for those with only one limited way of viewing their past.

—VAGINAL DAVIS, from “Creative Time Summit DC,” 2016

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In memory of

Mark Robert Oberman ז"ל and Joshua Oberman ז"ל

May their memories be for a blessing.

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DEDICATIONS

This book borrows from an unfinished one by my father, which has no dedication page. He may not have known how to grapple with the impossibility of a dedication, given the subject matter of his book. He may simply not have gotten there yet. I tend to think of the last sentence of his book as a kind of dedication. “May you all find peace on your journey,” he wrote.

To all of Joshua’s siblings, Jennifer, Jesse, Eli, and Jaime, and the beautiful families and communities you’ve made. I know you each carry your own wildly different kaleidoscopic memories of our family. I’m endlessly grateful to you for your patience while I’ve explored my memories, and always want to hear yours.

In memory of Jan Oberman ז"ל, thank you for sharing your stories with me.

To Seth Anderson-Oberman, a most rare and beautiful man and father.

To Susan Oberman, who always comes with.

To Eli Oberman, I melteth to pure wode without you.

To my beautiful children, Rosie and Reuben, who guide me with joy and hope, and who keep me *very* humble.

To my partner, my *bashert*, Louisa Rachel Solomon, my greatest source of love and courage.

To all of you who have lost children, siblings, and parents.

To the brave queer and trans writers who came before me, and those who write alongside me in time. My body and my words are truly impossible without yours. Thank you for lighting the way.

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A final dedication: this book, which I turned in to my editor on October 1, 2023, grapples with the way that trauma caused by the death of a single child ripples through a family for generations. Now, witnessing an ongoing genocide in Palestine and being confronted with the reality of thousands upon thousands of dead children, the lens through which I view my own book has irrevocably shifted. Some of these poems took me twenty years to write, as I sifted through complex feelings of trauma and grief. Time, what a luxury. Time to mourn, bury our dead, sit shiva. Time to care and be cared for by our loved ones; this is time everyone should have, and yet today Palestinians often lack access, not just to food and water, but even to the bodies of their dead. I'm overwhelmed with awe as I watch Palestinian poets and journalists writing and responding in real time to mass and individual death. These writers are true heroes. I dedicate these poems to all writers of conscience and witness and to all those who see the loss of every single human being as the loss of an entire world. The unthinkable, preventable loss of these children and families will be felt and mourned for generations. May we all find the strength to keep witnessing, may our hearts be strong enough to keep breaking. May each of us do all we are able and more, in the streets and on the page, to bring about an end to this genocide and a free Palestine.

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PROLOGUE

TWO LUNCHES WITH MY FATHER

On March 31, 2006, my father died at age fifty-nine, of lung cancer. He spent the final year of his life working on a manuscript called *Climbing the Joshua Tree: Awakening the Heart to Move through Sorrow* about the mysterious death of his first child, Joshua, at age two, and his journey to grapple with this loss through mindfulness meditation.

Before he died, he asked me to read it. I got through less than a chapter. I had little interest in his spiritual journey and found his Sufism appropriate at best. He had recently taken me downtown for pizza and, dragging his oxygen, which he couldn't get around without by then, tried to open up to me about the book and Joshua. I recall him saying, "When Joshua died, my heart closed," and that's when I stopped listening. Fuck you, your "heart closed," I thought. What about me? What about my childhood? The material felt doubly hurtful—in how it was *and* wasn't true. The truth that he had been shut down during my own childhood was painful, and I wasn't ready to think about it as an adult. The fact of his fixation on this as the Truth, when it was only partially true, seemed to pave over the reality, for me, that this hadn't wholly been the case. In some ways, he had been a wonderful, open-hearted father. His statement felt cruel, and I resented his need to say something about himself without thinking of how it might sound to me. Trying to read the book confirmed this erasure: there was hardly a mention of me, my mother, or my living siblings to be found, except in ways that had to do with his continued grief around Joshua's loss. This was about *his* journey, *his* healing. But to what end? Not, it seemed at the time, to become a more loving father to his living children, of which there were four.

As I sit here today, in January 2018, my own firstborn child, Rosie, is two years and one month old. She is on nap strike this week, whooping gleefully in her crib. In the fall of 2005, I stood with my father in the pantry by the grill tools, by the door to the back deck he'd built. A between-places place. Not in the house, not out on the deck. It's falling off the house now, the deck. A hazard. It was new then. He asked me if there was anything I wanted to ask him about before he died. *You might want to know something later*, he said, *but I'll be gone. How can I know what*

I'll want to know in the future?, I said. I had a few thoughts, but they all sounded too petty in my head.

I was twenty-five. I was thinking of another day he'd taken me to lunch, at a Greek sandwich shop called Café Europa. I'd come home from my first year at college and was trying to talk to him about my gender, the ways I'd been bullied. I described men chucking bottles at me from cars, and a woman who, cross-ashed on her forehead, spit in my face at a Metro North station that spring, calling me a *faggot*. He looked worried and gave me terrible advice. *If you only add a few more feminine aspects to what you wear, he said, it will help. You don't even have to wear a dress! Just a pair of dangling earrings would probably do it!* I knew he loved me. I knew he didn't have any idea how to love me. I stopped trying to talk about my gender.

There's nothing, I said, in the pantry. *I can't know what the questions will be. I don't have them yet.*

As I sit here again, on another today, my second child, Reuben, is two years and three months old.

After Rosie was born, I began to experience anxiety. I'm sure all new parents do. Mine began to approach a kind of anguish. I called my mother and asked her if she had a copy of my father's memoir. I wanted to ask him about Joshua.

This book includes excerpts from my father's manuscript, which I've distilled and lineated, setting pieces of his descriptions of the days surrounding Joshua's death among my own poems. As a young adult I often felt guilty I didn't call him more. Now I'd give anything to be able to call him. This book is a kind of call, an attempt at a shared story. This is about fatherhood, although when my father died, he did not know I would become either a man or a father. Today, November 7, 2021, Joshua would be fifty-one. My father would be seventy-five. Hi, Papa, it's me. It's been a long time. Putting all these dates down is unlike me, but you do it often in your book. Trying to mark time, I suppose, trying to find something concrete to hold on to, a habit it seems you began in the hours and days following Joshua's death. Time: what a terrible choice for a reality check. If you were here, I'd tell you everything I've learned about time since you've been gone, how lyric it is, how elastic, how queer.

It has taken me a long time to write this. It keeps on not being what I want it to be. Today is February 20, 2022. At first I wanted to figure out the mystery, what happened to Joshua, my father, my siblings, me. I be-

gan with an investigation, chasing down houses, local newspaper articles, police reports, the names at the scene. Patrolman, doctor, neighbor. I didn't get far. People died, records were lost, phone calls unanswered. I kept logs in my notebooks, what I sent, who I called. Little came back. Joshua's obituary and official death report are all I have. I look at the pages of notes and remember the sound of a dial tone. How it wavered and bent if you listened long enough, the sound of a phone off the hook, flatlined forever. This is a story about how we get stuck in time, or parts of us. Pain nails us to a spot, and when we move from the spot, the nailed-down piece rips off. A piece of my father at the pool where he found Joshua's body. A shred of me nailed to a plastic chair in a sandwich shop. The state of Pennsylvania has yet to unearth a police report for me; they can't even agree on what county Joshua died in. So I set to work collecting these other pieces, stuck as I am in the pantry, a nonroom my mother allowed to be cluttered. It was for storage, after all. An extra freezer, boxes of folding chairs. To the right of the screen door, a wardrobe that still had its skeleton key.

On July 16, 2005, Joshua's birthday, my father began his book with this sentence: "My first-born child, Joshua, was born in 1970 and died when he was 2 years and 2 months old. Today, he would be 35 years old, older than I was that day in 1972, older than some parts of me today, which remain nailed to that moment so long ago" (1).

Fitting, this image, since my father worked as a framing carpenter in those days. He also loved poetry.

He began his book with a Rainer Maria Rilke quote:

Perhaps everything terrible is in its deepest being
something helpless

that wants help from us.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

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NOTES ON THE ORIGIN AND SOURCES OF THE POEMS

1 All memoir sections originate from Mark Oberman's unpublished memoir, *Climbing the Joshua Tree: Awakening the Heart to Move through Sorrow*, a project interrupted by his death in March, 2006. In my father's book, he refers to his neighbors in Phoenixville as "Ed and Martha," while the *Pottstown Mercury*, the local paper, identifies the neighbor as "Arthur Nicol." I have been unable to account for this difference, and have left the discrepancy intact.

2 "Joshua's Birthday" borrows from Marcia Falk's "Blessing for Children," 124. Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival*. Harper Collins: San Francisco, 1996.

3 "Pottstown Mercury, 1972" includes Joshua's obituary, originally found in the newspaper of the same name. "2-Year-Old Boy Drowns after Falling in Pool," *Pottstown Mercury*, September 19, 1972.

4 "Phoenixville, 2020" features a conversation between Dante and Ovid, with lines from *Inferno* and *Metamorphoses*. Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Mandelbaum; and Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Dryden.

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum. Everyman's Library/Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995. This poem borrows language from *Inferno*, Canto XXIV, 160–63.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses in 15 books, translated by Mr. Dryden, Mr. Addison, Dr. Garth, Mr. Mainwaring, Mr. Congreve, Mr. Rowe, Mr. Pope, Mr. Gay, Mr. Eusden, Mr. Croxall, and other eminent hands. Published by Sir Samuel Garth, M.D. Adorn'd with sculptures*. (London: Printed for J. and R. Tonson and S. Draper in the Strand, 1751; Ann Arbor, MI: Text Creation Partnership, 2011), book 1, 1 (trans. Dryden), <https://quod.libumich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=ecco;cc=ecco;rgn=div1;view=text;idno=004871123.0001.000;node=004871123.0001.000:6> and book 15, 528–29 <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=ecco>