

A Map of the Lost World



One theme persists (from the Talmud):
To save one life is as if one saved
The entire world. For long afternoons

In Ohio, I and my ninety-year-old friend
Sat knee to knee at his kitchen table
Beneath the ceiling's bright overhead;

Between us, the map of his besieged
City, Warsaw, unfolded, unfolding
Further as he led us down streets

That no longer exist, through sewers
He knew by heart and waded those
First days of the last ghetto uprising,

Two shadows moving under boulevard,
Avenue, *ulica* (street)—the snowy dust
Now lighting up around him and us

In the refrigerator hum—a small universe
In which the Warsaw Ghetto comes
To life, stirred by his fingertips.



DC Spring. The cherry blossoms sway
Eerily outside the Museum of Remembrance,
Red-white explosions against navy-blue sky

Blackening: another inscrutable portent
Of early spring. In less than three months
The museum theater's "world premiere"

Of *Anne and Emmett*¹ will be postponed
Indefinitely after a WWII vet (ex-navy,
PT boat officer) enters the museum lobby—

Setting off the alarm—and shoots to death
A museum guard.² Later, in his Annapolis home,
Feds find his weapons cache and oil paints.



Once inside, the Museum of Remembrance
Archivist leads me through the new display:
“The Well-Kept Secrets of Bad³ Arolsen”—

Five of eleven yellowing snakeskin miles
Of moldy Nazi documents just released for
Research after seven decades. (How long it takes

To unfurl one scroll of History.) I’m here
Following a paper trail for my Ohio friend,
Now failing—whose name in Aramaic means

Heart-wise and praise (= T.)—a Shoah survivor
And widower still hoping to learn the fates
Of prison friends, when out of deep-sea digital

Memory surfaces the yellowing SS file on him.
From Dachau (one of seven internment camps
He managed to withstand) filled out in longhand

1 An imagined conversation between Anne Frank and Emmett Till.

2 Stephen Tyrone Johns (October 4, 1969–June 10, 2009), an African American ex-marine and the Holocaust Museum security guard shot to death shortly after opening the front door for an eighty-nine-year old self-professed “white supremacist.”

3 German for “spa town.”

And blue ink. A bottom line like a black corkscrew
Curl pulled tight by *Name der Ehefrau* (Wife) says:
Gabriella—*Gabriella*? But his late wife was *Ewa*.

And a room long-dressed in shadows now opens.



That March night, outside the DC hotel: lit
Monuments, a waning moon, and shooting stars
Of neon pink and green bar light below me
Blur on wet concrete; the drenched red-white

Cherry blossoms now glisten like sapphires.
I call my friend. His voice, that old-world
Baritone—chemo-chiseled to a squeaky tenor—
An old ham radio amplifier's red needle,

Quivering. This will be our last conversation.
Too tired to speak, he says: "Cowl back
Later in thee week. And I tell you *everything!*"

—But early Sunday morning, I'll hear his daughter's

Voice, and know, before she's said a word—
Each word an X, dissolving unknown history.



Weeks later, a parcel arrives marked: *Priorytet*.
Return address unfamiliar, a street in WARSZAWA:
The name, a world-renowned neurosurgeon/chess champion,
And my dead friend's best friend of seven decades,

“George.” Or *Jerzy* (= *J.*), whose name in Greek
Means “earth worker” and a way of training
Apprentice knights with lances. *J.*, one who
Sharpens the known edges of available thought

And earth, one who labors at his work, kneading
The soil, now helps us both to reconstruct
The scene. The envelope—that seems part
Sunflower, part fallen maple leaf—contains

A glossy portrait of the sender and his wife
On a rust-brown vinyl sofa, the man’s face:
Clean-shaven, elfin, grinning beneath a thick
Low-watt shock of Einstein hair, beige shirt—

Beige sweater vest—lit by a red, white, blue
Striped bowtie. His wife of seven decades
Beside him on the couch looks uncertain:
A stark contrast to the portrait of her, hovering

Like a thought balloon above their heads
On the wood paneling. (Her younger self,
Mid-argument, looks like a cat ready to
Pounce.) In old age she only recognizes *J.*

Whose letter now begins to address
Some of what his friend no longer can.
He mentions a book, then untangles
The writer’s full name—a bramble of

Polish consonants, which in Hebrew mean:
“One who delivers or rescues from oblivion”:
(First name: *Moshe*, nickname: *Mietek* = *M.*).
Also meaning: “One drawn as from water”—

As if *J.*'s articulation pulled *M.* from depths
Where he long languished; or the infant Moses—
With whom *M.* shares a name—then the
Retired shaper of available thought and earth

Says: “. . . And I tell you things . . . I tell *nobody else!*”



Through adolescence, I shook a Magic
8 Ball, almost religiously, to answer
Crushed-out questions, turned my
Seedy dime-store orb till it surrendered
The answer I already knew I wanted most:
(Usually: ALL SIGNS POINT TO YES!)

Now I trawl Google (an oracle good as any)
For any clues and find the memoir: *Mietek's*
A PRISONER OF HOPE. Later, at home,
I flip through the university library's near-
Pristine copy, when suddenly one sentence
Unfurls, practically stampeding to life

With my dead friend's full name. Rising
In the bright dust of flickering home movie
Black-and-whites: Warsaw; October '39.
A month after Poland's invaded by Nazis.
M. is a new physician—just married—
Now an officer. His father-in-law, a WWI

Hero (cavalry—three times awarded Poland's
Purple Heart) believes *M.*'s chances of survival
Dubious at best. His evidence?:—*Moshe's* poor
Showing at playing cards: (“ . . . Every day,

You play worse. But today you played me, *Mietek*,
Like it was a *hundred* years from now!") The

War hero escorts his son-in-law to the Russian
Front himself, leaving the family women
Behind in Warsaw. In three months, it's toxic:
Nazis occupy the war hero's Warsaw apartment
(An SS Lieutenant Memmler and a henchman,
Who are behaving "well enough" thus far

Even bringing the women: ". . . flour, oil, sugar.
And for no fee!") Fearing good behavior won't last,
The women take the long train south ". . . to the Black
Sea." Feb. '40. All "arrive safely" at the Odessa home.
But an unexpected fourth has joined their company:
Gabriella's pre-war Warsaw boyfriend: —*Tadzik!*—

Alive again, at twenty-two, and our protagonist.



It all seems like doomed relations from the start:
The terms: $A = 1$ [cramped studio apartment];
 $+ [(3 \text{ couples}) / (\text{The Black Sea}) - 1$ [unmarried]
 $+ [2 \text{ cots} + 1 \text{ bed}] \div C =$ [disapproval: their parents'].

All variables make for an equation—resolvable as: π .
The next eight months are a Tao of calculus ("the study
Of change") when a letter from *T.'s* father arrives
Demanding his only son return ". . . immediately!"

T. returns to Odessa ". . . multiple times"
(From Warsaw). *M.* says in mid-March *T.'s* given
". . . An ultimatum" from his mother, *Sabina*.
That night, *T.* removes himself completely from

The Black Sea board “. . . never to return.” Nov. '40.
First snows, *Gabriella* gives birth—to a baby girl.



Yet here the binding agent holding everything
In place in *Mietek's* painted landscapes—having
Spanned such distances—memory, Time-Space—
Gradually begins itself to dissolve in snowy flakes:

(But how accurate is any representation? Even
This?) By the time the Nazis invade Poland,
T's mother was *already dead*. And mail service
Has long ended. So who delivered these letters?

And how did they arrive? Can we know? Cut
To: The Liberation. The orrery of Love's planets
Realigns, various characters caught in its gears.

Gabriella now has another man—a trial lawyer (*Lolek*
= *L.*), also from Warsaw, Jewish, who left a wife
And daughter behind, in the Warsaw Ghetto.⁴

⁴ Meanwhile, *T.* and his father, *Henryk* (= *H.*) are also imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto (with approximately 400,000 other Polish Jews). *H.*, chief surgeon of Warsaw's Jewish Hospital at the time of the Nazi invasion of Poland, dies in April 1941 "from a wound infection when he cuts himself during an operation. In those pre-antibiotic days [his death] may have been avoided if instruments could have been sterilized properly" (Charles Roland, *Courage Under Siege*. Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 85-86). After the Warsaw Ghetto, *T.* will be sent to six other concentration camps: Treblinka, Maidanek, Birkenau, Sachsenhausen, Dachau XI, and Dachau IV. Found "face down in the snow" when liberated by the Allies, he weighs seventy pounds and is "very close to death"; it will take "three months of intensive care to keep him alive." A fellow survivor (*Ewa*) will help nurse him back to health; they will marry in 1947 (Tadeusz Stabholz, *Siedem piekieł* [*Seven Hells*]. *Specjalne wydanie czasopisma* [special limited edition], Stuttgart, 1947; and from oral testimony). Note that the dates of *Gabriella's* father's letter and other sources of the marriage date are also in dispute.



Six months after the war, neither lover knows
How their futures will “square” with their pasts.
Cut to: Odessa Depot. Spring '45. *Gabriella's L.*

And her father board a train to search for
Survivors. A month later, a letter arrives
For *Gabriella* postmarked BERLIN. Her father,

Stacho: “. . . Dear Child, I'll not even try to describe
What I've seen. Instead, I'll come right to the point.
Two days ago I found your beloved *T.* in Germany.

At a camp in Stuttgart for the Dispossessed.
. . . He looked half-starved, confused, and not
Visibly happy at all to be seeing me. *Tadzik?* I said.

You're alive! Now you may have your *Gabriella*
And your daughter, awaiting you in the Ukraine!”



Almost the living image of a fruitless, winter
Tree confronting a brewing, nearly human,
Weather system—pre-storm—

So barren of affect, *T.*, *Stacho* writes, said: This is
Most difficult to say—*especially to you*—
But I'm *already* married.

Next day, waiting in Odessa, *Gabriella* receives
Another letter. Postmark: WARSZAWA
(From *L.*). She sees the long lines

For groceries outside then reads: His wife and child—
They: “. . . did *not* survive.”



Jerzy and *Mietek* speak of the same man
I write of, yet he becomes a different person
To each, taking another shape completely
Before dissolving again in smoky breath.
Cut to November '45. A letter arrives
For *Gabriella* and *L.* (now her husband)
From her father to say he's found a place

For the newlyweds “to start again”—
Seaside in Gdansk. Later (quoting *M.*):
“. . . Now the couple may begin living
The lives they've wanted all along. . . .”
Then *M.* adds: “. . . *Tadzik* never sought
Out *Gabriella* or their daughter again.”
“Not true!” *Jerzy* tells me by phone

And across six time zones. Once, by
Chance, after the war, *Jerzy* saw *Gabriella*
Walking along the beach (outside Gdansk,
At Sopot). She told him *Tadzik* had found
Her after the war. “But she no longer
Wanted *he-yhm.*” When the Berlin Wall
Fell, their daughter found her father

Who paid her airfare, round-trip, Jerusalem
To Cleveland. Others close to her father
T. confide that they both hoped for some
Sort of “*reconciliation.*” Then the lost
Daughter saw how fully family illness

(Ewa's) had ravaged most, if not all, of
His savings. She lost interest. Another

Paint fleck sparkles then crumbles to flakes.



The Lost Cave Paintings of Grotto Cosquer

When I finally saw the museum's underwater
Footage of explorer *Henri Cosquer* in silhouette,
Backlit by bright high beams and floating

Like a cosmonaut, trailing a long black umbilicus—
And *Cosquer* at last arrives at the right opening
To find the cave paintings of *Calanque Morgiou*,

The most perfectly intact petroglyphs then known
Anywhere since Lascaux—even though the whole
Scene was staged, *Cosquer* still seemed to be entering

The lost city of Atlantis. His head poked through
The underground wading pool's surface; he stands
Waist-high inside a cavern sparkling and echoing.

He takes off his diver's mask, and tank, and rubs
A black-gloved hand along one waist-thick yellowing
Downward-spiraling fang whose lower half, submerged,

Conceals not bats or swifts but the blue-silver
Undersides of neon fish, darting in and out,
Around and through the explorer's shadowy legs.

Fish like shooting stars lighting up red and black
Images whose pigments, ground from wood
Charred black around fires where, it seems,

Our ancestors gathered and told stories
Of the day's hunt, and of their days, and ate,
Mixing the blackened wood with animal fat

Dripping from the day's kill, first on a spit
And turning; and, for pigment, adding warm
Blood, then blowing the whole conglomerate

Hot in the mouth, through hollow reeds,
Onto these walls outlined in charcoal; among
The red and black figures of aurochs, buffalo,

Seals, dolphins, jellyfish, a guide points out
The image of the hunter killed at his own hand—
By his or another's spear. Before *Henri Cosquer*,

Three other explorers died trying to find
This long unknown spot, a place for centuries
Held out of time in time. Then, for a time,

I wondered if my search would make of me
A *Cosquer* or another *Ahab*, destroying himself,
His men, his whole vehicle for transformation,

By making a curse of the thing he craved.



I never wanted to make of you some trick
Of mirrored light, or lie of the imagination.
I never wanted this flurry of shooting stars
To obscure your final place in the night sky.
Is this why you kept the story to yourself?
Because there was no gift in it for us?
Your silence, now absolute, is not so different
From the pauses that follow certain music.
Or what sometimes comes before the words.
That some real part of you, still vital, waiting
To be found on the map of the lost world
Might return, if I went far enough, is the stuff
Of poetry. The kind that says, Be vigilant.
We must love one another while there is time.



In today's mail arrives: a square, white bubble
Wrap mailer of Frisbee-span length and heft.
A parcel (from the Museum of Remembrance)
Nearly big enough to fill one panel of a prison-
Barred storm windowpane—suddenly flooded
By late afternoon light so blinding it turns
The breath-steamed glass white. Inside slides
Out a silver, metallic DVD diskette that grows
More rainbow-colored the more I tilt it in air;
Its contents (for another time) the enclosed
Note says: "All known Nazi files" on my friend
And his prison mates. How long will we shoulder
What we can bear of what we'll never know
Before the weight breaks us, or we grow into it?