

The Crambo

Volume 1

Article 13

4-3-2018

Safety

Anonymous W.
Mills College, arwolf@mills.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/thecrambo>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

W., Anonymous (2018) "Safety," *The Crambo*: Vol. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/thecrambo/vol1/iss1/13>

This Creative Non-fiction is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Crambo by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

SAFETY

by Ariadne Wolf
Mills College

Everybody needs a safe place to get away.

The story, as it was told to me:

Israel is ours. God gave it to us and we earned it by surviving the Holocaust. The Arab people do not wish to give it to us because they are evil, they will harm us. The white people of this country cannot be trusted to protect us because they are racists and it is only the Jewish men who can be relied on to protect us, the Jewish women, from the threat that Brown men present.

They are the ones we require protection from. Any sacrifice to earn this safe place is worth it.

To claim otherwise was anathema.

I grew up expecting a knock on my door. My family kept cans of food we did not need in preparation for another genocide and we had closets and a cellar, and I expected to have to hide someday.

For years I was grateful to the reliable ugly walls of my synagogue, rising like Jonah's mythical whale to swallow me whole against my will. B'nai Shalom was my succor, and if it asked more of me than I wanted to give, well, perhaps the bargain was worth it. So I sat in the uncomfortable high-backed pews, trying not to squirm in the scratchy tights my mother insisted on, trying not to bat my mother's hand away when she yanked my shirt down over my seven-year-old tummy. Trying not to insist on self-determination. What does self-respect compare with survival?

While the endless services in Hebrew, a language I could not read, droned on for three hours-an eternity to a child-I read about our deaths in the backs of Siddurim, Jewish prayer books, during services at my synagogue.

Soldiers picked up a child my age by the ankles, and while she was still laughing they threw her headfirst into a wall and shattered her skull. Soldiers shot another child just for fun, just for a good time. Soldiers stole Anne Frank away and we know her name because she left a journal for us to find. I traced my way to these children through time and for years I was obsessed with stories from the war.

B'nai Shalom synagogue began in 1948 as Beth Israel synagogue in Pittsburg, an outgrowth military collaborations with San Francisco's Jewish Welfare Board to meet the needs of Jewish military personnel returning from World War Two. The founders accommodated the shifting nexus of the East Bay Jewish population and moved to Walnut Creek in 1964. The first full-time rabbi, Gordon Freeman, is the man I think of as my rabbi; darting, joyous, the man who burst through the doors on the holiest of holy days to preach to a group of conservative voters about global warming. A series of male cantors culminated in Cantor Dinkin, with whom I studied Torah for my Bat Mitzvah and who bragged to the congregation about me wanting to spend an extra ten minutes with him, in that way men do when a young teenage girl is awkward, and they think that means she is awkwardly flirting. One more betrayal. One more humiliation.

Spring, 1998. I color the Negev lavender, the color of the sky at dawn. The color of heaven.

My teacher Maya, who is from Israel or who has been to Israel or at any rate is Israel, comes to tell me what a good job I've done. I hug her because she is the mother I almost had.

Lavender like my grandmother, who has died. Lavender like the bathroom of my other grandmother, who has little money but has a bathroom made all from purple. Purple everything.

Yitzhak Rabin was to be the savior of Israel. Left-wing liberal who preached peace with the Muslim Palestinians, he was shot by a member of his own people. Yigal Amir was against the Oslo Accords because he could not see what my family did, what everyone I knew saw—that any peace, even a blood-spattered one, is better than none at all. Rabin died in 1996, and our hopes and prayers went out to him but we were all in mourning. A world away, a black shade dropped over our sky and we began to talk in hushed tones about what would happen now to the country that was supposed to be our paradise.

This is what I learn from Hebrew school: Israel was originally intended to be a colony of peace, a gathering place for all the world's great religions. That Israel was supposed to be a great Communist paradise.

There is no proof of this. There is no way to search for proof of this.

It is a wonderful story. I seize hold.

One day I will go there. To Israel. Where no one will humiliate me again.

1999. The entire Board is composed of white men. The Cantor and the Rabbi are both white men. Children notice these things. Adults know better than to mention them out loud.

I barely speak for years and there are reasons why. Uri Wilensky of The Huffington Post in 2016 that Jews are more often the victims of hate crimes than any other group in the U.S, according to the FBI. I was welcomed as a white person so long as I did not bring up that pesky Judaism. So long as I did not give any "real" white people a reason.

I was safe as a Jew and as a woman, so the story goes, so long as I did not mention feeling unsafe. Feeling afraid of the men in my life, white or Jewish, was unacceptable.

Spring, 1999. I lock my properly submissive, efficiently feminine Hebrew School teacher with the lace keepah, Jewish hair covering, permanently bobby-pinned to her scalp, out of our classroom. It is an accident but as she pounds, it becomes a calling. When I finally unlock the door she barges in and takes aim at each student, in turn, explaining precisely what is wrong with each of us. Attacks verbally, the only way a woman is permitted to act. I am quaking but defiant.

After I dart outside to the undeveloped back lot, my hideaway. The entire hillside glows golden and God is here. God is right here.

Later that day my friend Carly and I discuss in hushed tones the deaths of young Palestinian boys at the hands of Israeli soldiers. Each of us nervy and wide-eyed, scared of something we cannot name.

I cannot stop picturing their weeping mothers. The photographs of ruined homes. All the ruined things.

2013. My father looks sideways at me in the pretty sunlit kitchen composed of pretty, expensive appliances which he nor my mother ever use, from which he spent thousands of dollars from my would-have-been college fund, to please my mother who is so anxious to belong. He says, “the congregation hired a female rabbi.”

Amy Eilberg in 1985 was the first female rabbi to be ordained in a Conservative synagogue.

2013 is better than nothing.

I respond in the affirmative. “How wonderful!”

My father shakes his head. “She’s not going to stay. She’s from New York. She does not fit in with the culture.”

Translation: she is a woman with self-esteem and the Board which to this day is primarily comprised of white men wants her out, so out she will go.

2011. I have called Cantor Dinkin, with trembling fingers. I am backlit by a sun happy like I am to be beyond the dour walls of a theology I can no longer accept.

I picture my cohort. Gabriela from the Palestinian Justice Movement who patted my back while I sobbed a whole year of my life away. Devin who was sexually assaulted then drank herself to death while no one noticed, including me.

I tell the Cantor, “My father raped me.” Silence.

The cantor asks, “What do you want me to do? They’re members of my congregation.”¹ I turn off my phone.

Everybody needs a safe place to get away. But away from what?

2017. My father has “forgotten” to reserve an extra room for me at our hotel in Seattle. He twists and whines and convinces me and my mother it will be fine for us three to share a suite.

I am unmoved. There will be a locked door or I will flee and leave him to explain the situation to his cousins. Leave him to explain the ‘why’.

I get my way. I make myself safe.

2017. My cousin Carol insists, “I have no idea how Trump could get away with saying those things about women in the campaign!”

Greek music plays gaily all around us. Greek gods and nymphs lounge luxuriously on the wall behind us. The food I denied myself for years of misdirected punishment sits pleasantly on my tongue.

“I understand,” I insist right back. “Based on my experiences and those of my friends, the idea someone could get away with that did not come as a shock.”

Blatant is my father’s shame. My mother’s attempt at withering rage. Carol’s instant of recognition.

My mother interrupts to say, “if Black people had gathered behind Hillary the way they did Obama, Trump would not have been elected.”

Gently, I tell her, “it was not their responsibility.”

It was not my responsibility, what happened to me. But what happens as a result of me is.

2017. My cousin Caitie and I have rediscovered one another after twenty years of in-between. She sits with her bleach-blonde pixie cut and three-hole piercings next to her hulking, wealthy husband, talking with a flutter in her voice while her anxious hands paint the air. We discuss

science fiction until he leaves early.

Her words pour forth like a waterfall and she says, “I learned after the election what white feminism is.”

“Yes,” I say. “I learned things about my friends that I wish I had not learned.”

Translation: I learned things about my parents I wish I had not learned.

We sit in the grand and grandiose dining room with its museum exterior and intricately painted objects from dozens of different countries. We fill the space with our words about feminism and racism and who we want to be.

Not once do we say, but those *Men of Color who are rapists*. Not once do we say, *but those white men, and those Jewish men perceived to be white, who would never rape us*.

Because we do not lie to each other.

John, too thin and balding, wanders by. “What are you girls doing in here?”

We turn beatific smiles towards him and pose, and hold until he backs away. Slowly, as though we are dangerous. As though we are prepared to pounce.

We turn relieved faces towards each other. Do not acknowledge what we have just done, what we are doing.

That we are rewriting the story.

That we are making ourselves safe.