

MARIA TUMARKIN

Left-Overs

1.

After so many faces, after being motionless for so long, she'd lift her head to look at a person in front of her and she'd see in their face something, some thing. The thing was defenseless and plain. Sometimes it was wrapped in pain like in a muslin wrap. Often it'd break out of a person's chest and you could hear the whooshing sound of it flying through the air. Did Abramovic see a child in every face in front of her? Not entirely innocent (we know this about children), not altogether pure, but naked in that most human way: car-on-the-assembly-line naked, belly-of-a-hedgehog naked.

Too late. If I wanted to write about Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present*, I shouldn't have taken 8.5 years to write this book. 8.5 years of mainly not-writing, my partner says. Abramovic's three months (seven and a half hours a day, six days a week) at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC is over-exposed, over-described. Novels (!) have been written by now in which an artist sits motionlessly at the story's epicenter. Examples? How about Heather Rose's *The Museum of Modern Love*? Plus there's a doco. Every time I watch it, I can't look without crying at people's faces as they look at her, into her eyes. I know it's the filmmakers who crafted this symphony of quivering, emoting faces. I know: *it's the editing, stupid*. I don't even like Abramovic that much anymore. I don't care. I cry.

2.

Have you noticed that writers often talk about realizing one day how much their writing careers turned out to be connected to their early history? They might be in their seventies, like John McPhee, say, and they look back and see that pretty much everything they've spent any amount of time writing about are the things that gripped them in their childhood. "If you look at all the pieces I've ever written," McPhee said, "and put a little tick mark besides the one that relate to childhood interests, you'd have over ninety percent."

Who cares about writers and their childhoods? Writers on writers. Writers on writers reflecting on their practice. Safe, inoffensive paragraphs. Standing on shoulders of giants etc. Paraphrasing politely. I don't want to write like this anymore. If a paragraph doesn't have steam coming off it, kill it. So much of this kind of writing (the kind I used to be adept at) is not cooking but reheating in a microwave.

Once upon a time when contracts were signed and promises were made, this book was supposed to be 100,000 words or so. It is barely 60,000. Yet it feels longer, more solid now. Like it has a greater mass. I remember reading Michael Hofmann's review of Richard Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to Deep North* and Hofmann talking about Flanagan's "gassy, bullying prose." I felt mortified. It's like he was taking about me too.

3.

Eva Hoffman remembers her Polish mother, who survived the Holocaust, repeating again and again, in her "wondering, skeptical voice," well before her young

daughter could understand what she was saying and why, “People just wanted to survive, to live... To live at all costs. Why? What’s so wonderful about this life? And yet, people wanted to live.”

I hate reviews and critical essays that take the best images and colors of the work being reviewed and paint glorious pictures with them. It’s not yours to use, Mr/Ms/Dr. Artful Critic. Dig your own ochre, mix your own colours. What Eva Hoffman’s mother (Hoffman with a double ‘f’) says to her daughter is one of those small heart-stopping moments. It has been documented, committed to paper by Eva Hoffman. Written into being and remaining. I return this paragraph to its author with apologies.

4.

Who we are cannot be explained away by what life has chosen to throw at us and neither could it be traced to our genes or some banal, schematisable interplay between nature and nurture. We are not twigs hard-blown into our particular shape by winds of history. We are not the sum total of all the carrots and sticks administered to us. Who a child is, who a child becomes—that’s a question about a soul, isn’t it, as well as, granted, genes, twigs, carrots, sticks, what the mother ate, what happened at the moment of conception, nine months in the womb, the time of the year, stress, forceps, chance, the topography of birth canals. Except of course trauma has its own way, its own network of underground tunnels. It gets around.

Thank G-d I had the good sense to cut this little monstrosity. Firstly, the ponderous, smug “we.” I always say to students,

“Who are you talking about when you say ‘we’? Tell me who these ‘we’ are. Name them. Describe them. Force yourself to imagine them. Are they really, really everyone?” And here I am... Because doctor heal thyself? Because all writers suffer from a particular kind of blindness?

But that’s not all. Behold the listicle! Stress, forceps, chance, the topography... Oh the ready-made high lyricism of throwing unlikely things together in one sentence. Just keep going, one more thing, mundane followed by extraordinary, domestic strung with the political, first micro then macro, keep piling on.

Thirdly, sentences starting with “Except trauma.” Fourthly, taking so long to say so little.

5.

Being a child meant that Barry Lopez couldn’t yet conceive that an explanation offered by a man, whom he and everyone else around him believed to be a Doctor – the man who was trusted by his mother and evidently respected by the community and who had all those diplomas on the wall – could be false, unconscionably so. Neither did seven-year-old Lopez have the capacity, yet, to question the notion of “treatment” even as Shier’s “treatment” created nothing but pain and humiliation in him (and, as he’d recognize much later, a catastrophic erosion of self as well) and this, of course, was partially because he didn’t yet have the language for what was being done to him. Being seven, eight, nine, ten meant he couldn’t separate the task he took upon himself, since his father’s move interstate, of being the man of the house (and, thus, the protector of his mother and his

younger brother) from the task of enduring Shier. And it wasn't till much later that Lopez could fathom that the man, who seemed so full of warmth and concern for his mother and who slid banknotes in her hand from time to time in Barry's full view, could be actually violating their family, violating the very mother he seemed to be so manifestly fond of.

Barry Lopez, "Silver of Sky," an incredible piece of writing about a lifetime of living with childhood history of sexual violence. 2013 it came out. That's when I read it. Here I go again, piggybacking, re-describing, re-saying, plugging myself into someone else's powerpoint. Because it's easier than starting with nothing, than starting with your own history.

Katherine Boo talks about the "earned fact." I go through my book and throw away everything unearned.

6.

You write a book, however long it takes, and then you have all this stuff left that needs to be dealt with. Or maybe it doesn't need to be dealt with. Maybe it's OK to let it rot away quietly. All this stuff that didn't make it, that got culled, forgotten, left behind because you're already a different writer, perhaps a different person. Construction site dumpster with squashed cans of coke and bits of timber and dust and wrappers (I'm listing again.) A book cannot be reverse engineered from its debris, but maybe each book has its own shadow book.

8.5 years. One woman (one incredible woman, I should say) I had written 20,000 words about had her own ghosted memoir published while I was pissfarting around unable to finish. That's what happens. I do not plan to live forever, she

said. And I thought then, when I held her book in my hands, \$32.95, black-and-red cover, fattish, “Time to give up.” But then I didn’t. I reasoned my book was about time (even though people keep telling me it is about trauma) and there was nothing I could do but let myself be undone by time again and again. That I didn’t give up then or at other moments was also kind of random. The immigrant stock with its pathological tendency to see giving up as death-like, no money ever to pay back the modest advance, other things.

And now the book is out there and so it is no longer mine. What is mine, what remains, is the other book.

The postcode is a code for whether anyone from your street goes to work, and at what age kids start selling drugs or themselves, and do you have to skip lunches only or dinners too and do you go to sleep listening to men beating up their women or women beating up their men, and whether people around you are angry most of the time, which, as we know, is more infectious than measles, or resigned, which is worse.