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As If I Wasn't There

Writing from a Child's Memory

"It's almost as if you weren't there."

That's what a listener told me after I read my work in progress at a program called New Adventures in Nonfiction. Held at Performance Space, an intimate venue in New York City, I had opened by admitting that my current project was "definitely a new adventure for me." I was writing a book about "the hijacking of three planes, in September 1970," I told my audience. "The hijackers were members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a Marxist-Leninist organization. They hoped to trade the passengers and crew for Palestinian prisoners. I was twelve years old at the time, and a passenger on one of the planes. I was traveling with my thirteen-year-old sister, unaccompanied by adults. We were returning to New York, from Tel Aviv, and were held hostage in the Jordan desert, inside the airplane, for a week."¹

After my sister and I got home, we did not talk much about the hijacking. No one took us to a therapist or sent us to a school guidance counselor. Parents of some of the other children on the plane even instructed teachers not to bring up the subject, for fear of causing further suffering. My friends in seventh grade—I returned to school two weeks late—found me apparently unchanged; indeed, decades later a classmate told me that as the years progressed she wondered if she had imagined the whole thing. Over time, the world’s memories of September 1970 faded too, making it easier for me to sustain the erasure.²

Nearly a half century later, I found myself wanting to know more about what had happened to me. Because there was so much I did not remember, I started out by doing what I knew how to do best: research. Gathering and cross-checking documents seemed like the best way to make sense of my fragmented memories. The Popular Front had hijacked five flights that day, and three planes ended up in the desert. First I read a book I had studiously avoided: an account of the hijackings by a fellow hostage. In *Terror in Black September*, David Raab focuses his rigorous archival research on the international negotiations that ensued—he was seventeen years old at the time and published his book thirty-seven years later. As I read Raab’s descriptions of events, I marked up the margins, frequently scribbling the words “don’t remember.” In the National Archives in Washington, I read heaps of State Department telegrams. At the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library in California, I read “situation reports” and transcripts of telephone calls between Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger. Trans World Airlines no longer exists, and at the TWA archives at the State Historical Society of Missouri I read detailed narratives of the hijacking written by each member of our crew. I gathered press coverage, watched television news segments, and read the political manifestos and autobiographical writings of my captors. I also gathered records of the experiences of other hostages—interviews they had given upon their return, legal testimony taken in lawsuits against the airlines—and set out to find some of those who were still alive.³

When I began to write, I again did what I knew how to do best. I compiled a multitude of voices, balancing, combining, and filling in gaps, to reconstruct what had come to pass up in the air, in the desert, and during our release. During this process, I thought often of *Remembering Abanagran: Storytelling in a Family’s Past*, in which the historian Richard White skillfully places his mother’s memories of her native Ireland in the context of deep archival research. Historians, White writes, “must accept memory as a guide,” treating it “as detectives treat their sources: they compare them, interrogate them, and match them one against the other.”⁴

Sometimes the research and writing brought unbidden emotions. The International Committee of the Red Cross had served as mediator in the negotiations, and in their archives in Geneva, Switzerland, I unexpectedly came upon a never-delivered telegram that my father had written to my sister and me.

Frontis: The author in Tel Aviv in summer 1970, just before the hijacking.

- 1 “My Hijacking,” *New Adventures in Nonfiction*, Performance Space, New York, November 4, 2019.
- 2 The hijacking is difficult to fit into studies of childhood trauma, which most often concern repeated sexual abuse or a single frightening incident. When post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was named ten years after my return, “being taken hostage” counted as a possible cause, though like the majority of children who experience a traumatic event, I did not suffer from PTSD. Rather, my brief bad dreams and flashbacks would now be called “acute stress disorder” or “visual misperceptions and hallucinations”; see Andrew P. Levin, Stuart B. Kleinman, and John S. Adler, “DSM-5 and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* 42.2 (2014): 146–58, here 149; C. H. Salmond et al., “The Nature of Trauma Memories in Acute Stress Disorder in Children and Adolescents,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 52.5 (2011): 560–70; Lenore C. Terr, “Childhood Traumas: An Outline and Overview,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 148.1 (1991): 10–20, here 15. See also Richard A. Bryant, “Acute Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” in *American Psychological Association Handbook of Trauma Psychology: Foundations in Knowledge*, ed. S. N. Gold (Washington, DC, 2017), 161–84. On treating traumatized children, see for example Lenore C. Terr, “Using Context to Treat Traumatized Children,” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 64.1 (2009): 275–98. The 1970 hijackings by Palestinians, in which no one died, were supplanted in public memory by the murder of eleven Israeli hostages at the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, and then by

the 1976 hijacking to Entebbe, Uganda, where a rescue mission ended with the death of all the hijackers and four hostages. See David Clay Large, *Munich 1972* (Lanham, MD, 2012); Kay Schiller and Christopher Young, *The 1972 Munich Olympics and the Making of Modern Germany* (Berkeley, CA, 2010); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (Berkeley, CA, 2001), 178–87; Simon Reeve, *One Day in September* (London, 2000); Saul David, *Operation Thunderbolt* (New York, 2015).

- 3 David Raab, *Terror in Black September* (New York, 2007).
- 4 Richard White, *Remembering Abanagran: A History of Stories* (Seattle, WA, 1998), 4. White also writes, “History is the enemy of memory” (4).
- 5 James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York, 1994), xii. See also James Goodman, *Blackout* (New York, 2003) and *But Where Is the Lamb? Imagining the Story of Abraham and Isaac* (New York, 2013).

Soon after reading my work in progress at Performance Space, I gave a first complete draft of the manuscript to two friends. One, the director of counseling at an independent school, told me, “I got anxious about you when you disappeared from the narrative.” The other, a fellow historian, thought I had written far too much about other people’s experiences. Where I put my own observations last, he said, I needed to put them first; where I described the aircraft making a 180-degree turn over Brussels to head back toward the Middle East, for example, I had recounted eight people’s observations ahead of my own. When the plane landed in the desert, he went on, “it felt like there were a million people in the narrative, but not you.” This historian-friend was James Goodman, whose own books are intentionally based on an abundance of voices, beginning with his Pulitzer Prize finalist *Stories of Scottsboro*, which the preface describes as providing “the perspectives of a wide range of participants and observers.” In other words, Jim appreciated the undertaking of collating voices. He also recognized that, given my dearth of personal memories, I would need other people’s stories to tell my own. But rather than populating my narrative with so many voices, Jim suggested keeping the focus on myself via the device of an omniscient narrator. “Where a historian can turn to many characters,” Jim said, “a memoirist has one.”⁵

Memoirist? The word unsettled me. My book contract called it non-fiction, and my fellowship applications had assured selection committees that, although the nineteenth-century United States was my field of expertise, this project would follow the method that remains central to my career as a scholar: undertaking intensive archival research in order to weave the lives of particular actors—in this case, both captives and captors—into deep historical context, presented to readers through narrative and storytelling.

When my editor read that first draft, he too heard a crowd of voices “barging in and drowning out” my own experiences, as he put it. The tightly woven story I had crafted, he said, had the effect of sidestepping my own emotional responses. The narrative was moving, sure, but also, in parts, “cold.” My editor suggested another approach to the paucity of personal memories: rather than presenting readers with a fully researched, airtight story, let them in on my re-creation of the events. Bring them along to the archives. Let them experience, with me, the drama of finding a document, the surprise of finding out what I did not know before.

The trustworthy method I had described to fellowship committees was clearly not working, and the more I thought about it, the more I saw that my truancy from the manuscript was not merely a matter of sparse memories. My ghostly appearance was also a result of feeling uneasy writing about myself. The inclination to research the book the way I had written all my other books arose from a sense that placing myself too prominently in the narrative could be a “dangerously self-absorbing” enterprise, as John Demos writes in a *Journal of American History*

roundtable called “Self and Subject.” I had, after all, become a historian to investigate other people’s lives.⁶

To be sure, I always ask students in my graduate seminars how muted or audible they want their own voices, as scholars, to be. I also always tell them that the use of first person is far from the only way to be present in our texts, and I often provide a favorite example, a two-sentence sequence in Michael A. Gomez’s *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. It goes like this: “The Middle Passage was a transition like no other. No other.” Struggling now to place myself in my book about the hijacking, I knew why I had brought Gomez’s sentences to the attention of my students for more than twenty years. I love those two well-chosen words of the second sentence because they subtly reveal the writer’s own voice and sentiments, without invoking the first-person singular. But I was coming to see that, for a memoirist, an emulation of Gomez’s virtuoso evasion of the first person would not do.⁷

After the reading at Performance Space, and after absorbing the comments of my two friends and my editor, I began to understand something else too. Deliberating how best to place myself prominently in the manuscript, I saw that my dilemma was not primarily about either meager memories or a scholar’s reluctance to write about herself. I understood that my real dilemma concerned writing about myself as *a child*. I had written the first draft the same way I wrote books about nineteenth-century historical actors precisely because that twelve-year-old girl held hostage in the desert felt like someone apart from myself, the grown-up historian writing the book. That girl felt like someone from the past, someone whose emotions I could not access, but because that girl was in fact myself I also had to face the emotions of my historian self writing about that child.⁸

I returned to the manuscript. It was time to pare down other people’s experiences, to foreground my own observations, and to bring readers into the archives with me. The first step was to assume the voice of an omniscient narrator as a way to remove the clutter of other characters. Writing about the plane’s desert landing, for example, I deleted a paragraph filled with other people’s names and impressions, writing simply about “passengers” unnerved by the absence of runway lights and terminal buildings. Then, to figure out how to put more of myself in the narrative, I listened to the voices of others—not those who were with me in the Jordan desert in 1970, but instead other historians and scholars who had written about themselves, especially those who had written about themselves as children—to glean and appraise their writerly techniques.⁹

Revising the manuscript, I often wondered, *Who was that girl held hostage in the desert?* In *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands*, Hazel V. Carby refers to herself as “the girl.” Sometimes she follows the third person immediately with the first person (“In the late 1950s, in Mitcham, a girl was lost. I do not mean that she was incapable of finding

6 John Demos, “Using Self, Using History ...,” Roundtable: Self and Subject, *Journal of American History* 89.1 (2002): 37–42, here 37. Demos writes of “unlearning” the imperative that the scholar “must be held apart from his work” (37). For older debates, see Adam Begley, “The I’s Have It: Duke’s ‘Moi’ Critics Expose Themselves,” *Lingua Franca* 4.3 (March–April 1994): 54–59; Daphne Patai, “Sick and Tired of Scholars’ Nouveau Solipsism,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 40.25 (February 23, 1994): A52; Ruth Behar, “Dare We Say ‘I’? Bringing the Personal into Scholarship,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 40.43 (June 29, 1994): B1–B2.

7 Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998), 164.

8 Historians sometimes write about themselves as children in prefaces and introductions, most often taking the form of anecdotes that explain a connection to the topic of study at hand; for two examples see William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis* (New York, 1991), 5–7, and David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness* (New York, 1991), 3–5. I did so myself in Martha Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln* (New Haven, CT, 2015), 7–8. See also Kate Brown, “A Place in Biography for Oneself,” *AHR* 114.3 (2009): 596–605, in which Brown reflects on the connection between the desolate landscape of northern Kazakhstan and her childhood in a deindustrializing midwestern city.

9 For a sampling of book and articles by scholars writing about themselves and their families and other researched memoirs not cited elsewhere in this essay, please see the online supplemental bibliography. In 2019, Kendra Taira Field organized a Mellon-Sawyer Seminar at Tufts University on Writing Family, Reconstructing Lives, in which some participants

her way, but that I had to let her go”), and sometimes both grammatical forms occupy the same sentence (“In school the girl found arithmetic difficult and I still struggle with maths”). Likewise, Edward W. Said’s memoir describes a remote self, whom he calls “Edward,” rendered in quotation marks, defined as “the self my parents tried to construct” in opposition to his “inner, far less compliant and private self,” who, he writes, “gave me strength when ‘Edward’ seemed to be failing.” The circumstances of Carby’s and Said’s distant selves were very different from my own, yet the sense of separation that both expressed about themselves as children made me more tolerant of the distance between my twelve-year-old self and my historian self. It was all right, I realized, to let readers in on that distance.¹⁰

While memoirists may relate stories of childhood without questioning their recollections, a historian-turned-memoirist is more likely to grapple with the problem of memory, and perhaps especially with the problem of memories about childhood. In *On Juneteenth*, a series of essays that intertwine the history of Texas with Annette Gordon-Reed’s upbringing there, Gordon-Reed distrusts her memories enough to pepper her prose with phrases like “if I remember correctly” and “I cannot say with certainty.” I appreciated those phrases and began to emulate their spirit. Still troublesome, though, were the handful of memories of the hijacking that had remained vivid across the years, since I did not know if I could trust them.¹¹

In one such memory, during the up-in-the-air commotion, the copilot emerges from the cockpit with a gun at his neck. Across nearly fifty years, the fragment remained sharp, the disembodied gun occupying its outermost edge. I see the copilot, his grown-up face cueing emotion to a scared twelve-year-old: eyes worried, lips pursed in silent fear, hands up as if responding to a robber’s command, the skin on the left side of his neck turning red as the nose of a silver revolver presses into it. Scientists have long known that such flashbulb memories can be fickle, and in the course of my research I found that no one else on our flight had recorded this incident, including the copilot himself in his crew report, and that no other hostage recalled the scene, even when I asked about it directly. When Philip J. Deloria crafted a narrative about a school bus altercation with a white kid—Deloria’s father, Vine Deloria Jr., had written the book *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, and the kid had shoved the young Deloria, shouting, “Custer died for your sins, man!”—Deloria-the-historian knew that his crafted narrative was “richer, better informed, more interesting, more historical” than the way Deloria-the-sixth-grader had experienced it, since at that age he had only a “vague sense about Indianness.” In his contribution to the Self and Subject roundtable, Deloria seriously considers the possibility that he had imagined the whole incident, “repeated it,” he writes, “until it took on a life of its own.” Had I done the same with the gun held to the copilot’s neck? Puzzling this out, I found myself drawn to Jonathan Scott Holloway’s decision, in a book intertwining his family’s history

shared work about their own families. In 2020, Stéphane Gerson organized a symposium at New York University on Scholars and their Kin. For my current project I am also turning to fiction written from the perspective of children, including for example Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (1897; repr. ed., New York, 2010); Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John* (New York, 1985); Affinity Konar, *Mischling* (New York, 2016); and Marisa Silver, *The Mysteries* (New York, 2021). See also Linda Rui Feng, “Writing from Inside the Precarious Hunger of Childhood,” *Literary Hub* (May 24, 2021).

10 Hazel V. Carby, *Imperial Intimacies* (London, 2019), 56, 245; Edward W. Said, *Out of Place* (New York, 1999), 217, 165. Said describes this as “a project about as far from my professional and political life as it was possible for me to go,” drawing on memory “unaided by anything except concentrated reflection on and archaeological prying into a very distant and essentially irrecoverable past” (217, 216).

11 Annette Gordon-Reed, *On Juneteenth* (New York, 2021), 25. As the writer Ben Yagoda so eloquently writes, memory is “itself a creative writer.” See Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York, 2009), 103.

with African American history, to “embrace a faulty memory as a kind of reality, even in the face of a confirmable and objective truth.” (Two years after I wrote the gun-at-the-neck scene, I located the copilot, in his late eighties, who—I won’t give away here what I found out—generously helped me make sense of that flashbulb memory.)¹²

Reading Holloway, I also came upon a sentence that offered a possible resolution to the problem of writing about childhood emotions. At a family reunion in Maryland, white hotel personnel had called the police on Holloway and his siblings and cousins, who were socializing late into the evening around the hotel pool, accusing the Black youths of trespassing. Describing the scene before the police arrived, Holloway, who was a young teen at the time, writes, “I was having a good time, I think.” I liked the elegant way that Holloway-the-historian honestly evaluated his memory of a past sentiment. Researching the hijacking, I saw that the distress of some of the grown-ups around me had originated from their own childhoods. Some of my fellow hostages were children during the Holocaust, and some of my captors were children during the 1948 war, when their families lost homes in Palestine. On the plane, my sister and I felt sorry for everyone. Much of the time, though, the more personal emotions I harbored as a hostage felt wholly inaccessible to my adult self. Twenty years after we got home, my sister told an interviewer, “It was so intense that I think you really do shut down, emotionally shut down when it’s just so overwhelming.” There were “a lot of guns around,” she said, and “from time to time somebody would say something about dying or being killed,” either a hostage or a commando. In the face of that, we both “withdrew.”¹³

“Memory is notoriously difficult to study, childhood memory doubly so,” writes Clifton Crais, who found that he could recall almost nothing of the New Orleans childhood in which his mother tried to kill herself and him. In *History Lessons: A Memoir of Madness, Memory, and the Brain*, Crais dubs himself “a detective investigating my self,” applying his professional training as a historian to this mission. The failure of that mission leads Crais to conclude that his unrecoverable memory stems, in part, from an absence of family stories. His mother’s memory, he writes, seemed “to unravel around the time of my birth and childhood.” Again, even though my own story was very different, I found a parallel in my family’s silence after my sister and I returned home. Indeed, I had wanted nothing different. When classmates asked about the hijacking I said little more than that it was hot, that we ate a lot of hard-boiled eggs, and that the airplane bathrooms were horrible. In my diary that first week back home, I wrote, “I love school! Everything’s great!” Like the adults in my life, I too looked resolutely forward.¹⁴

When it came to banishing feelings, the best-selling graphic memoir of cartoonist Alison Bechdel had something to teach a historian. In *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Bechdel confronts her father’s death while she was in college, a likely suicide, and along the way confronts her father’s queerness and her own. For years afterward, Bechdel writes,

12 Philip J. Deloria, “Thinking about Self in a Family Way,” Roundtable: Self and Subject, *Journal of American History* 89.1 (2002): 25–29, here 26–27; Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins* (New York, 1969); Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America since 1940* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2013), 9. Holloway decided to embrace faulty memory because his subjects had been “systematically denied a space in the official archive in the first place” (8). For additional reflections on this point, see Gordon-Reed, *Juneteenth*, 37–38; Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, 2007), 16; Carla L. Peterson, *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City* (New Haven, CT, 2011), 19–20. On flashbulb memories, see Oliver Sacks, “The Fallibility of Memory,” in *The River of Consciousness* (New York, 2017), 101–22; and on “emotional memories,” including flashbulb memories, see Daniel L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory* (New York, 1996), 192–217.

13 Holloway, *Jim Crow Wisdom*, 160. Telephone interview by Jeffrey Simon, March 21, 1992, Brooklyn, New York. I thank Simon for access to this tape.

14 Clifton Crais, *History Lessons: A Memoir of Madness, Memory, and the Brain* (New York, 2014), 18, 19, 44–45.

she would talk about her father's death "in a flat, matter-of-fact tone, eager to detect in my listener the flinch of grief that eluded me." During my research, I asked friends for their recollections of how I had spoken of the hijacking—just as historians collect evidence from contemporaries to tell a fuller story about a historical actor in the past, I interviewed my own contemporaries to learn more about myself in the past. Many described my demeanor as detached and nonchalant, omitting, said one, "how you felt." Most, I learned, had been confounded by my presentation of such a harrowing experience as insignificant. My high school sweetheart told me that, as a result, he put the hijacking into the same category as other "cool and sophisticated" things about me, like that my father was a modern dancer and that I had a "groovy" older sister. One series of images in *Fun Home* shows Bechdel relating her father's demise to a skeptical listener while smiling, then laughing, then laughing harder, and another old friend remembered that when I talked about the hijacking, "You told it as a funny story." When Bechdel asks why her listener does not believe that her father has just died, he says, "Uh ... lemme see. Because you're *laughing*?"¹⁵

The late David Carr, who researched his misremembered and unre-membered years of alcohol and drug addiction using his skills as an investigative reporter, put it this way: "People remember what they can live with more often than how they lived." That discovery, on Carr's part, helped explain the underlying source of my too-cold first draft. I had formed my memories of the hijacking by forgetting some of what was unbearable and crafting the rest into stories that I could comfortably tell myself. Those stories also needed to be manageable for my friends and—most important—tolerable for my parents. As for the unbearable parts that I was unable to erase from consciousness, I did my best not to think about them and refused to talk about them. Writing as a historian about myself as a child, then, would also mean coming to grips with my feelings as a grown-up writing about that child, and it was turning out to be a far more intricate dance than I had imagined.¹⁶

Revising the manuscript, it was time to dance with the first person singular. John Clive took the title of his essay "The Most Disgusting of Pronouns" from the eighteenth-century English historian Edward Gibbon. Contrary to the title, though, Clive endorses the use of "autobiographical intrusion" as he surveys the ways in which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers "brought themselves explicitly into their histories." Thomas Carlyle, writes Clive, "takes the reader into his workshop, where he lets him not only watch but participate in the historian's struggle with his sources, and in the resulting frustrations, defeats, and triumphs." Alexis de Tocqueville, moreover, brings his "encounters with archival sources" to readers in a way that "enhances the dramatic quality of his account" in prose, writes Clive, "*charged with deep and genuine emotion*" (emphasis emphatically mine). My task was to follow suit, to warm up my chilly manuscript.¹⁷

- 15 Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (New York, 2006), 45, 227.
- 16 David Carr, *The Night of the Gun* (New York, 2008), 12. On trauma and forgetting, see Schacter, *Searching for Memory*, 233–36, 242–47.
- 17 John Clive, "The Most Disgusting of Pronouns," in *Not by Fact Alone: Essays on the Writing and Reading of History* (New York, 1989), 25–33, here 26, 29, 30. See also John Kaag, "Putting the 'I' in Biography: John Kaag on Biography-Memoir Hybrids and the Myth of Objectivity," *Literary Hub* (March 22, 2017).

For my first foray bringing readers into my workshop, I chose the Red Cross archives in Geneva, where I had unexpectedly come upon the telegram from my father. My historian-husband, Bruce Dorsey, who was with me in the archives that day, reminded me to write not only about unearthing the telegram but also about the emotion that had accompanied the find. For a contemporary model, I turned to Daniel Mendelsohn, a classicist by training, who set out to uncover how exactly six relatives had perished in the Holocaust. In *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*, Mendelsohn keeps his readers close by as he conducts his research, all the way through to dead ends—in one instance, he repeats the sentence fragment “Impossible to know” four times in the space of ten lines. Along with letting readers in on the process of research, Mendelsohn also lets us in on his feelings, describing, for example, helplessness (when elderly folks do not remember enough) or anger at himself (for asking the wrong questions). In the Red Cross archives, I unfurled a five-foot-long sheet of paper filled with relatives’ messages to the hostages. My father had wrapped his anxiety in a breezy tone. (“Was he thinking of never getting you back?” my stepmother told me decades later. “Well, yes. Killed and never coming back? Oh, yes.”) My father’s words, rendered in all lower case with no punctuation, came near the bottom of the lengthy sheet, speaking for himself and my stepmother: “parents request children not be alarmed mom and dad thinking of you rooms ready visited both schools great love from us and your friends.”¹⁸

When I traveled to Geneva, I had just published a book about personal responses to the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, an endeavor that steeped me in records of emotion. Soldiers in the Black Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts regiment found news of the assassination “too overwhelming, too lamentable, too distressing” to absorb. A white woman described “frantic grief,” and a Black woman called the tidings “an electric shock to my soul.” Rejecting such effusive nineteenth-century language for myself, I returned to Hazel Carby. Reading through her father’s Colonial Office file had proven a wrenching experience for her, and I spent a long time pondering a sentence from that scene. In retreat in the archive’s cafeteria, Carby writes, “My cheeks were wet, tears for a lost girl,” a construction that contained a modicum of distance from the intimate act of weeping. In my own manuscript I wrote, “In the archive in Switzerland, unexpected tears come to my eyes.”¹⁹

That may have sufficed for finding the telegram from my father, but I had another, far more emotional scene to write: my return to the Intercontinental Hotel in Amman, Jordan, where many of the hostages, including my sister and me, had been released. It was just inside the lobby, seated at the registration desk, that the flashback came on, prompting me to rest my head in my arms for a long time in an effort to subdue the undertow of hallucinations. Again, my husband was with me, and again he encouraged me to let my readers in on the emotion he had witnessed. Now I considered Mendelsohn’s description of his reaction to a heartrending discovery about his murdered relatives:

18 Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* (New York, 2006), 55, 187, 198.

19 Telegram in “Messages pour les otages transmis par la Croix-Rouge américaine,” September 11, 1970, B AG 226-004.06, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, Switzerland. For responses to Lincoln’s assassination, see John Ritchie journal, April 23, 1865, Records of the Fifty-Fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiments, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; Sarah Browne to Albert Browne, Salem, Mass., April 20, 1865, Browne Family Papers, Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA; Mattie J. Jackson, *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* (Lawrence, MA, 1866), in *Six Women’s Slave Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York, 1988), 30; and see Hodes, *Mourning Lincoln*, 56, 47. Carby, *Imperial Intimacies*, 239.

"I simply sank down and squatted there in the dust of the street and started to cry." Even as I contemplated the gendered consequences of men, as opposed to women, describing themselves in tears, I admired Mendelsohn's straightforward language. In the end, though, it was a single word in Susan Faludi's memoir that allowed me to navigate the space between Carby's evocative, if more remote, prose and Mendelsohn's candid portrait of grief. In her memoir, *In the Darkroom*, Faludi, a writer and journalist, explores the life of her father, an "imperious patriarch" who transitioned to become a woman late in life. In one remarkable chapter, Faludi convinces her dismissive father to take her to the apartment building where, as a young boy, he hid during the German occupation of Budapest. The scene ends with a terrific fight, which Faludi inadvertently caught on her tape recorder. "My father was shouting," she writes. "I was, too, and also crying." There was the word that permitted just the right amount of space between me, the grown-up historian, and the twelve-year-old girl who kept her emotions tightly in check the whole week in the desert and for so long afterward ("no crying, no tears, ready to go," my stepmother said, recalling my sister and me upon our arrival at Kennedy Airport in New York). In the passage where I describe my delirium at the Amman hotel, I now wrote, "Also I am crying."²⁰

The passages I read that evening at Performance Space in New York City described the weather on the morning my sister and I boarded the plane in Tel Aviv and the interior of the Boeing 707 that we did not know would become our home for six days and six nights. I described how the hijacking began, and I described the plane's landing on a make-shift runway in a desert at dusk. I mentioned the kind Palestinian doctor who asked if anyone needed medical attention, and I mentioned the expressionless commandos wiring our aircraft with dynamite. But I was barely there. When I returned to the manuscript, I understood that this was going to be a book about how we remember the past and why we forget some of the things that happen to us as children. I returned to find my emotions, both in the desert and in the archives.

Back when I was writing the first draft, my husband asked me, "What do you want your readers to learn about you, in the course of reading this book?" My answer was immediate. "Nothing," I said, and we both laughed. I was half-joking, of course, but only half. Readers of autobiography, according to the late philosopher Lynd Forguason, should "learn from what the autobiographer has learned about himself" and "from what he has failed to learn." I was going to write as a memoirist, but I would always be a historian. Just as piecing together the lives of our historical actors is necessarily an imperfect endeavor, so too would be the endeavor of piecing together my own past. Writing from a child's memory, or—to put it in first person—writing from my own memory

20 Mendelsohn, *The Lost*, 477. Susan Faludi, *In the Darkroom* (New York, 2017), 8, 144. For two memoirs that write freely about crying, see Ava Chin, *Eating Wildly: Foraging for Life, Love and the Perfect Meal* (New York, 2014) and Michelle Zauner, *Crying in H Mart* (New York, 2022).

as a child, in a way that evokes both the emotions of that child and my emotions as a historian writing about that child, would be unlike anything I had ever done. The book would be a memoir, but it would be a historian's memoir, and it would be a struggle. This, I understood, was going to be my adventure.²¹

21 Lynd Forguison, "Autobiography as History," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 49.2 (1979–80): 139–55, here 155.

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