A Theology of Anorexia

by Jacob Russell

"What is your question?" she asked, in that too grown-up tone, holding her doll between her eyes and the spring sun--high over her head in both hands, like an offering. The lawn was wet, saturated with newly melted snow, and the soft earth pulled at her shoes with every step; it made her feel queasy, the sucking of the mud under her feet. She turned in circles, staring heavenward, and wished she had power to climb into her doll's shadow, to rise like an eclipse in human form over the mire. "Is your Melinda christened" her friend repeated.

"Exactly what do you mean: 'christened'?" she said--embarrassed at her ignorance, and eager to dissect her friend's question with one of her own.

"You know, baptized. So Jesus can save you."

"Save me from what? she thought. There had been a bird in her friend's explanation, at least as she reconstructed the conversation in her dream: a spiritus dove, and when she woke from the dream her second day in the hospital--her third confinement in ten years, she felt its presence in her room, the sudden flurry of wings, the mote in the sun. The steps of the temple once gleamed white under the summer sky, blinding and forbidden, but the blood of doves does not defile.

Her eyelids fluttered in the harsh light that was streaming in the unshaded window. "I am white as a dove," she thought, when she told the doctor she did not remember the last time she menstruated. This was not precisely true; she even half realized what had happened this time, and it made her smile; that even as she spoke she had forgotten what the doctor had asked; how the subject had been changed, without the least effort on her part--as a feather

falling does not think about the wind it rides, as the blood from the kohen's finger does not think of the horns of the alter it stains.

The first one was late in coming--nothing like her mother's, and unlike her mother, it was long expected. She knew all about it when she was five, or maybe six. To spare her, her mother told her what she herself had gone through. "Not so!" Grandmom said, "yours wasn't the first modern generation, you know!" It seemed the tradition which she was to inherit was open to interpretation.

Long ago, she was told, in the old country, and even now among those who carry what is ancient within them, the men and women went their separate ways, and in those days there were stairs that led into pools of water, and the women would rise out of them and return again to the world glistening, arid, wet and pure as newborn babes. This ancient world held great fascination for her--Mother Rachel sitting on the stolen idols, and Devorah with the head of Sisrah, red drops spreading on the surface of a bowl of milk.

Her Catholic friend had different stories. Some of them she knew, and others were strange and troubling. There were men who went into the desert and fasted and afflicted themselves and they were called "Saints" and "Fathers of the Church." She saw pictures of them, carvings of men clutching keys and wheels and crosses, and there were women too, who she was told were virgins because God wanted only the pure in spirit for his brides. But she did not have to fast, because she was a child, and it was only once a year. Was that the day God came to chose his Jewish brides?

There was a time when these figures of the ancient worlds loomed large, as real as her own family--when they moved among her household like unseen guests--though she knew she could not speak of them. They were there to protect her, to keep her pure, to stand between her and the dark savior of her friend, from his lust to save,

his menacing eye, his naked heart. No one told her, but she understood--the guests were unseen because the others did not wish to see them. In time, these ancient guests grew pale, transparent as water--if it is possible for things already invisible to become even more so. Years went by when they did not cross her thoughts, not even in dreams.

When it was late in coming, she was pleased, for she believed it was her power that had spared her--even though she knew that same power was drawing her ever closer to the time

"You are such a pretty thing!" her father said, and he would take her on his lap and she would turn her cheek to receive his kisses, and his rough, whiskered chin would chaff her neck. In the dark, she would run her fingers ever so lightly over the spot, but in the morning, it would always be gone. When he stopped taking her on his lap, and he no longer kissed her on the neck, she knew without words that it was her power growing within her, and she felt this fear of it as though it were something not her own. With such power, surely she could do as she wished, surely she could go on like this forever.

She was spending the night with her friend, in her friend's house taking a bath. She was doing as she had done since she was a small child without thought, when the sudden presence of her friend's mother startled her to a shamed awareness so abrupt and unexpected it was as though she had been cleaved in two with an axe. The next morning, it came. Her power had fled her will like a flock of crows startled from a carrion feast.

Later, her mind bristled with questions. She was like a field of nettles, but before the disquisitions there was silence: rock deep, and thick as tar--a mire, honey sweet--pulling downward, always, into darkness, the boneyard and bestiary of the soul. Nothing changed that anyone could see, or wanted to. She was a girl who did

her school work, helped her mother at the household tasks--even cooked (quite well!)--dishes pleasing to her father. If her eyes wandered in class, it was to the window, to the open sky, to the closest mirror.

Less and less believable the image, and less enduring. Each time, it was a stranger who greeted her, a stranger who had come to fill her body. She arched an eyebrow, and it mocked her with her own gesture. She made faces--masks, happy and sad--it cruelly aped her. In the bathroom, before the full length mirror on the back of the door, she saw how her breasts had begun to swell as though they were no part of her, obeying laws that defied her, animals with lives of their own, clinging to her chest. There would come moments--riding with her mother to dancing lessons in the car--walking to her locker between classes--lying sleepless in her bed at dawn, when she would feel the stranger stirring in her body, and the need would come over her to see herself, and nothing mattered from that moment but the satisfaction of that need. She would run down the stairway at school to the girls' room, beg her mother to stop the car at the nearest gas station, fling off th covers from her bed, pad through the dark hall to the bathroom, and bare her body before the unforgiving glass.

When her homeroom teacher mentioned to her mother her frequent and urgent needs, her mother thought she recognized a pattern. The pediatrician asked about her habits, and she shrugged but would not answer. Perhaps she was embarrassed. The urologist too asked questions, then examined her with cold gloved hands. He explained why he would have to watch her void, but the shock of the request overwhelmed the explanation. "Your stream is normal," she heard him say, watching her reflection in his glasses--filled with a disgust that made the room go white. Fireflies danced before her eyes. They took her blood pressure and had her lie down on the hard gurney. She lay on her back staring at the fluorescent light, listening to its faint buzz, like flies over the body of a dead bird. "To flow into the

void, like a stream." She felt its presence--the power that had fled her, stirring to life, resurrected in the words. This is when her arguments returned.

The urge to see herself vanished in a stroke. She now averted her glance. She washed her hands with bowed head to avoid her own eyes in the glass above the sink. She was but the space her body moved through, a space defiled by this coarse stranger. Television and newspapers were filled with photographs of children, dark little stick bodies with swollen bellies. Where were they--their little souls, in that suffering flesh? the phrase, "great with death," ran thorough her mind and she woke in terror, feeling her own belly huge and round, brushing flies from her lips in the dark. She wrote an essay and sent it to her school paper. The counselor called her mother and requested a conference. It was a story of the great beast, Void, who made the world and molded her from his own feces softened with urine--how he had charged them to populate his creation that they might return the treasure of his being from their true inner selves.

It was an allegory, she argued, no more repugnant than Swift. Men inflict suffering because they cannot bear the suffering within them. The greatest thinkers have always turned the floodlight of truth into the dark corners of the heart. There is no other hope.

Their perplexity at her ideas both troubled and pleased her. The power of words became her refuge; the fear they brought to her heart exhilarated and nourished her.

She went to school and came home and once she was home she seldom left her room--except to visit the library. She came across a translation of The Cloud of Unknowing, and from it, found her way to the writings of pseudo-Dionysus, of Plotinus and Porphyry and other late Hellenic and early medieval mystics. The idea of God as divine darkness took hold of her--purity as ignorance... a studied ignorance of the world as it is, that in unlearning the illusion of

physical reality, there might open to the heart a gateway to the divine, unispectral light beyond. to bodiless truth.

Her writing now became more circumspect, more knowing and more cautions. She could not write for the many. They would not understand. It only led to trouble. She wrote for a secret audience, at first general and vague in her mind: the initiates, the hidden soul upon whom the unknown God had poured his love, revealing the unreality of this coarse, foul world of appearance--the world of war, procreation, defecation and death, the world of the Void. But this audience, too, was only another many; it was not the One... Little by little she began to imagine the imageless, to address him, to speak to him... she saw him as boy, perfect in his beauty, lean and strong, with sword in hand, who came to slay the giants of the flesh. It was a paradox she allowed herself--her one wink at idolatry--that imagination should seek to cloth the imageless in human form.

She always told them that she had eaten earlier, that she had had a big lunch, that she wasn't hungry. "Leave me alone," she cried, running from the table to her room. This anger would burst out of her, so sudden and so total in its transformation--from that distant, passive silence to a flashing rage--that no one dared pursue her. Once her mother followed her up the stairs and confronted her in the hall, blocking the door to her room. She screamed, dug her nails into face till she drew blood, threatened to scratch out her own eyes if she wasn't left alone. They learned. They learned what they could say, and what they could not. They learned how to move through the house like ghosts when she was present. She taught them, and they learned.

The first hospitalization was the summer of her senior year. There was a yard party at a neighbor's. When she walked up to the pool in her bathing suit, all conversation stopped. Later, the neighbor had an earnest talk with her mother. Arrangements were made. She was told they were going to visit her aunt. She had not seen them pack

the suitcases in the trunk before they left.

It was a three month stay. She noted with droll amusement how they observed her at meals, taking in the waste, as the urologist had observed it passing out. "Who was it that was obsessed with food?" she asked. Her stay was not without benefit. She learned all the better how to keep her secrets; and when she was released, she seemed happier than her mother had remembered seeing her for years. They were delighted with her counselors. She had enrolled in college and was looking forward to her classes, and was even dating--a boy she had met in group therapy.

Her aunt made the mistake of bringing it up that he was not a Jew.

"And tell me, what is a Jew?" she asked, angrily.

"Someone born of a Jewish mother," her aunt said.

"That is not an answer," she told her. "It is the postponement of an answer by a generation!"

Later she felt ashamed that she had resorted to borrowed words--that she had used those of Simone Weil, whose life she had come to see as a prefiguration of her own. In this shame she found both redoubled motivation to pursue her goal, to find her own vision of the Unconditioned... and a new and more troubling doubt.

She continued to write--metaphysical stories, she called them, and began to publish in literary reviews. Her work was praised. When it became known that she was writing a novel, letters started to arrive from interested agents. But the praise troubled her. The reviewers did not understand her real meaning, and the more she was praised, the deeper her self doubt. She began to feel like a betrayer. She had drawn on the bounty of hidden love that had been her gift, and hers alone, and turned it into fodder for common prattle. It was

happening again, the power she had won back was slipping away, out of her hands, out of control.

❊ ❊ ❊❊ ❊ ❊❊ ❊ ❊

Her second hospitalization was voluntary. She had given herself several weeks to prepare for it, and her uncertainty was resolved on the morning she looked down at the scale and found that she had gained a respectable thirteen pounds. Her complaint was depression, and she was confined for a three day evaluation. Medication was prescribed and arrangements were made for continued counseling. When she was asked about her earlier treatment, she told them that her appetite was fine--this was no longer a concern. She knew it was untrue, but she had come to believe that her other problem, as she called it, was spiritual, that it was not subject to the laws of ordinary psychology, and must be isolated from other questions, to be pursued as a purely private matter.

Her writing had taken on greater urgency, even as its power to quiet her fears diminished. It was increasingly difficult to still the inner dialectic, and her fiction became more densely philosophical and speculative. She published a series of essays on the themes of literature, asceticism and morality, later collected under the title, A Poetics of Renunciation: a last brave effort to rescue her art from the influence of Kierkegaard, and to a lesser degree--the late Tolstoy.

It was at this very point in her life, the moment of highest abstraction, a point at which, seeking to describe her, one is quite lost for words, for there seems nothing there to describe but the outpourings of a relentlessly austere and selfless mind; at this--the moment her soul was prepared to step aside, to make room for the magnified beam of the pure, unknowing eye--at this very moment, it happened--the unthinkable, the one thing she could never have imagined or prepared for: she fell in love.

It was a summer-long conference by a wooded lake. She had seen him at her lectures, and found that her eyes would seek out his face when she raised them from her notes. When he sat beside her at lunch in the dining hall, she blushed. Alone in her room, about to dash out for a meeting with the staff, she stopped before the mirror and quickly ran a comb through her hair--than froze in self-conscious amazement at what she was doing, and why. She could not suppress the slight acceleration of her pulse when he came into sight, nor succeed in banishing him from her idle thoughts. When she became aware of the pleasure she took in studying the curve of his brow, the fine sculptured lines of his nose and mouth, she took measures---refused her eyes permission to look at his face: but then her eyes would wander in happy defiance to his hands and when he caressed the table top or the rim of his glass with his fingertips, she would tremble as though caught in a chill.

He admired her, and made no effort to hide the fact. He sought her out. They talked in the lounge outside the lecture hall, eating graham crackers with sweet tea. They sat on the library steps, discussing the fall from critical grace of Paul de Man over salted almonds. What she thought she saw in him, she felt in herself, felt it anew, as something almost remembered, almost lost.

On one of the last days of the conference, they thought they would try to walk around the lake. It was not that large, and if they got tired, or the way turned swampy and impassable, they could always turn back. The lake bottom was sandy along the shore most of the way, so when they came to thick stands of blueberry and wild raspberry, they took off their shoes and waded in the shallow water. Further on, the ground grew rocky, and the bottom was covered with stones that hurt their feet and the lake sometimes dropped off close to the edge, compelling them to hug the shore, where the briars caught and pulled at their cloths; but then the woods would open up, the thorny undergrowth give way to bracken and the only

impediments to an easy walk would be an occasional fallen tree, moss covered and soft with decay. She took the hand he offered to help her over a particularly large and recent windfall, and when she jumped down, he went on holding it, and along with the pleasure she felt--the warmth of her fingers in his palm--there was also a chill, a shaft of icy light that penetrated to the core of her being.

Rounding a narrow pint that extended into the lake, they came upon a deep cove. Here, sheltered from the wind, the water was clear and smooth as glass. Red oak, birch and sassafras crowed the far bank of the cove, rose from their own perfect reflections into a cloudless, late summer sky. The land above the cove's inner bend had been cleared of trees. Tall grass and scattered low bush blueberries partly concealed a row of stones, the foundation of an old building; a row of privet gone wild and a single lilac bush as large as a tree stood between the ruins and the encroaching woods to the north. The day was warm; in the cove and out of the lake breeze they both of them broke into a sweat. He took off his shirt, washed it round in the lake, wrung it out, and spread it before him on the grass to dry. He took her hand and pulled her toward the lake. "We can take a swim, he said. "Our own private grove!"

"No!" she cried, as he began to slip out of his jeans. "Suit yourself," he said." ...or just come in with your clothes, if you're embarrassed. In this sun, you'll be dry in no time... Come on! It'll cool you off!"

She turned away, self-conscious before his naked body, but when she heard him splash into the lake, she turned back again to watch. He swam away from her in easy strokes, disappeared under the water, reappeared several yards further out. "Feels great!" he called, waving at her, beckoning with his hand for her to join him.

Slowly she began to unfasten the buttons of her blouse, biting her lip to still her nervousness. She turned away to face inland toward the woods, and let her jeans slip to her feet. When she had finished

and turned again to face the lake, she was startled to see him standing a few feel from shore, unashamed and grinning. this time, in spite of the embarrassment, she could not take her eyes off him. She clutched her arms across her chest and stared in worshipful, open eyed wonder. He was holding up what at fist looked like an ancient human head, with seaweed for hair and streaming with mud. With his slight, boyish build, his skin, bronzed in the shimmering sunlight, glistening and smooth as polished metal--Donatello's David with the head of the Philistine, Goliath! She gasped to see him: That such beauty dare exist!

He tossed his find ashore, dove under the water again, then swam out toward the center of the lake thinking she would follow. It was a carved, waterlogged mask of tragedy; she had seen its comic mate lying by the wall. This must be the summer-stock theater that had burned down some years back. She felt the wet algae-covered earth pull at her feet, and a cold crept through her body.

He looked back from far out in the lake, but could see no sign of her. When he came ashore, he found her behind the lilac bush, sitting on a pile of stones, fully dressed. She told him she wasn't feeling well. Disturbed by what he saw, he gently brushed aside a strand of hair from her brow, but at his touch, he shuddered and pulled away, and in her eyes there shone a pure, unworldly light.

❄ ❄ ❄❄ ❄ ❄❄ ❄ ❄

When she was hospitalized for the third and last time, it was for a persistent cough. She was very weak, and though she only weighed seventy-two pounds, she would not eat. Not even broth. The stick children had returned to the news, and the shells were exploding in Sarajevo. It was no use to write letters, to go to meetings. She saw in their suffering eyes the suffering of God himself, mourning for a world He could no longer save.

At the window, the light made no sound. It flew on wings of no earthly weight. The body must be slipped off, like a shadow--that the soul may enter into that pure light which precedes creation and the fall, the light that calls out of the darkness for its lost children.

She longed to see herself in her father's eyes, the father who sees not the body, but the soul. She burned with fever now, but longed for fires not of flesh, to burn and rise like smoke, like sweet incense from the illusion of death; to become a wisp of smoke that rises like a single cloud on the horizon, a finger of dust pointing heavenward. The ashes of the red heifer, the adom parah, are unclean, but they make clean; they are impure, but they make pure. The blood red clay of Adom h'rishon, who strides the isthmus of creation, shall fall waving the white bone, the rib plucked from his side, and eagles will circle his wound, the fires of the Temple Mount will enfold his loins, and there above him, soaring as an eagle--Lillith shall laugh, light as air, watching over him, always over him--embracing to her emaciated breast the immaculate, every merciful castrati of immortal life.