**THE HANDBOOK OF SUFFERING**

**BY**

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**The Handbook of Suffering**

**Lesson 1 Earth Day, April, 1995**

for G

1. The one-armed girl

I was touching the dirty fingers of schoolchildren

who were holding loops of string

trying to weave them into patterns.

Teaching them tricks to reveal

Earth's relation to the Universe,

I was moving among children,

from one cosmic fingertip

exploding *I did it!* to the next,

when the one-armed girl hugged me

because I kept making sure

she had a partner who could offer

a right hand to her left.

At the end I prayered my hand with hers

weaving the story out of the pattern

which is, I suppose,

one way of learning the Universe,

and at lunch her teacher said,

*We'll have to teach that girl*

*not to hug a stranger.* I was moving

from one moment to the next.

I said, *By the time she hugged me*

*we were no longer strangers.*

2. The trick of memory

The trick of memory, like untying knots

from a loop of string, is to keep returning

until the knots are undone,

the last muscle in the throat loosens, and

the ragged cry rises like smoke

from the ashes of the heart

into the ear of the teacher

who did not want her student to hug me

because there is so much danger in this world.

As if danger had not already

claimed her arm, *as if it does not always*

*find us moving from one*

*moment to the next....*

3. The onset of grief

After school that April day my friend waited

in her book lined space

to tell me about the opening of grief

eighteen years after the fact.

Her blessed sons had finally talked

about living with their father's loss

which was not as she thought so long ago

*a matter of getting over a bump*

*in the road without*

*too much damage.*

More like walking through hard

rain for eighteen years and you can't

feel your hands or face getting wet.

You keep wanting to learn how

but every raindrop burns

like fire....

*The trick of memory*

*like untying knots from a loop of string*

*is to keep returning*

*until all the knots are undone.*

4. How rain is enough

A month from now my friend's younger son

will die, a victim of memory,

all the knots in his body loosened.

But that April day we did not realize

the danger of return,

although driving home I said aloud

*The Handbook of Suffering*

*is what needs to write itself next!*

Because talking out loud while driving

is another way to stay alive

while the terrible things keep happening

until the last muscle in the throat loosens,

until the ragged cry rises like smoke

from the ashes of the heart

and the rain falls from the eyes.

And when all we have left of our loss

is the rain, that will be as the old rebbes

explained in that story about stories,\*

that will be enough, if you understand

this is only the first lesson

in the Handbook of Suffering.

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*\*”that story about stories” -- “Once the Baal Shem Tov, Master of the Good Name, taught us how to reach the ear of God. But we no longer know the place in the forest. We no longer know how to pile the wood or light the fire. We cannot remember the sacred words that opened the Gates of Heaven. All we know is this story of Knowledge and Loss. And telling this Story is enough...”*

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**Lesson 2: At the Anne Frank Exhibit**

Two girls, bright cheeked, glossy-haired, full

bodied, so unlike Anne in those last

head-shaven, typhoid Bergen-Belsen days,

so like Anne as she once longed to be,

two girls call out to Holocaust Survivor,

Ibby Schreiber, Your numbers--can we see

the marks? Those numbers!

On your arm?

I stiffen, go still inside.

But Ibby, looking up from a book

of Rescue and Remembrance.

smiles, My numbers. Certainly.

Her left sleeve's unbuttoned,

rolled up a little, already. All morning

she's been talking to students

rolling up that sleeve.

She moves past me, toward the girls.

With grave delicacy, lifts her arm,

pushes the cloth up the slender length,

rotating to let them see, pale blue as submerged

veins, a row of numbers inked into her skin.

The girls stare. One grimaces. One blurts

a little laugh. That number,

it's so big! Is that how the Nazis

counted you? Yes, says Ibby,

There were a lot of us.

The girls pulled into sunshine by scolding

teachers worried about schedules

have no time for further questions.

Ibby rolls down her sleeve, smiles at me,

shakes her head. They don't realize.

We were many more than this number.

Forgiving them. So many more!

They just don't know.

Is this forgiveness the gift

the victims must extend

to those of us who come after,

if we are to learn the next

lesson in the Handbook of Suffering?

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**Lesson 3 give pleasure when you give pain (for the mothers and wives of warriors)\***

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reading a journalist's battle memoir

all i can think as he wanders

from one charred and gutted body

to the next is *testosterone does this!*

and i love men-- signs of their hormone

hair everywhere on their skins

pleasure of their guttural

bravado muscles butt the wagging strut

bearing the oh so tender scrotal sac

the anxious genital flag

tell me, can a woman be

more brutal than a man?

what am i looking away from?

is it damage or desire? is there a way

to set eyes on what burns the eyes to ash?

there is a place in close i must not want to see

i come back i go away

wanting soul in a splendor of light

on dove wings to come to rest

feeling talons growing

from the darkness in my breast

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all she wanted:

to rub shining hands across her

apron--this good mother of the reich

interviewed

forty years after the crimes. she wanted

to laugh, to caress her child's

face

she wanted to mother a dream

of perfect savage

holiness

in cruelty lies madness, in the state

the cruel madness of many men

in women ruled

by men, smiles that disguise

willing teeth, iron benevolence, selective

mercy,

estrogen, the pleasure of clean hands

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there is an old law: *this depends on that*

on our skulls that equation

balances

better to lift up all the rocks, watch the crawling

insects scatter, the grubs writhe in unaccustomed

light

survey every corner of our land, expose

all our dark, admit every holding

pen

each twisted wire barb, count corpses,

gravestones, and the missing. when they don't add up

exhume

the bones from pits beneath the sod

filter hunks of hair from cooking

pots

instead how many of us kiss the hands

that strike the killing

blows?

sweep and sweep the kitchen floor?

mend the uniforms, bleach out the stains

a map

of territories we inhabit

and do not dare to

name?

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what men enjoy direct and bloody

close to exposed

bone

women want clean want orderly

the housewives

of murder

broody sheltered vicious

hiss in the ear *we believe*

*in heaven*

but estrogen can breed cruelty

lust born in glamour's adrenalin

creates hell

tearing their enemies savagely the mothers

guard their cubs, then send them out

to kill or die

with what ease a woman is more brutal

than a man. all her threatened

energy

curled inward emerges molten

mirror of the cruelty that's shaped her

and the fear

her greatest prize, her highest

honor: *mother of warriors, mother*

*of death*

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following the trail left by the last

eggs in my dying ovaries

i settle into the nest of myself

i massage my thighs

what am i looking away from?

when will we understand?

this flesh can be torn like fabric

like leaves off a living tree

oh you teachers,if you want

every one to want to understand

our two-legged stupidities

our big-brain cruelties

our deadly passions

you must

*give pleasure while you give pain!*

this is one of the eternal lessons

in the Handbook of Suffering

\*this poem inspired by readings in *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics,* Claudi Koontz, St Martin’s Press, 1987

**The Handbook of Suffering**

**Lesson #4: Make sure it's interesting**

**for S**

God spoke from the Heavens

Don't ask questions! How-to

is not why. Just do

what I say!

Now we have the telephone.

Again and again

I hear myself advise my daughter

suffering through Kant and term

paper blues, first year at the smart

rich kids' college, goyishe heaven

she chose because she was so tired

of being nerd, so tired of being

weird big frog in this small

town friendly boring pond.

But now she feels blubbery,

big nosed, klutzy, dumb!

52%, I tell her, with impossible

maternal optimism. Make sure

your days are 52%

happy 52% content 52% the smile

side of good.

And the rest? she asks

indulging me. I dive

right in: When you suffer

make sure it feels like it's going

some where new.

Make it interesting!

Not this same old same

old same old. You've been afraid

of term papers since 7th grade.

Boring! Solve it!

So the next mystery

can shake you.

This is one of those Repeater

Lessons we keep learning and relearning

from the Handbook of Suffering.

**The Handbook of Suffering**

**Lesson #5: Increase**

How much we yearn

when the pain begins

to know cause

consequence

remedy

but for now—right now—

to show cause lay

blame struggle against

damage claim

control to persistently

claw your way

toward healing only

increases

suffering

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**Lesson 6: so many blank pages so many alphabets so much trouble spelling it out**

for G

*1 she tells me*

he was the last one to see alive

his brother who died less than one year ago.

his father killed himself eighteen years ago.

this is the simple information.

she tells meher surviving son after years

of hallucinations drug abuse suicide

threats schizophrenic labelling

and just two months after going berserk

one month incarceration psychiatric

ward is refusing medication living

she does not know how—in other

words the nightmare continues

full force careening.

she says *he knows i'm here. i can't*

*call him, i can't*

*think about him. I don't*

*want to know until*

*i have to....*

*2 blank pages*

sometimes all you can do is record

the rising falling temperatures

of the soul.

there is no such thing as good advice

no path clearly marked already

travelled through this

aching universe

which is why

there are so many blank pages,

so many lonely words

a single tear a drop of blood

and alphabets

no one has seen before

in every volume

of the Handbook of Suffering.

**The Handbook of Suffering**

**Lesson 7 Every body must get wet**

for S

Rain all day

the leaf tender branches, water

heavy, curve, kiss ground.

My daughter, counsellor-in-tears, phones,

from summer camp. Water's falling

everywhere!

I describe for her my own despair,

visiting writer watching hurting six-year-olds

harm one another, scatter

half-written poems across the floor,

run wild through their class.

I stood on a desk to yell my grief.

That bought fifteen minutes

peace.

Love who you teach, I advise her.

Love what you’re teaching them.

You’re the crying kind, so it might help

if you let them—all those

quitters whiners arguers

homesick complainers—see

your tears.

Love's a salt-water word

when you stand in summer rain

admiring the green. Every body

must get wet. Remember that

you teachers and students

of suffering.

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**Lesson 8: Helen from Scotland tells us**

How in a small canoe she paddled out into the loch

where the nuclear behemoth—huge steel gray

underwater death machine

nudged the gray waves toward its docking

place as she struggled for courage

to propel her tiny craft in front of its great

blind nose.

Tells us how she found

courage—lodged like a stone in her heart—*NO to this*

*monstrosity means YES to everything else!*—paddled again

closer to the terror only to be accosted by uniformed military

men who motored toward her, armed…

As they pulled her weeping alongside their boat

she cried, “Are you arresting me?”

“No,” they shouted, “We are saving

your life.”

**The Handbook of Suffering**

**Lesson 9: The limits to suffering**

It was her gift of water,

not just for the man

drinking from the jug

balanced on her hand,

but for all the impossible

camels of the Fathers’

imaginations, and the equally

impossible math, of generations

of Torah masters who calculated

the water carrier was but three years old

though nubile , quick-witted

and ready to go forth to the aggrieved son,

still mourning his own almost death

and the life of his mother, great shofar

howl of loss as she left

this world to teach the One

there are limits to suffering. And the son?

He loved her the woman, the water carrier.

And once he healed through loving her

he took up his task and blessed

his father by finding his wellsprings, filled

with sludge. He dug them out so water

might flow. If all you can do

because there are limits to suffering

is redig your ancestors’ wells,

that is enough. This is an eternal

lesson in the Handbook of suffering.

**The Handbook of Suffering**

**Lesson 10: The Sigh Of Relief On The City Street**

for J

Commuting from Upstate

two days a week,

then from subway to work,

she walks Manhattan streets.

Always after two blocks

walking, sometimes three,

she says she breathes

the same long sigh of relief

at this exploding fanfare,

flotsam jetsam messy dilemmas

rooting in trashcans swinging brief

cases lying on cardboard adjusting sunglasses

tripping over piss-smell whispering platform

shoes honking hollering looking

out looking away talking out

loud to every

body no

body…..

And her

sigh?

The common space,

she opens

on these unforgiving

pavements for herself

for everybody

because

it's finally clear—

we’re all lost

together, we’re all

struggling, we're all

doing our best to learn

the next lessons

in the Handbook

of Suffering.