

Oswaldo Golijov's  
***Falling Out of Time***

Notes by Leah Hager Cohen

You--  
Where are you?  
What are you?  
And how are you there?  
And who are you there?

— David Grossman, *Falling Out of Time* (2014)

*Falling Out of Time* is a journey to nowhere – or more accurately, a journey to no where. For the dead are no longer in time or place, and those who love them and would follow them must seek a route beyond linear boundaries. This is a kind of madness, and a kind of truth.

The seed of this musical project was sown at a 2002 encounter between Oswaldo Golijov and Yitzhak Frankenthal, founder of The Parents Circle, an organization of Israelis and Palestinians who have lost family members to the ongoing conflict. Mr. Frankenthal shared the story of a bereaved father who could not reconcile himself to leaving his dead son and reentering the world of time. For many days he remained at his son's side, at night sleeping upon the grave. Narrating with his actions a story of madness and truth.

The seed found soil 12 years later, when Oswaldo read David Grossman's brilliant, almost unbearable novel about a man who walks, a father who describes with his feet impossible, ever-widening circles, driven to go to his dead son.

The notion of losing one's child conjures, in Oswaldo's words, the utmost pain imaginable, a supernova of pain. Is it madness to try to translate such experience into words, into music? Perhaps. A supernova is very big. But as one of the characters says, there is "Great, definitive death" – boundless, eternal, immortal – and then there is "Your single, little death, / inside it."

In a sense, it is the "single, little death" that both David Grossman and Oswaldo take for their starting points. They enter the fathomless through the particular, the palpable, the present. One foot placed in front of the other. One heartbeat at a time. *Ka-thunk. Ka-thunk.* We are very much in time – music is nothing if not an organization of time – and in motion. The father is joined by other townsfolk, each having lost a child; each railing against circumstance; each compelled on a relentless walk of resistance at once mad and true. The heartbeat and the walking,

the walking and the heartbeat. The body's humble metronomes – the very movements that separate the living from the dead – allow the journey.

We find a crucial counterpoint to these rhythms in the questions that erupt from the walkers. Osvaldo, for whom the novel is “a book of questions,” has distilled from it three, which we hear again and again. At times a cry to pierce the sky, at times an echo swollen with tenderness: *Where are you? Who are you there? How are you there?* To ask, a form of madness. To refrain from asking, another.

And the questions themselves contain echoes of the sorely missed children – indeed, of all children: their lovely doggedness, their lively insistence on asking the unanswerable. We all go in circles, children with their hunger to know *why? where? who? how?* and grownups who in suffering find we have not lost the appetite: “teach me – as I not long ago / taught you – / the world and all its secrets.” All of us circling, circling, until in time we come to perceive that perhaps the “walk itself is both / the answer and the question.”

“Great, definitive death” touches us all, yet grief is always isolating. Each “single, little death” inflicts its separate suffering, a unique exile. Even parents mourning the same child do not share the same grief.

A coda to the story about the bereaved father who could not bear to leave his son's grave: When Mr. Frankenthal heard about this man, he went to the cemetery. And remained there. Day and night he kept company with this man, until he was able to rise back up and reenter the world and time.

Perhaps more than an act of making art, the joining of Osvaldo's musical voice to David Grossman's literary one is an act of accompaniment. And by collaborating with the Silkroad Ensemble in the creation of this piece, Osvaldo widens the circle of accompaniment. Accompaniment is not a cure for grief. But it may be the opposite of madness.

Sitting shiva, the Jewish custom of gathering around the bereaved for seven days after a death, is a ritualized form of accompaniment. *Falling Out of Time*, with its ever-expanding circles of community – from the townsfolk in the novel to the musicians bringing it to the stage – might be thought of as a walking shiva, an act of accompaniment that remains, like the breath of the living, in motion.

*There is  
breath  
there  
is breath  
inside the pain  
there is breath*

– David Grossman, *Falling Out of Time* (2014)