



**Paul Brodowsky**

**Fathers**

Novel

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Sample translation by Daniel Bowles

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Did the term *transference* mean anything to me? Peter's best friend asks me on the walk after Peter's burial. Judith's father Peter died a week ago. On the day following the burial, we head to the grave again, this hole in the ground into which Peter was lowered in a coffin the day prior and which is now already covered over with dirt. The trees are still bare and leafless against the February sky, no birds in their branches, just a smattering of crows nestling farther back in the cemetery. As Judith, Milan, Anouk, and I stand at the grave, taking in the sight of this heap of earth with a few flowers on top, a recurrent squeaking or shrieking is suddenly audible, the almost metallic-sounding calls of a bird unknown to me. Then I realize that the sound is coming from beyond the graveyard wall. Above it, I see catenary wires from the switchyard and railbed of L.'s main train station. Locomotives and train cars are hidden from view by the high wall. There is something comforting about the fact that this wintry barren cemetery directly abuts rail lines, the thought that trains here run to France and Italy. Instead of a childlike belief in vertically oriented transcendence, then, a kind of pale shadow of it: a horizontal connection with expansiveness, with the landscapes of the South. In lieu of nearness to a personalized god: the abstract beauty of depersonalized technology, of potential movement, of stretches of track continuing for thousands of kilometers in all different directions.

Peter died alone. Because of his cancer, he is treated as an in-patient and then, despite comprehensive hygienic measures, contracts COVID-19 during his hospital stay. The attending physician cuts off his chemotherapy and transfers him to the COVID ward. There he is treated

exclusively by nursing staff in full-body protective suits who are also wearing gloves, masks, and visors; the nurses mostly stop in the doorway and communicate by shouting. They keep asking: *Do you need something more for the pain?* On several occasions he hears the line *This is no walk in the parka*. Peter's only regular line to the outside world during his ten days on the COVID ward are the phone calls with Judith. Then, last Friday, Judith calls me from work. Right away I can tell from her voice that something is wrong.

– My father is dying.

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– I haven't been able to get ahold of him at the hospital all morning. Just now, a doctor on the ward answered. She said he hasn't been responsive since this morning. That he probably only has hours to live. He's getting morphine now. I'm coming home and taking the next train.

Three hours later, Judith calls me from the train. While she's still talking, my own tears start to flow. Sitting at the kitchen table across from me, Anouk looks at me in disbelief, then she understands what's happening and runs out of the kitchen crying.

– I'm sick of this! she shouts. Everything is so pointless!

One of my first thoughts is that I now not only have to be a father for the children, but would also like, to the extent it's even possible, to be a grandpa, or a surrogate grandpa, to have the same emotional generosity, the equanimity, the unceasing desire to have a good time with them. Since Judith wants to tell Milan herself, I go to the living room and hand him my phone. Then I return to the hallway and put my arms around Anouk, who's still crying, and try to comfort her.

– If Grandpa isn't alive, I don't want to be alive anymore either!

The usual lines I use to soothe her, *Everything will be okay* or *Don't worry*, come off as wholly out of place. I tell her it's okay to be sad, to cry, that I'm there for her, that Mama is there for her. We hug for a while longer and let the tears flow. I go to the living room to check on Milan. He's put the phone down on the table and is crying silently to himself. I wrap my arms around him, too. After a half an hour, Milan continues with his remote schoolwork, I read to Anouk, we somehow pass the afternoon and evening, I make dinner for the kids, put them to bed, and lie with them until they've fallen asleep. A while later, I call Judith from the kitchen. She tells me she took a lot of pictures at the hospital. When she arrives at Peter's bedside three hours after his death, he is already lying, like all those who've died from COVID, in a black plastic bag that the nurses have not yet sealed only at her request. She spends an hour there with her father. When she saw his

body, she says, she understood why he was unable to live any longer. He'd been so incredibly skinny; he simply could no longer survive in that body. Judith seems pretty composed, at the moment much less emotional than I, who have largely repressed the thought of Peter throughout the afternoon and evening and spent an almost normal lockdown afternoon with the kids. Over the course of the call, it occurs to me that I'm losing a sort of surrogate father with Peter, a role model, while my own father had for decades mostly served as an anti-role model, as a seek-and-find ex negativo, as the very person you wouldn't want to become, though who as a result points you into a void, into empty space, to a blank page, horror vacui, which is why there is a long line of surrogate or chosen fathers in my life, beginning with Lovis, who like Till represents more a kind of chosen older brother, then an author and editor friend twelve years my senior, and for a time during my studies one of my professors. These surrogate role-model figures each only carry out aspects of a role-model function but are still important markers when constructing an image of the self. The final figure in this chain, for now, is Peter, as I now realize: Peter, who is no longer in the world. With Peter I share a lot more values than I do with my own biological father, a lot more ideas of what a successful life could be, but also everyday things like how to decorate rooms, how to dress, what makes a good book, intense conversations—this man who was not even present in my everyday life is suddenly not only not present, but inaccessible for all time, forever absent, lost, swallowed up, suddenly pulverized, with a finality that makes the thought of your own mortality virulent, that anticipates your own dying. No more handing off the kids at a train platform in Nuremberg, Bamberg, or Weissenfels, halfway between Berlin and L., in the knowledge that the kids are in the best hands with Peter, or with Inge and Peter. No further possibility of meeting up with Peter, no more of Peter's stays with us in Berlin where in his reticence he integrates himself into our everyday life like an older, agreeable housemate, no encounters, no text messages, no conversations.

The following Wednesday, I take the kids to L. to attend the burial with them and Judith, and to support their mother in making the final arrangements. And so now I'm walking through a wood near Inge's and Peter's house with Peter's best and nearly only friend, together with a small circle of mourners, family and close friends, led by Milan, who has walked this route countless times over the years with his grandpa. I'm talking with Peter's best friend about absent fathers, Germany as a post-Nazi social space, about subcutaneously passing on modes of behavior and conduct, Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, and the concept of *Übertragung*, which at first makes me

think of postterm pregnancy, also *Übertragung*, and of colloquial meanings of the same word, like the broadcast—*Übertragung*—of the discussion on the radio, or of school-related areas, *Übertragungsleistungen*, meaning the application of acquired abilities and knowledge—patterns of thought, ganglia, soil corrosion—to new contexts. Did the term *Übertragung*—*transference*—mean anything to me? asks Peter’s friend, who studied pedagogy with him in the Sixties and then again later psychology, that concept being one of the few from the arsenal of psychoanalytic terms he still finds really productive. On the first day of his seminar, he once explained to the group of thirty students sitting before him what he intended to teach over the course of the semester, what texts they would read, what terms they would learn, and then a student he had never met before stood up, evidently upset, and said she wasn’t going to put up with this anymore.

– I’m not going to put up with this anymore, she said, says Peter’s friend, and then she grabbed her things and left the seminar room.

Months later, the same student came to his office hours, apologized for the incident, and said at that moment she had only been able to see her father in him. Transference, Peter’s friend explains, is in fact always an *error in time*, a *reaction inappropriate to the circumstances and overly strong in emotions*.

A few days later, Milan yells at me because Judith and I won’t let him look up a new *Star Wars* Lego set on my computer after he received a package with just such a Lego set two days earlier; he unpacked the set, played with it for two hours, and needs new Legos already without having even thoroughly attended to the ones he has. I don’t like the consumerism of it, or that this search for the next set means more screen time either, an acquiescence to the almost infinite consumerist potential of the Internet, quite apart from a ruefully low-simmering aversion within me to these space warfare simulations predicated on machismo, and the fact that I, via my computer terminal and the process of ordering I have to undertake for Milan, become an accessory to an action that is, for all these categorical thoughts, in fact abhorrent to me. Milan insists, however, that he may do whatever he wants with the savings from his allowance. I try to explain to him why I would prefer not to hand over my computer for that right now, instead of just unequivocally ruling out that option, but Milan immediately screams at me, hurls ugly insults, is no longer reachable by any line of reasoning. What I would actually prefer is to have set out a half hour ago for the office apartment to work on my novel project. At the same time, I would love nothing more than to stay home so that I don’t have to make my way into this mineshaft of a text anymore today,

these craggy mountains, into this sprawling atlas of my inner topography, this continent full of blank or, more accurately, black spots that now, after weeks of not writing because of the turmoil around Peter's illness and death, I both want and simultaneously do not want to take up again; the only thing keeping me from leaving for the office apartment is Judith's return home, delayed for understandable reasons, so that she can take over looking after the kids. I remain calm with Milan, although inside I am seething with rage because I hate being yelled at like this, and respond to his screaming, to these moments of infantile verbal force, with clinical reason, mature rationality, fully aware that I am failing as a father, which, however, does not cause me to abandon my rigid denial of his wish, which only makes him more irate, as it does me in a kind of mirroring, even if I do not yield to the impulse to yell back. After this day of remote-school supervision with its attendant spirals of frustration and periods of catharsis, there is no way with my exhaustion, but particularly with all my unreleased counter-rage, that I will be able to write. This thought arrives suddenly and takes on a life of its own, becoming a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy; I imagine myself hitting Milan, *bloody mass*, as it is called in Theweleit, *empty square*, which of course in reality I would never want to do, never would do; at the same time I hate myself for this violent image, which in my mind affects not only Milan, but also me, myself. Judith comes home, I pack up my computer, drive to the office apartment, after a good hour give up on my plan of somehow making any headway with the novel project, head home—the kids are asleep, Judith peeks out of the kitchen astonished, asks what's wrong, I say I can't write but don't want to talk about it, tomorrow is a new day, I couldn't break out of the spiral today—brush my teeth, get in bed, and think about verbs of obliteration: to crush, to pulverize, to liquidate, to annihilate, to nihilate, to null, sleep.

On the phenomenon of transference, Freud writes: *The libido (entirely or in part) has found its way back into regression and has re-animated the infantile imagos.*<sup>1</sup> That pretty much summarizes exactly what is happening to me—Milan's aggression triggers a memory in me of my own powerlessness as a child in the face of my aggressive father. Instead of reacting confidently, I get caught in spirals of largely unexpressed destructive rage, from certain angles at least becoming that father I don't want to be. The protofascist ego claws its way to the top.

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, "XXVIII: The Dynamics of Transference," in *Collected Papers*, by Sigmund Freud, ed. James Strachey, trans. Joan Riviere, vol. 2 (New York: Basic Books, 1959), 315.