A Year of Two Summers

Shaun Levin
A Year of Two Summers

Abstract
1978 was a year of two summers. A summer of departure and a summer of arrival. I spent the first summer at Habonim camp in a green canvas tent on a site marked by hammocks and benches made by Joburg boys. Big-city boys who weren't afraid to be caught smoking in their tents after lights-out. Boys proud to stand before the mirror at dawn with shaving-cream on their cheeks. In their shiny Adidas shorts and naked backs. Boys who had their own versions to the songs we sang and they shouted them out in competition.

This journal article is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol20/iss2/10
SHAUN LEVIN

A Year of Two Summers

It was a good place to come from in that it was a good place to leave.

Robert Mapplethorpe

I

1978 was a year of two summers. A summer of departure and a summer of arrival.

I spent the first summer at Habonim camp in a green canvas tent on a site marked by hammocks and benches made by Joburg boys. Big-city boys who weren’t afraid to be caught smoking in their tents after lights-out. Boys proud to stand before the mirror at dawn with shaving-cream on their cheeks. In their shiny Adidas shorts and naked backs. Boys who had their own versions to the songs we sang and they shouted them out in competition.

At the start of the second summer the employment agency sent us to pick carobs in chilled before-sunrise humidity and I had no idea where I was. They drove us out to the carob groves on the open back of a truck. I remember Nestor’s chest and small brown nipples when we sat down for lunch. His thighs as thick as entire bodies, covered in hair blended by an Argentinian sun. We sawed off dead branches and dragged them across the dew-wet ground to the open trucks, until the calluses began to bleed and then seal up and harden. By then it was time to start school again.

During the first summer questions were shrugged aside and phone-calls glided from talk to hush to.

‘There’s nothing to say. Nothing is final yet.’

And I, unable to keep the news to myself, let everyone know we were about to leave. So proud to be amongst the departing few. Special at last. I wanted my name to be called out at the closing ceremony at summer camp. They ordered those going on aliyah to come and stand in a line before everyone. Coming to the centre, my socks got caught in the barbed-wire surrounding the bonfire. And then, once I’d unhooked myself I stood with the other to-be new immigrants, SHALOM inscribed in fire behind us, singing Hatikvah. Kohollodbalevav pe heh ni hih ma. (It’s hard to imagine a time when I didn’t know the meaning of those words.)

And the second summer dominated by noise and uncertainty. Along the road from the beach to the Canada House Absorption Centre rows of brown buildings exuding music surprising in its familiarity. Stevie Wonder. He’s a real nowhere man. Rod Stewart. I am sailing. I am sailing.
That year I learnt the real words to *Hatikvah*. As long as inside the heart, etc.

By the end of the first summer I had tasted desire in the dryness and numbness on the inside of my mouth. I had swallowed the after-rugby sweat from Christopher’s body in the locker-room when Peter said to him: ‘Haven’t you heard of deodorant, man?’ And back in the classroom Budgie caned me for forgetting my Afrikaans textbook at home. *Die Lewende Taal*. I bent over the front desk my eyes seeing only David Walker’s who told me I was crying when the T-rule whacked against my backside. Mr Lategan, mouth as puckered as a beak, takes a bunch of *vrôt* grapes from his briefcase, holds them up to the class, and reminds us how important it is to eat fresh fruit and bath twice a day. Healthy living.

At home they said to me: Say goodbye to Grace, and I shook her hand, soft, almost melting. Almost white from washing dishes: Bye, Grace. She stood at the top of the stairs, arms folded over her chest, and I cannot conjure up a memory of her eyes. I need to know now: Did she cry to see me go. (When I think Grace might be dead now I stop myself from imagining any journey back home.) ‘Bye-bye, baas.’ Bye-bye. My father turned to her (their day of birth only four days apart): ‘Now, Gracie, don’t forget to scrub the walls before the new baas moves in.’ ‘Yes, baas,’ she says.

Where were they taking me?

And by the end of the second summer I had tasted the sweetness of carob and fresh *halva*, and turned my eyes from what they saw. In San Francisco Steve’s apartment on the eighth floor of the absorption centre, Jean-Paul from Morocco taught us to dance like John Travolta. *Le fevre de samedi soir*. Night fever, night fever.

There was the summer when milk came in bottles to your doorstep and you could press your thumb into the aluminium top and lick cream from its underside. Put your ear to the bowl and hear the milk snap, crackle and pop. And the summer when we crossed the dunes and shrubs (not a *veld* anymore, but a desert) to get to the shops for milk in plastic sachets that snuggled into blue plastic jugs. Snip off the corner to pour the milk onto sugarless cornflakes. No more Kellogg’s. No more Nestlé. No more liquorice allsorts from Beacon Sweets.

There was the summer of fresh fruit and vegetables off the back of Mr Koopoo’s van. And his daughter Amshi who stepped down from the passenger compartment to carry bags of mango and fresh pineapple into the house. Her long hair reaching down to her hips and the golden ring in her nose. Or not. Maybe not even mangoes and pineapples. And then a summer of rows upon rows of vegetables piled on the cement ground at the open market in Migdal (née Majdal, before the Palestinians got trucked out to Gaza) and the old woman with the black woollen hat and her bare-footed daughter in a red T-shirt shouting, tomatoes, tomatoes, *agvaniot*, three liras a kilo. Cheap, cheap, *be’zil ha’zol*. 
And there was the summer with the thatched-roof house with the white-washed walls in Cape St. Francis. When the mullet ran in shoals like sunlight on water close to the shore and we pumped for blood-worms at low-tide. That summer the hair began to sprout on my inner thighs and I shaved it off with my father’s razor. The beach stretched from the mouth of the Krom to the rock pools where the waves funnelled in and washed back out. And surfers in Hawaiian shorts and brown, golden, how-could-there-be-anything-so-beautiful skin. And the summer when the sea was a lake and the blue and white flag said: Come in. Swim as much as you like. There are no waves here. The beach littered with tar and plastic bags and the sound of beach-bats. I shaved my legs that summer and locked myself in the bathroom to do push-ups and masturbate. And the life-savers, dark and hirsute, tight swimming trunks hugging their. Laughing, taunting. Poor little white boy with white white skin. Hey, kotej. They yell out: Ow arr yu? Miz Amerika. Big tzitzi, hey?

There was the summer when the neighbour was a witch with a loquat tree in her backyard. From the pool in our garden we’d throw soft fruit and loquat pips at her kitchen window. Nobody dared approach the winding stairs to her front door. I’d rather have stolen fire-crackers from the bubble-and-squeak sweet shop than chance her evil spell. And I did. I did steal. On Guy Fawkes Day. David, Michael and Eytan dared me to and I filled my pockets. Like an angel. And the summer when the neighbour was a 19-year old woman from Oklahoma who sucked my cock for hours until I came in her mouth. There was another neighbour, too. A young Indian girl and her family from Bombay. Curry and cumin and cardamom ghosted out of their flat and filled the stairwell up to the eighth floor. Coconut ice-cream on her birthday and a three-layered cake of vanilla sponge perfumed with rose water. And she danced for us. Enchanted, confused, lost new immigrants. Hands turning and winding to twanging music. And she said, she said, they all said she was Jewish. Jewish? You mean like us Jewish or was there some other kind of Jewish, too? No, all the same Jewish. All the same. We’re all the same. All of us. Jewish.

But no. Grampa says: They’re hewers of wood and drawers of water. Just look in the Bible. Everyone’s got his place in this grand enterprise. This kingdom.

Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

I turned thirteen during the first summer. They were both hot and saturated by clouds of humidity, leaving no room for that cold season in between. And I longed for a winter. I yearned for a time in which I’d be able to curl up and keep myself warm. By the fireplace of the first place on the mohair carpet. There was no need for fire in this new place, this second place, it’s sun so violent the sky had lost its colour. And then by December, my birthday, the second summer was long over, and the present kept tucking everything under the mirrored surface of memory.
II

It all takes place inside. I take Grace Masakele’s hand and we walk through its chambers. Look, Grace, look.

Africa is green. Luscious wet bright green with winds and wide open sunflower fields. Travelling up to the Orange Free State I gaze out the back window at crowds of round black circles in yellow bonnets. Smiling. The car heading northwards as the faces follow us. We’re on our way to say goodbye to family. We stop off in Aliwal North, my father’s place of birth, and drive around until he says they must have taken down the house he grew up in. It’s still cold outside and we swim in the sulphur baths, my father my brother and I, my vaccination for our visit to Lesotho still hurting my shoulder. Later, we sat outside on a bench eating Simba cheese and onion chips.

In Bloemfontein we played with cousins I’d never met before. My newly-found-soon-to-be-lost cousins who took us fishing at the dam and braaied what we caught. In the evening we played tok-tokkie along the street until a neighbour chased us home with his rifle pointing at us.

‘I’ll call the blerry police, verstaan? jou bliksem.’ He talks to our parents, his voice carrying all the way to under the beds. ‘Tell your children to pas op, hey. This place is full of kaffirs. I’m not taking any chances.’

We visited Auntie Naomi that spring. I went into their bedroom where Uncle Max had reached out his hand to turn off his reading lamp and died of a heart attack.

‘Just like that. Gone.’

And then we drove back to Port Elizabeth. Or did we go by train. Could we have flown. The journey home has vanished. Another black hole of memory. Come, fill these holes with stories and imaginings. But they’re unfillable. They’re empty and waiting. Constantly. And when I want to give them a name I say: Pain. Or: Nothingness.

At home my parents spent their nights packing our house into shipping crates. Towards the end all that remained were beds and some paintings. The paintings would travel with us and the beds would be given to the servants. Grace would take my parents’ double bed and a single bed; Johnson would take a single bed from the guest-room. He’d move it to his small room in Uncle Nathan’s backyard (being a Rhodesian, Johnson couldn’t live in New Brighton, the Xhosa location). Who would Johnson invite to sleep over in his room. Who would follow him while he weeded the lawn on his haunches in his faded blue overall. The tight curls on his brown skin visible through the missing buttons as he fills the bucket with weeds and chases a little boy around the garden with his pruning shares and gardening fork, laughing.

Grace had one or two children. She’d had others, but they’d died over the years.

‘Grace just had another baby,’ someone would say.

I try to remember: What did she look like when she was pregnant. Again:
Nothingness. But this: She was warm and let me be close to her body. She let me watch and help her cook and do the dishes. She let me eat from her plate with my fingers and put my head on her. On her soft jasmine skin. She let me eat from her mngqusho and her khubu mielies. She'd listen to me swear, kunya, and laugh and say, ai-yee, baas, don't let the masta hear you.

Over the years I'd hear how Thursday or Mary or Goodenough were getting along, surprised at how similar their lives were to mine. And then they'd be dead. They always died.

'Grace just had another baby.'

Her son Nelson came to our house from time to time. (He died last year.) I'd go to Grace's room behind the kitchen and sit on her bed. A mountain of thick mattresses piled high to keep her safe from the tokolosh. The smell of hair-oil and perfume and beef scorched crisp dark brown and sweet creamy coffee in a tin cup. A smell so kind and inviting, holding out its hand and saying: Stay with me.

Nelson didn't move from his mother's room, the air warm and thick with bittersweet vapours, and his mother in the house on her knees scrubbing floors. She didn't want him in the house. She didn't want her son to see her not his mother, but a mother bringing up someone else's children, holding little white babies who'd look into her eyes and think: You're my mother.

'He won't go to school, madam,' Grace told my mother. Nelson refused to wear his school uniform and do his homework. He insisted on running around with those good-for-nothing tsotsies.

'She's going to have to do something about him,' my father says. 'He can't sit around here all day. What if the police check up? Didn't we pay for that school uniform and his books?'

'I'm telling you, they're just bloody lazy,' grampa says.

I wanted to take Nelson into the valley across the road where the freighttrains went back and forth between the coal-mines in the Kalahari and the harbour at the foot of the hill. The same valley where Michael and I would go hunting for grass snakes under the rocks.

The last two months of summer were spent in a house with only beds to sleep on, a leather sofa in front of the TV and four paintings. In one, four field-hands crossing a field of stubble with scythes, bearing sheaths of wheat on their shoulders, their brown skin dark against the cornfield and the red and purple brush-strokes of early morning sky. In another, Ndebele blues and greens on the outskirts of the village. A mother and a daughter are seated, leaning against a willow tree on the banks of a river. The daughter rests between her mother's legs. The mother plaits her daughter's hair and looks out across the river, at us. The daughter's eyes are closed, basking in the soothing, tender pull on her skull. The dog lies beside them, asleep in the warm sun.

These two pictures flanking the fireplace. The other two in the dining-room above the big round table where my mother would light Shabbes candles and I'd refuse to wear a yarmulkeh.
'Must you?' my father would say. 'Put it on. For me.'
And I would. And we'd watch my mother pray over the candles like a little girl playing peek-a-boo, and then listen to my father say kiddush over the bread and wine. And my mother would ring the silver bell and Grace would bring in the first course and set the pot of soup on a large coaster on the sideboard that had been padded and boxed and sent off to await for our arrival.

Only a few friends came to see us off at the airport. No need, no need, no need to bother. Next year in Jerusalem. Please God, we'll all be together soon. My father removes his necklace with the big silver Magen David and places it around my uncle’s neck. He says: You’ll bring it with you to the Promised Land when you come. (Ten years we waited. Ten years we waited for any sign of family.) There were tears and hugging and we’ll stay in touch, and you must remember to write. At least once a week. See you soon. Have a good time.

We boarded the plane and my father ordered a whisky.

What now?
The plane begins to move. What was I thinking? How do you think about something you haven’t the words for? How can you think about leaving your home when you don’t know what it means? How can you think about a new country, a new house, new words, when you have never experienced anything vaguely similar? So you grapple with what you have and translate it into what you see. You gradually stop thinking about the transition. You can’t be in two places at the same time. And the feelings that once looked for words begin to change their shape and take on the form of the words that are available.

The runway is speeding below us and the sound of the engine grows louder and more hollow. And then the plane is lifting off the ground, and there’s no more noise from the outside. The drone of the engine is swallowed up by the vastness around it. Inside there’s just a low hum and a lightness. We’ll be there in a matter of hours and soon it will be summer again.

Barren land and khaki bushes along the highway. Glaring open spaces of yellow sand and towns made of blocks of flats. At a roadside café, on our way to the south of the country, we stop for food. Food that until then had been exotic. Humous and pitta bread, olives and cucumbers with green chillies pickled in brine. Soon to be our new daily bread. And all the signs and every sound in letters and tongues that were once confined to shul and Hebrew classes. This was going to be the summer of difference. A summer when men became beautiful. The summer when envy could barely distinguish itself from desire. The summer when everything would change.