



*a temporary blindness*

by Sharon Kivland

a text written to accompany the installation *Women; keepers of the light* by

Nadine Norman

Let me tell you, the story started long ago, and though the thread of its telling has long since passed from one to another and to yet another, the story still continues to be told. For the space of pages I must take the place of the story-teller who is figured in my words; she tells it better but has other duties. If the tone is sombre, old-fashioned even, then it is because of the endeavour of the narrative. It is nothing more than a formality, but that is everything. It sets the scene; in Majorcan story telling, the story always began with the phrase there was and there was not and you know once upon a time and il était une fois. The form may change; the voice falters, halts, assumes a different register. In the voice of the daughter one may hear something of the tone of the mother, within whose sure or uncertain delivery a particular way of enunciating a word or stressing a syllable reminds her of a way her own mother had of speaking. It is neither she nor her daughter, but the structure of another who echoes in such moments of attention to phrasing, and she too has her own precedents. She too has taken the place of daughter to a mother, grand daughter to a grandmother. The words are passed on like a coin in the hand of one which is passed into the outstretched hand of another and each will leave an impression upon it. It is a legacy, one subject to intervention as much as to invention. The words are passed on but at times they seem to stop, to break off in mid-sentence, and sometimes, failing completely, they are silent for a long time.

There was a break in lineage and in this rupture lay a loss so immense that words do not exist to either convey its measure or breach the void; so huge this loss that it can only be conceived in terms of the

abyss, into which the fall appeared to be without end. It is said it put an end to certain forms of poetry. The descent can only be arrested by words, those which fail to describe it but must nonetheless, in all their partial form, all their pathetic inadequacy, be spoken, even if they lack an epic resonance. There must be, as others have insisted, a testament. Let us keep speaking; let us tell what we did not see or know; let us withdraw from the sight of the world to the space of recollection. Let us breathe for a moment, draw in breath with the flame.

A moment, that's all ... in the space of inhalation, the time taken to illuminate a candle, one is sent into the past, otherwise irretrievable. This is no time machine of science fiction, in which a traveller is sent from the future to undo the present. My words, yours, our memories, even as they were formed by the stories we were told, will do nothing to change anything, but I, you, between us, we will continue to speak, even in that instant of silent withdrawal, flame in hand. At that moment, in that and each particular moment of suspension all is clear and though nothing is seen during the folding inwards to a place of history, the intimate place of memory in which everything is registered insists.

I have visited a place which though not here is present as the source of a command : remember. But I do not now remember who spoke it to me first nor when. Perhaps I dreamt the word one night. I am rarely subject to visions though certain images and their residue continue to haunt me. I was shown something in absentia, in effigie. I try to write, stumble. The first place was a disaffected synagogue in Prague - I know it well - but I did

not see this work here. It was a place of worship which then became the storage depot for the belongings, the effects (I believe that is the legal term) of those who would certainly never return to claim them. They had of course worshipped there, men downstairs, closer to the tabernacle, women upstairs. All gone, men, women, tabernacle, cantor, whatever their position, and with their absence the place became a store for fruit and vegetables, falling into disuse. It did not entirely disappear however and so one cannot say that it became a monument, which would by its nature be condemned to vanish, and soon a swastika appeared on its walls, spray-painted, and my friend was beaten up in the neighbouring bar because, said the men who did it, he looked like a gypsy. It is a place tourists in Prague do not think of visiting, in the ravaged margins of a city which define its limits.

The windows were traced out by images like apparitions. I did not see them with my own eyes though I may yet lift them up and restore sight. I may speak of them for my tongue has not been cut out and I still have my hands. If the text disembodies me, I retain my inscription as symbol of myself. Like Diderot, I can write without seeing, and in all the places where my words are illegible, in all the places where my blind words over run the margins of the page, I am still vigilant. I am observant even while excluded from the temple. In *L'Entretien Infini* Maurice Blanchot writes that while to speak is not to see, to speak the truth is necessary in order to think to the measure of the eye. In exile I am closer to the outside than the inside. My words turn about a work which could be seen from both sides once and presence of the self is secondary. I saw it from afar, the distance was finely calibrated, to come any

closer would blind me, so I close my eyes and shield the flame with my cupped hand.

One woman follows another; each is present at once. It is twilight, *entre chien et loup*, and in some towns a curfew would be imposed by now. One returns home, seals out the imperative flesh of the world and its social bond; one embraces the ritual paths decided long ago. One does it blindly, the origin forgotten or shadowed in the comfort of mythologies. It is only for an instant that this closing of the eyes constitutes vision and it is a condition of impossibility. It leaves its mark. One cannot hold that moment forever and yet its aim is eternity. It leaves its trace, is the trace, excessive and unbearable. Some refuse to do it, will not accept the burden of the weekly Friday lighting of the candles in the menorah, while for other it has never been in question that they would not come to assume this role. In keeping faith, they bear witness, they keep guard on a memory that is not determined by the horizon of space and time. Memory will not submit itself to the setting of a limit, any more than will an act of forgetting. Each woman, negative image, black where there should be light and the shadows improperly bleached, crosses the boundary that would be given as a judgement. The light is blind or causes blindness, finds its mark and cuts. It incises internally, neat as a surgeon, as though following the scar of an old wound.

Inside or outside, one follows the text, naming. The names are silent, a text of the body. I know the words but I cannot speak them. The image interrupts the act of naming, but does not break this particular lineage, at least not this time. I want to call it an affiliation and I know it carries redemp-

tion. It is not subjection though at times it seems to be so, subject to and subject of a culture where the power of women is one of confinement, the guarantors of sons. Darkness comes, the candles are lit inside, the supper was prepared earlier in the day and the house is clean. While the wolves howl at the door, we, that is, the family I dreamt, come my little ones, my beloved, can eat in peace. We know continuity and it is enough. But I am in a library in the south of France, I am far enough, that is, too far from home, and the Mistral is blowing, shaking the windows, chilling the air that should have been soft and sweet by now. I open the window and the wind whips up the papers on my desk, scatters them about the opened pages of my books. The negative impressions of the rich life of a family that is not my own signifies my own physicality, my own strangeness. I shut my eyes against the wind and it beats against my face, heavy as a fist. It hurts, and engraves itself upon my cheeks which are quite suddenly wet with tears. Do I imagine a transfiguration of my body by this translation of bodies, those of other women, into a narrative of sorts?

The images become phantoms. The self is divided by these revenants who in negative form provide such a seductive image - is it profane? It pulls at things, energises them. I am enveloped by dissimulation. I should assume the position, transcendent, ecstatic, but I am afraid of its duplicity, the price I will have to pay to take up my place in this history. I absent myself from the work in order to tell of it. I am prevented from joining it by the necessity of standing apart to hear it and to repeat it. In exile, from exile, I am pulled towards something; it is nearly night, though commanded, I cannot see what they see. I cannot move, though I am not within the work which has kept me in

my place. A woman in the frescoes of the Villa of Mysteries at Pompeii pulls her veil over her eyes and turns as though to run but she is transfixed; the smallest glance was enough. It is a threshold, on the edge between two worlds, a fine balance. I will tell of it as I choose not to fall, for though I recognise the cost and turn away, I will regret it forever.

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Nadine Norman's *Women; keepers of the light* is a black and white photo-duratransparency series of 13 triptychs exhibited in the windows of the Liben Synagogue Na Palmovce in Prague, 1996 and in light boxes at the Galerie Lilian Rodriguez in Montreal, 1998.

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