

DEFECT *(the fact of being wanting)*

Jessica Fisher

1

There had been a letter to my father, along the lines of *Dear Friend Please*. This one read *Find my son, our middle child, he is good character and hard-working boy*.

A needle in a haystack. What are the chances?

You're sure to find it, if only you'll burn the hay.

2

Speechless in his striped pants, sitting on the beach like a boy at Brighton, out of place and out of time. The elements: sand, sea. A funny kind of first date. His left hand larger than his right, his silence very alluring at first, then boring. I traced half circles in the sand with my foot, as the ballet teacher had instructed. If nothing else, I would have the perfect turnout, toes that could hold the weight of a body. I wanted to ask him what it's like "to flee"—

3

Even now, it's not a history I know well that had forced a correlation between his body, the left hand stronger than the right, and the limits of a country that his grandfathers had fought for, and lost twice if they'd lost it once. When I think of it, what I imagine is the word *defenestration*, which gestures, in its compound Latinate way, to what I initially guessed must be the act of replacing a pane of glass in a broken window. But what would break the glass?

Several men in the room with the one who fell, and whether he was 'helped,' who could say? The body on the street below, after all, evidence only of the fact that a desperate man will leave what he loves.

Fly or flee, the given options—

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What you don't know can't hurt you, so he didn't tell anyone he was going for good when he boarded the plane for a fortnight away. On the way back, he packed a change of clothes in his carry-on, as one might do in case something spilled on the plane, or the luggage was lost on the homeward journey. A spare pair of shoes, too, to change into in the airport bathroom as the flight boarded. The effect was transformative: the StB officers traveling with the exposition team didn't recognize the left-handed pitcher's bare ankles when they peered under the stalls. Then he waited, I don't know how long, before sliding the lock open and turning to the washroom mirror.

What did he see looking into the mirror at JFK, if not his same eyes looking back at him? Still, he had become, one might say, *a stranger in a strange land*. Yet this very statement is illustration of an impossibility: from his point of view, he was himself still, walking the new streets, whereas I saw a stranger in familiar territory. And so our eyebeams crossed, or, as Donne had it, we *twisted and did thread / Our eyes upon one double string*. Except that there was no ecstasy. Beads threaded from opposing ends will meet in the middle, but that's not to say that they belong side by side.

5

Ask the boy who leaves his country *wherefore* and he won't know it means *why*, that's what country does to you and if you leave what they call you is, as everyone knows, not a nice word. Something wrong with you to have found something wrong with *it*—that sort of logic, not very logical, but then neither is the fact of love.

Love of the homeland, we know all about, its rolling hills and rolled haystacks remembered through the lens of loss, the dozen city bridges crossed in memory. But his was a homeland that loved—he belonged to it, was wanted. Condemned *in absentia* for his absence.

It was ridiculous to feel anything at all for him, but there were many strands in the unraveling ribbon; loving the boy, I tied it into my hair, tucking the stray ends away. *Seemly* the word I wanted used of me, not that he had much to say. Or there wasn't much he could say with the words sold in the beginner's word-kit. A few nouns, a few hot verbs stuck to the fridge. The articles, missing. We learned from him to do without, his strange English undoing ours.

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What he saw, we never could tell—"gray-green," or "a sort of a gray." I tried to pair the socks in his drawer, arrange them by color, but I was distracted by the photograph that he'd slipped in beneath, black and white, dogeared. The negative a world away. What was gone, he remembered: the scene a snowfield, or, like the film that catches in the projector, the indelible past alight. It showed the children with three instruments, violin flute harmonica. Stacked by height like the musicians in Bremen. An allegory, but of what. The edges of the photograph scalloped. The past a field buried in snow.

7

Filmmakers of the Eastern Bloc talk about color—about its lack—when they want to get at the era. Not that it was in fact colorless: I myself counted the red stars on the Lenin Museum. But strip the primary colors away and you approximate in visual form what it was to be behind the curtain or wall. As viewers, we register only that something is off, the way in the dream when the car is held up and the shots fired, you realize even within the dream that the scene hasn't ended as expected: you aren't dead, nor are you awake. Either way that you explain the uncanny fact, it remains, though you remain safe in the script, a prop more than a person, a dreamer merely.

So it was only afterwards, listening to the NPR interview with the director, that you realize that the colors red and blue are nowhere in the film. It is in one sense a bloodless world, missing the colors blood takes, except when blood mars the scene. Her death destroyed you, though the filmgoers in the lobby gathered round to assure you that the actress had in fact survived the accident.

Her death was an invention, just as the story I told when I returned to the Prague apartment was an invention. My father had asked us to pack the car: we were headed back to the West. I had carried my suitcase and sleeping bag down the three flights of stairs, into the arcade that opened onto the butcher-shop, with its stale smell of death, and then through the heavy doors. They locked behind me, and because I had neither a key to the car nor to the building, I remained on the street a long time, waiting for the others to come down. I didn't know what to do, where to look: the street was empty, dirty, except for the Lenin Museum across from the parked car, where an old woman mopped the steps. I counted the stars, tried to remember the words to some song. No one came; no one in the apartment above heard me shouting.

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Eventually a man said something to me I couldn't understand, then opened the doors. I followed him in, carried my bag and sleeping bag back up the circular stairs. Meanwhile, they had been caught up in looking at pictures of Filip as a boy, Filip who couldn't come home, who had made himself homeless. I was frantic when I entered the apartment, a panic incommensurate with having being locked out, so when they asked what was wrong I said that a man had held a knife to me on the street. What he had wanted, I couldn't tell them, and they laughed at the story, asking why I would say such a thing.

But there *was* a threat, though not to me. And we could say nothing of him, in case the apartment was still bugged. But I never imagined who might be doing the listening, crouched in some too-cold attic, hunched over some gray desk.

8

Words I didn't know crept into my sleep, and what I wanted to say was, I worried, the wrong thing, and might put them all in danger. That he hated the cartoon we liked, for example, slammed the kitchen drawers as we watched until he had enough English to call them *Damn Commie Smurfs*. So we spoke of nothing in particular in a third language none of us knew very well, commenting on the weather, gray, the food, knedlíky and carp, *parce-ce que* confused with *peut-être*, cause with chance—

We went in his stead, were his surrogates, his sister as if our sister, his mother, as if ours, too. But it was to us a foreign country, its beauty more striking because subdued, queues in the city streets for toilet paper or eggs, while the state-owned shops selling glassware and garnets were empty except for us. We spent the money we had to exchange each day of our stay, buying the things they couldn't afford as pretext for our trip. At the border, an officer fingered the receipts, checked the addition to be sure we hadn't traded on the black market, and was too distracted opening the boxes of crystal, the jewelry boxes, to find the treasure we smuggled back, the papers that made Filip's case tucked into the suitcase lining.

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By “filmmakers of the Eastern Bloc” I mean those making films about what it was before it was an era, not *of* it as in belonging to it. But you couldn’t have known, one says in the thick accent, I mean, they didn’t know that it would come to an end.

But that time did end, which is why indeed it is an era. Returning years later, I found the stars stripped from the building across from 26 Hyberska, the grocery store downtown transformed into a Kmart. Filip had returned, suited up, resumed smoking. I too had changed. I was sleeping in the front room when I heard him calling my name from the street below. It had seemed in the dream like the right thing to do to kick off our shoes, to live like burning and to burn where we’d been. But the stalks were sharp, the fire fast, and the frantic voice fit with that scene—

The dream can’t make sense of the voice speaking your language when you are so far from home. I mean, I thought I was dreaming that he was calling my name, saying *Please open the door*.

10

Barefoot in the arcade, trying each key on the loop in the lock, Filip on the other side, his voice raised over their jangling. The crack in the threshold not wide enough to slip him the key. Some trick to it, once the right key was found—inserted not quite to the hilt, if a key has a hilt, then turned in the old lock.

For each door, there’s a key: that was the premise of all my favorite books as a child. Or, for each key, a door. As if the story existed somewhere, and the question concerned the approach.

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We were as sister and brother

We might have been —

Jessica Fisher’s first book of poems, *Frail-Craft*, won the 2006 Yale Younger Poets Award and was a finalist for the Northern California Book Award. Her poems appear in such journals as *The American Poetry Review*, *The Believer*, *The Colorado Review*, *McSweeney’s*, *The New Yorker*, *Puerto del Sol*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *TriQuarterly*, and her translations appear in *The New York Review of Books* and *The Paris Review*. She holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Berkeley, where she is currently a Holloway Postdoctoral Fellow in Poetry and Poetics. She lives with her family in Oakland, California.