

PERRY
★ **BRASS** ★

An Indelible Mark

The South leaves an indelible mark on you. I grew up in Savannah, Georgia, in the 1950s and early 1960s, and moved to New York in August of 1966, a month before my 19th birthday. I was working then in advertising, first in a small art studio, and then in a large agency's art department. The first impression New Yorkers always had about me was that, being blue-eyed and softly spoken, I had to be a Southern WASP, one of those genteel Southerners whose roots go way back on the land and who still subscribed to a code of chivalry New Yorkers find initially quaint and charming and eventually annoying. I was in a fact a Southern Jew, and in that I was also very much out of stereotype since I had grown up in a kind of poverty unseen among most Southern Jews.

My father, after a series of business setbacks, died of colon-rectal cancer at the age of 42, when I was 11, pushing my mother, sister, and me into a state of complete indigence. Since this was a time in the South when bodily functions of any sort were never mentioned in polite company, and certainly never to children, I was not told that he had died of cancer—a forbidden topic of conversation anyway—and certainly would not have been told that the origin of his cancer was an area of the body (the colon leading to the rectum), that was meant only for the bathroom, something normally you should have to pass through three doors to find.

I was not told this bit of information until after my mother's funeral, when I was 38 and one of her brothers let it out the bag. I also learned that colon-rectal cancer is one of the most inheritable of all forms of cancer; still it wasn't something you could talk to children about, no matter how old they were. I was also informed that my mother Helen, after several lengthy hospitalizations, had been formally diagnosed (when I was 14) as a paranoid schizophrenic, but neither I nor my sister was ever allowed to know this as well. What I learned once again from these late revelations is that in every Southern family there's a closet stuffed with secrets. The secrets may be sexual,

psychiatric, or even monetary, but they will remain in the closet until something catastrophic, like a death, forces them out.

This secrecy stems from the ingrained Southern attitude that most things pertaining to the body, your self, or your bank account, are best left alone—an attitude that always had racial overtones to it, in that eminently decent, upright, hardworking white people always wanted things left alone, since over time they would prove (like it or not) *best* that way. And black people were not in a position to question it.

Strangely enough, growing up Southern, Jewish, and very much queer (certainly quietly sissified), questioning things had become a part of my own secret wardrobe since I was a child. I was abetted in this by my father Louis, and the strange, contradictory, and even romantic way he lived his life. He was born in 1916 in Charleston, South Carolina, an only child of two prosperous Lithuanian Jews, and even though very spoiled, had been brought up as a little Southern gentleman in dark velvet shorts and white silk shirts. Both of my paternal grandparents died before I was five, but Louis liked to talk about them. His mother was a cosmopolitan woman who spoke French, Yiddish, Russian, and of course English. A marvelous cook, she presided over a genteel Jewish home that in the presence of black servants mixed kosher laws with Southern politeness. My father's nickname was "Bebe," Yiddish for baby; he was headstrong, quick-tempered, and almost shockingly rebellious: he hated working for other people and loved taking time out to be on his own. He had that distinct presence, masculine, strong-smelling, and handsome that many Southern men of his generation had. I remember his smell. Camel cigarettes, sharp, salty perspiration, and a dash of the Mennen deodorant just coming in. Like a lot of Jewish men, he went off to fight in World War Two, and when he came back I had a feeling he was very changed; he couldn't just be a nice Jewish boy anymore. Energetic, affable, talkative, he brought back with him a lot of gentile Army buddies, and regularly went out drinking with them. Although he admired *yiddishkeit* (Jewish culture), he was crazy about guns, hunting and fishing, and frequently met with his buddies to kill and eat flesh Jews would object to—like squirrel, rabbit, or deer. These ventures horrified my mother. She couldn't understand why *Bebe* couldn't be a regular enough Jew, while he told me how important

it was to accept people for what they were, but still question their actions if they weren't good.

He put this into practice by making me feel always accepted by him, even though we had little in common. I hated killing anything, found fishing boring, and loved art and puppets. Strangely, my mother hated that I loved puppets. She referred to them as "Perry's dolls" in front of other people, humiliating me. My father though, who adored fantasy, adventure, and the very Southern art of story telling, made me a puppet stage and helped me make hand puppets and marionettes. I was scared of his guns and bloodshed of any sort, but we bonded over this so that the most beautiful parts of my childhood were spent working on puppets together. He would say about these times, "Let's make an adventure out of this. Just the two of us."

The genuine intimacy of this seemed very Southern to me—that it was important to like people genuinely, and not simply use them. But, if you didn't like them, not to be hypocritical about it. I have a feeling this attitude destroyed him in business, and it might have led to why he died in complete poverty, in what would be a "shameful" circumstance (as anything involving money in the South at that time was), which colored my entire growing up. The good thing, though (and I learned that every bad thing had to have one), was that I learned to question everything, even if I kept any answers I got to myself. I questioned why black people were routinely treated like subhumans (something that embarrassed many Southern Jews, since the Nazis had treated Jews the same way); I questioned that there were things boys should do and girls should do and that they should never meet; and I questioned why I felt so alone, so isolated as a kid from the other youngsters in the housing project where we went to live after Bebe died; even if I couldn't put a name on why.

But I knew there was something there. What I wanted was someone to share that thing with me. Someone to reach into that loneliness, and attach himself to me—and I knew it had to be a boy, even if I could barely speak it—passionately, romantically, as you could only do in Savannah, Georgia. Because the city, and I knew this, was so romantic in itself.

What made it so? It was that sense of the past being all around you, and being real. That was the thing that held Southerners together: we knew it. It was terrible. This strange, twisted legacy of

the landscape itself, dream-drenched stretches of salt marshes, fields and farms, the clay soil, ancient oak trees and old houses, Civil War sites, and of course the trail of race, class, and speech. When I first got to New York, I missed it all so much it was painful. Even after all the hell I'd gone through, in a trial-by-fire adolescence marked by a suicide attempt at 15, I missed being in Savannah in the rain at night; and the slow hot days, and Southern boys and the way they talked and smelled. I was truly head-spun with New York; there were lots of gay Jewish men I could meet—in Savannah that would have been impossible. And New York, amazingly, was very good to me; I still retained a coastal Georgia accent, and the reserved Southern manners generations of Southern gay boys have learned to use seductively up North. But there was something missing in Yankees: they moved and talked too fast, and they could dispense with you way too easily.

For a while I went back to the South yearly to visit my mother. By this time there was at least one gay bar in Savannah, existing between raids by the cops who found every way to close them down. I would come back and smell the air and listen to the way people talked, always telling stories without even telling them. But by then I found myself in that strange no-man's land between being too much of a New Yorker to fit in to the South again, while still too much of a Southerner to feel really at home in the North. The South was moving quickly. It was now full of dope-smoking hippies and gay communes and alternative "lifestyles" that would have been massacred when I was growing up. A colder, Yankee corporate brain was also moving in, puncturing the landscape with faceless new office towers. It was getting harder for Southerners to find the "real South," that connection with a past you could not shake: now the past was being marketed as a tourist attraction instead of something you simply lived with. By 1980 when I met my husband Hugh, who grew up in the genteel white suburbs of Birmingham, Alabama, there was little of the Old South left, except for the constantly pervasive, now fairly polite, racism of Alabama. We went back once a year to visit his conservative doctor father and his mother who still lived in the fantasy of the rural South she had grown up in, where everyone knew their place and no one wanted anything *ever* to change.

Both of his parents are dead now, and things have changed even more. The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute recently had a show

of large-scale photographs of Southern lesbian couples and their families. Hugh and I walked through it extremely impressed, but also noticed that other people, black and white, walking through kept a tight-lipped composure, like they were not ready for this thing, even in the context of Civil Rights in Birmingham, still an area of controversy. Almost 40 years earlier, Hugh had been arrested in a raid on a gay bar in Birmingham—a very sudden and horrifying way for him to come out to his parents. Now we were looking at blow-ups of Southern lesbian couples—not men, but lesbians. Maybe women in a queer role were easier for Birmingham to deal with than men. Still, I asked him, “Did you ever think this day would come?”

“No,” he said. “But I’m glad it did. It was about time.”

Speaking in Tongues: How we cannot see the fire by which we've been touched

We have to endure the discordance between imagination and fact. It is better to say, "I am suffering," than to say, "This landscape is ugly."

– Simone Weil

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

– I Corinthians 12:4-6

We have no reason to mistrust our world, for it is not against us. Has it terrors, they are our terrors; has it abysses, those abysses belong to us.

– Rainer Maria Rilke



The last time I spoke with the Holy Spirit (a.k.a. Holy Ghost) I was a 20-year-old Southern girl—long brown hair, nose ring, and a penchant for all things hemp. I was engaged to be married to a nice Catholic guy. I was both terrified and tempted by poetry. I wasn't a lesbian, and I certainly wasn't an out genderqueer or trans guy yet. The nondenominational charismatic church I'd recently joined in Rossville, Georgia, had a full-on rock band—electric guitar, keyboard, drums, even a tambourine. Running up and down the aisles was common, and the metal folding chairs were spaced accordingly. There was clapping and dancing, sometimes for hours. If you were just to watch us from the outside, worship would seem to alternate between winning a big game and being possessed. I grew up Pentecostal, so I'm not entirely shaken by charisma. In fact, I'm bored

by most poetry readings. I often feel like I should take notes so that I can pass (I never pass) the discussion portion of the test.

A woman was visiting church that Sunday night. She was a traveling preacher, beehive and long skirt. The men of the church would stand behind anyone she talked to so as to catch them when they fell out. All she had to do was blow on you—she had the power of the Holy Ghost in her breath. I fell out when she blew on me. I came to quickly next to my friend Steve, and he and I were giggling ridiculously, writhing on the floor, chattering, speaking a language neither of us could comprehend. I didn't believe it fully until I was lying there. I was lost as in Rebecca Solnit's sense of lost: *the world had become larger than my knowledge of it. Either way, there is a loss of control.* It was pleasurable—an almost giddy mixture of joy and surprise.

In *Queer Space*, Aaron Betsky says, *we make and are made by our spaces.* In the South I was made by, we had secrets and we had stories. We put our hands on each other. We talked with our mouths full. We wandered. We were disowned and, then, we were smothered. We were women. We spoke in tongues. We paid for things with our good looks. We hit one another. We hit hard. We healed the people we loved. When we needed to, we would dance and we would sing.

"Glossolalia" is another word for speaking in tongues. For Pentecostals, it is considered one of several gifts of the Holy Spirit: the grace of no longer being burdened by linearity, a momentary relief from the expectations (persuasion, explication, or sense making) of everyday speech. Before my enjoyable, albeit startling, experience with glossolalia, all of my previous encounters had been a bit terrifying, even if I couldn't look away. In the church I grew up in, Sister Hazel's body regularly rose from the pew like a snake—her right hand trembling in the air above her head, her voice a song of strange, while the rest of her body buckled and jumped as though she'd been hit. There was a lot of crying back then. I thought my queerness was a devil. I wanted it out of me, but then again, I didn't. Krista Tippett says most churches think of *the body as an entry point for danger.* I didn't disagree with them. Let me say it plain.

For most of my life I've felt broken, not just tarnished. There has long been a kind of geographic darkness, a landscape of violence in me that I have feared (and that feels, to me, particularly Southern and religious) and of which I am deeply ashamed. This is less about being angry that someone did something awful to me as a kid (although they did, and god did not protect me from it) and more about being afraid that I deserved the awful and that awful is what I create. As Adam Phillips points out in an essay on agoraphobia, *James' open space is full of potential predators, but in Freud's open space a person may turn into a predator*. The open space is always writing. Always the body. Always other bodies. Always the voice. Always the page.

As a protection from this fear and this pain, I've spent plenty of time contemplating suicide—sometimes more actively than others, but the gist is this: I've always held onto it as an option. There was something about knowing I could leave this body if I needed to that made me feel safe. Thus, much of my writing (and my living) employs, enacts, or encourages erasure. Or at least hide-and-seek. It is slippery. It enjoys white space. On some level, no doubt, transitioning was a way of killing my most vulnerable, marked self and an attempt to make peace with men—a group of people I've long considered the enemy. I'm trying. Indeed, as my embodiment changed so rapidly (I suddenly really was “the man”), I was frozen by a multifaceted terror that, at its heart, was simple. I was afraid of becoming the thing I longed to be, needed to be, hated to be, and asked to be so named.

The cadence of a good Pentecostal preacher denies contradiction. There is a surety there, a solidity that exists in absolute tension with the logical ambivalence of so much in the Bible. The uncertainty of a miraculously confounding world is resisted primarily through the rhythm—a driving—where the full bore of language becomes a comfort. I saw my Papaw have hands laid down on him and be healed of cancer. Tongues, healing, prophecy. If there is poetry in that, let it rain.



My friend Sydney is one-and-a-half years old. She doesn't really know how to whisper yet. We've had to stop swearing around her because she just repeats every little thing that she hears. And that's different from every little thing that we know. And that's different from every little thing that's been said. I recently went to church on Sunday morning—a first for me in the 11 years since I've been living in Tucson—and I can't stop thinking about how language takes shape inside the body. Sometimes words embarrass me more than my feelings. Even though I always thought my Pentecostal upbringing was deeply anti-intellectual, and even though I was at a Presbyterian church and not a Pentecostal one, hearing the female pastor do a close (and very queer) reading of the Bible shifted the way that I understand my love of literature. Perhaps church (of any denomination) is really just book club. Perhaps my Papaw, with his 8th grade education, 15 different Bibles, and 50+ years of actively studying the same text, is the most literate man I know.



The more I think about what interests me in poetry, the more I realize I'm just trying to get back to church. CAConrad says: "My religion is poetry." I like that; it's close. According to Cicero, the word *religion* is derived from *relegere*, "go through again" (in reading or in thought), from *re-* "again" + *legere* "to read." My twist on CA's statement is: My poetry (all poetry?) is religious in that it requires re-reading (which is to say it requires attention). (Simone Weil: "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity." I always want to be surrounded by people who pay attention.) Also, reading and re-reading should be embodied (Judith Butler: "Speech itself is a bodily act"), and in this way it is a danger (as Gilles Deleuze riffs on Spinoza, "we do not even know what a body can do"). Reading, re-reading, religion is a danger to what we think we already know.



The truth is, I'm in over my head here. What I'm trying to explain is my experience. That's absurd. And antithetical to the poem (which is my life). How about this map of my brain:

THE QUEER SOUTH

speaking in tongues ≈ nonlinearity ≈ vulnerability ≈ terrifying/
blessed body ≈ queerness ≈ violence/love ≈ delight/fear ≈ wonder/
constraint ≈ poetry ≈ surrender ≈ god ≈ body + bodies + space

I always want to be surrounded by readers. Which is to say, I always want to be surrounded by queers.



I'm still a mess of influences, accents, inflections. If I believe in god, it's because there are moments when I'm actually able to sit still inside my body and feel both solid and permeable. I want language both untamable and untranslatable—benevolent and terrifying—a poetry that is. If I'm lucky, I'll get to speak in a tongue that both is and is not my tongue again.