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Not Optimistic

וְהָיָה בְּלִבִּי כְּאֵשׁ בְּעֵרְתָּ עֵצָר בְּעֵצְמֹתַי¹

There is a fire in my heart-
Shut up in my bones -
Says the prophet Jeremiah -

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I am on fire -I say

My world is burning
My country is fractured
My friends distanced
Myself isolated

There is a fire in my heart -
I feel it burn in my bones

Too much- Too much.
It's all too much.

Some days,
The fire is slower-

Almost ignorable

And then another climate report
Another shooting
Another war or failure of justice
Another attempt to take away my rights
Another moment of progress for progress's sake
Another child who has to rebuild their future in a new home once more-

¹ Jeremiah 20:9

And I am burning again -
Burning up hot --

Do you feel it?
- The exhaustion of burning?

What is there even left to give?

Running out of what can combust -

It would be so easy -
So simple to say -

I don't have to care-
I can squelch the fire

Shut out the world instead of letting her fires spark mine

I wish it was that easy-

But I am looking ahead at what will hopefully be a long life of mine

An enduring future for the generations I hope will come
- the generations I hope I will create

And my heart burns for them, too

Because I know what our burdens are

And I know how easy it seems for us choose the seemingly painless path

Nihilism could be our option -

Nothing matters - nothing hurts

But then I look at the world and I look at myself and see the way that my veins look like tree roots

And I see the way that children hug their friends tightly

And the way that people show up for each other

And how hearts break and get put back together again

And I know that the seemingly painless path isn't real - because the world isn't devoid of meaning

It is fighting for meaning *to be noticed*

Is that not what beauty is for? tears and pain? and love?

So there must be another way-

And the word optimism comes to my lips

And it falls

Because I am not optimistic -

Where is their room for optimism when there is fire in my bones?

Where is there room for optimism when all the evidence and data seems to point otherwise?

Optimism might simply be naive inaction -

Just sort of wishing that the fire will go out

Fires almost always sometimes do-

Maybe everything will be fine

Maybe it will all work out in the end

I want to be courageous -

I want to be like Jeremiah

Who felt that fire burning in his bones and

Felt his heart breaking

And went out into the world anyways

Who reached for something beyond his own comfort

Who wanted us all to be redeemed

Wherever

Whenever we are

I want to be bold -

And, as Aristotle reminds me -

Bold acts that derive merely from optimism are not themselves courageous.²

Aristotle wants something more from me

I want something more from us

I need something more -

I need hope

I *long* for hope

² Aristotle, as quoted by Jonathan Lear in *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, 112

I seek to be, what another prophet, Zecharia calls us

אֲסִירֵי הַתְּקוּהָה³

Captives of hope

Return to what makes you strong-

He says-

Return to your hope

And let it take over you -

Become captive to it

Oh to have the chain of hope -

Instead of those of fear and defeatism and anger

To be a captive to hope means to know the difference between hope and optimism -

To know that optimism is passive - hope is active-

It is our hope that gives us power

“An act of defiance”⁴

As Rabbi Zemel reminds us again and again

Jews do not despair

So the only way-

The only way forward is with hope

³ Zecharia 9:12

⁴ Rebecca Solnit, Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities, xi.

And so hope has been my project of this year
I have become a student of hope

And I join the Jewish people

Because hope is our project

Our major contribution to the human project

What have I learned of hope?

I re-read the story of Noah

Who sits in a boat as the world is ravaged around him

And when enough days passed

And he sent out a raven that never came back⁵

Noah did not despair

He did not know what the world he would step into would look like

But he *did* know that it would be on him to build it back

And he tried again -

This time with a dove⁶

An amazing act of hope

Or - an acknowledgement that hope is the only path towards life

⁵ Genesis 8:6-7

⁶ Genesis 8:10-11

What have I learned of hope?

I learned the story of the Last Crow Chief, Plenty Coups⁷

Who led his people as they moved to reservations

As they became captives on a small square of land

After the Buffalo disappeared

And the anticipated future, the future that could be imagined

-- would never happen

And so he goes to his people, and tells them this,

“[I dreamt] that our traditional way of life is coming to an end. ...There is nothing we can do to change that. ... we do not know what to hope for or what to aim for. Things are going to change in ways beyond which we can currently imagine. We certainly do know that we cannot face the future in the same way we have been doing.”⁸

He continues -

“We must do what we can to open our imaginations up to a radically different set of future possibilities.”⁹

He tells his people that

They shall get the good back¹⁰ -

He says, “something good will emerge even if it outstrips my present limited capacity for understanding what that good is”¹¹

That’s not optimism. That’s not being naive to the end of life surrounding him. That’s belief in hope as a way to live in the world.

⁷ Much of this section is inspired and informed by my own reading of Lear’s *Radical Hope*, and the historical research it led me to. Some passages are direct quotes from the book, as indicated.

⁸ Plenty Coups dream, as hypothesized by Lear, 92-93.

⁹ *Radical Hope*, 93.

¹⁰ *Radical Hope*, 94.

¹¹ *Radical Hope*, 94.

Something good will emerge.

Philosopher Jonathan Lear describes Plenty Coups' hope as radical,

“...What makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.”¹²

We do not know the world we are stepping into

What if we allowed ourselves to say that good will look different on the other side?

This is hope, Lear writes-

An understanding that the “goodness of the world transcends one’s limited and vulnerable attempt to understand it.”¹³

...no implication that one can glimpse what lies beyond the horizons of one’s historically situated understanding.”¹⁴

What have I learned of hope?

It is borne of uncertainty

I do not like uncertainty-

A lesson of this year, certainly

But that is what hope must be

Optimism is certainty it will work out

Pessimism is certainty - it won't work out

Hope situates itself in the uncertain space

¹² Radical Hope, 3.

¹³ Radical Hope, 103.

¹⁴ Radical Hope, 95.

But it is not without memory -

This uncertain space-

Rebecca Solnit, in her beautiful book, *Hope in the Dark* speaks about theologian Walter Bruggeman,

“Memory produces hope in the same way tha amnesia produces despair,” he writes.¹⁵

Solnit continues, “We can tell of a past that was nothing but defeats and cruelties and injustices, or of a past that was some lovely golden age now irretrievably lost, or we can tell a more complicated and accurate story, one that has room for the best and worst, for atrocities and liberations, for grief and jubilation.”¹⁶

Avishai Margalit calls those who have hope amidst great evil and tragedy *heroic* -¹⁷

To believe that evil power is limited and temporary is hard, indeed-

To believe that a moral community - committed to the truth of the past and the promise of a future of goodness

Is heroic, indeed -- to choose to tell the story

And then to choose to believe it doesn't have to be the story for someone else

This is hope -

embedded in memory

Embedded in others - in us -

In those of us that were captives to it -

It is all we have -

But we *have it*

The hope of a people scattered that still sing the same songs

¹⁵ Walter Bruggeman, as quoted by Rebecca Solnit, in *Hope in the Dark*, xix.

¹⁶ *Hope in the Dark*, xix.

¹⁷ Margalit discusses this in Chapter 5 (A Moral Witness) in the *Ethics of Memory*.

The hope of a people who built an ark and looked to the hope of doves

who imagined a freedom they could not taste¹⁸

who stepped into a sea

Who wandered and still walked towards a home

The hope of people who built homes and planted gardens wherever they went¹⁹

The hope of people who say, if the messiah comes, and you are planting a tree- ²⁰
Keep planting

This is the hope of 2,000 years not yet lost

The hope of people who keep showing up

You -Who keep trying

You -who keep walking forward in the darkness

The chain that link us -

It is the chain of hope -

On the edge of the abyss -

Where we have stood before

We step forward

Aflame and unafraid²¹

Bones on fire -

We stand on the uncertain ground

And with hope-

Walk forward.

¹⁸ See Sefer haChinuch, Mitzvah 7, 16 on the laws for eating the Pesach

¹⁹ Jeremiah 29:5

²⁰ Avot d'Rebbi Natan 31b

²¹ Amanda Gorman, The Hill We Climb