

Mother Tongue(s)

Η Κληρονομιά

By

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- *Αλλά αν δεν είμαστε απόγονοι των προγόνων μας, τότε ποιοι είμαστε;
- Δεν ξέρω ...¹*

My mother asked me to write. Passionately but earnestly. The beginning of my apprenticeship was as humble as labelling the family's photo albums. From a very young age, I was told of my heritage in an admittedly elusive and mythical fashion. Rarely was my mother recounting actual facts. If I was ever to question that mythology, she was quick to shame me and remind me that after all we are nothing but the offsprings of our ancestors. Of course, she delivered those lines in the passive-aggressive way that our communication had since taken form. It was always a rhetorical question. If only I had dared to verbalise my confusion and distrust. It was many years after our archiving rendez-vous had ceased to occur that I was able to read her own suspicion in her phrasing. Dates and names kept changing throughout the years. Some deaths were recounted with increasingly morbid details. They fled. They escaped. They suffered. They lost. They died. A vicious circle of violence and poverty that I did not know what to do with. I did not know and still do not know. Am I just the offspring of such tragedy? Am I doomed to reproduce this misery? At least my mother had embraced proudly the assignment.

Her persistence, indistinguishable from her excitement, was a strange spectacle to me; her round face, too often covered by her long black curls in her attempt to supervise me over my head, had a melancholia whose meaning, and intensity escaped my younger self. Nonetheless,

¹ Βασίλης Αλεξάκης, *Η μητρική γλώσσα*. Εκδόσεις Εξάντας, 1995, p. 286

being aware of her urgency did not constrain my curiosity. Each time I confronted nameless and unfamiliar faces. Whether because of time or circumstances the pictured people had failed to be present in my life. That saddened me, especially when I took a fancy to some faces – often women sharing my mum’s curls, all eccentric in their own way. Naturally, I do not have to mention that as much as I was fascinated by those faces, I did struggle with a profound sense of jealousy, imagining an affinity altogether fictional and delusional, if I were to quote my own sister. Despite being six years older than me, my mother never confronted her with the same task. I have always assumed that she understood that my sister’s distaste for anything concerning our family or heritage was too great to tame or change. I was on the receiving end of this dislike, often targeted by my sister for my archival diligence. The fact that I was the one giving them their names back each time did not help to control my yearning. To clarify, it was not a matter of guessing but of an actual, obsessive study – indeed, I was quite the apprentice. As my mother instructed, I studied photo albums already labelled, so I could refer to them to identify faces. It was not as dull as I might have suggested. Quite a few faces did reoccur while others made a single appearance, haunting my thoughts and indulging me in my fantasies. That does not mean my judgments were always sound, but I did cultivate an instinctive and intense familiarity with those unfamiliar. Those most hard to identify were by far babies – all bearing a frightening resemblance. To my own bewilderment, I had to label myself once. Witnessing my exasperation and confusion, my mother offered the answer with a chuckle. That did not assuage my fears. Of course, the photograph itself did not help. It was clear from its very setting that the photo was taken during the first days succeeding my birth.

Initially, it was my mother’s presence in the sterile, white space of a hospital that unsettled me. Younger, weaker, with dyed hair that evidently had damaged the volume of her curls, I kept resisting recognizing her - partly, because what I noticed first was her pained expression, fearfully and excitedly gazing at her chest. Her mouth was an even stranger sight; obviously

biting with all her strength her lower lip, the rest of her face, already swollen by hormones, was almost comically larger. My mother's round cheeks, devoid of breath, clearly suggested the pressure held by her tongue behind her lower lip. I tried, in vain, to relax my gaze by quickly going through the entire photograph. It was only then that I discovered the baby held in her arms. She was nursing me.

You're already big, I'm still little. But I came out of you, and here, in front of your eyes, I am another living you²

The birth must have left her so exhausted that her body seemed to have shrunk. A delicate figure whose smallness didn't match her years. She was in complete harmony with the baby. Both content with their little size, although ambitiously claiming for more space. Both expanding their bodies to meet the touch of the other. It is this exact gesture that made the baby all the more mature in the eyes of its audience. Sharing the confidence and strength of the young woman before her. Naturally, it is hard for any pair of eyes to escape their proximity. A constant reminder that the baby is of her body, coming from her body, reproducing its smallness and bigness in all its grandeur. Even at the moment of discovering this image, I knew that my mother and I were in a constant confrontation of our different sizes and bodies. Me growing taller, she growing smaller. My breasts growing, hers shrinking. Yet, in an unspeakable way we both battled naming those changes, finding comfort in each other's body, exchanging smallness for bigness and bigness for smallness. Becoming one great small body.

² Irigaray Luce. "And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other." *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1981, pp. 60-67.

Her naked breast, semi-visible to the camera and disproportionately larger than the rest of the body, had such an unnatural redness and soreness that it became clear to me that the baby's feeding cost her calmness. That is, I was responsible. One had the impression that the child was biting her nipple as strongly and stubbornly as the mother was biting her lip. The photograph was (un)kind to both mother and daughter.

fighting with our tongues

[...]

[a] history of violence³

There was something upsetting in realising how both of us accepted the pain that we had inflicted on each other. Forgetting the violence of the birth and the pregnancy alike. A reciprocated pain and cruelty that resulted in our embrace. Then how is it possible for our relationship not to inherit these violent means of communication? It is as if our small bodies had taken to confront this great question and by doing this, all the violence of the previous births that allowed our becoming.

I grew to love our fighting tongues, each of us for the survival of the mother-daughter. *I had to escape your body so you could live. You gave me your breast because I had to survive⁴.* Each indulging in gestures that transformed the other irreversibly. The violence of the photograph documented the initiation of our apprenticeship, each mothering the other, not entirely unlike our photo album adventures. All these years, of her being a mother to me because I had that day made her one, of me being an apprentice because I had to reproduce

³ Huggins, Rita, and Jackie Huggins. *Auntie Rita*. Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994.

⁴ It is worth clarifying that all sentences in italics, if not referenced, are my own. It allows me to mark the switch to the second-person narration.

and expand her body. This apprenticeship of violence made an archivist out of me. I was obliged by blood to continue her archive. The memory of that violent initiation to this world binding me to this promise. How else would I be able to name those of the past? I chose to write. I chose to write of and in our tongue(s). I chose the language of archives and textures since we never exchanged any other lexicon. Our communication has never been verbal.

tongue mother

tongue me

mothertongue me

mother me

touch me

with the tongue of your

lan lan lang

language

l/anguish

anguish⁵

This lack has always been a source of anger and discomfort to me. Despite her meticulous archives, her words never shared their clarity or beauty. My mother battled with two extremely different repertoires – verbal and texture -, failing to reach a point of compromise. Evidently, this influenced a lot our communication. Whilst I have been relying on the text, she opted for the textual. A doomed effort to understand each other and ensure one another of our love.

I found (again) this photograph quite recently inside your cupboard. An odd choice for a bookmark but I am not the one to judge. Astray from the other pictures, it had an even more

⁵ M. NourbeSe Philip. “Discourse on the Logic of Language.”

profound impact. I realised quite belatedly that we still shared the language of our bodies, the corporal memories that bonded us more than two decades ago as violently and as tenderly as it had happened. My first and last mother tongue was your body, your breast, your fingers, your tongue. *I am your archive and you are mine.*



⁶ Katraki, Vasso. *Composition 1/22*, 1960.