

**D M Gordon**  
from *Benjamin Zero*

What he couldn't remember or know was as important as what he could. He couldn't remember his brother. Not his hands, or hair. No pinches. No crying in the night. Nothing. He could remember the name of Oscar Ballentine's dog though.

He couldn't recall anything before he was...he didn't know how old. Then he would say that his memories seemed like they couldn't belong to him. In the middle of washing plates, or reading the second paragraph of an article on the new archeology of Atitlan, he would be suddenly struck by a memory of black-laced Gloria as he first saw her, sitting in the dusk of the lantern-lit courtyard with her prophet stones, and ask, *that's what happened?* He supposed other people felt that way about their lives.

He remembered the feel of his fingers wrapped around wire. That it tasted like a snaffle bit. He remembered drinking from bottles of milk that Annie must have given him. He must have been too old for them. He could still feel the squeak of the rubber nipple in his teeth. He didn't remember the sound of Annie's voice. Or her face. Did he call her mother?

He wore a leather harness, he remembered that. Blue leather strapped over his clothes. Annie attached a leash when they went for walks. Church bells, and a banana ice. He had been afraid of the outside air, how on windy days it moved without walls to stop it, how it wasn't trustable. But he didn't remember any brother.

When he was older, when he knew for certain that his brother existed, he had fantasies, visions, resentments. Sometimes, the brother marked everything he wasn't. When he tripped on a curb, he could feel his brother watching—the hairs stood up on the

## **D M Gordon**

back of his neck. But the brother was never more concrete than that. Sometimes, when he lost something, he imagined that his brother had reached into his life and taken the thing. The brother lived in an untouchable world, somewhere where lives were simple plots instead of dreams. It was as if he floated permanently in the wrong place at the wrong time, and there was someone else living what was meant to be his life.

Long before the idea of brother, or mother or father, he wasn't looking for anyone. He wasn't aware of himself as himself yet. He remembered licking salt from the back of his hands, but didn't remember that it came from his tears. He had a green square of cloth that he always carried with him, even when he went on walks outside. Especially when he went on walks outside. It smelled of changing things when he pressed it to his face. Once there was a patch on it that smelled like blueberries. And a patch that smelled like wet leaves. It could smell like licorice in places. Or hen's feathers after a dirt bath. How did he know that smell? Maybe, he guessed, it was the same way you dream places you've never seen, people you've never met.

In his mind, he could hear Annie in the kitchen, but couldn't see her. He could hear her drawing water for her baths. He didn't like baths, so she didn't give him any. He didn't remember that he scratched her when she tried to wash his hair, but did remember his panic under the water when he couldn't breathe. He didn't remember that she taught him the small necessities in bursts of guilt and maternity.

One day she put a key in an envelope and licked it until it was soggy. She'd said to give it to Liberty Ruth. She shook him hard and said it again and again. The walls of

## **D M Gordon**

the bare house echoed her voice. She unbuckled his harness and hung it on an iron coat hook near the door. His chest felt empty where the straps had been.

Annie said, “When you get hungry, you take this to Liberty, you understand?”

She kept looking over her shoulder, as if she could see out the window, but the curtains were drawn. The curtains were always drawn.

He remembered that Liberty Ruth had a peppermint stick. And he knew that she was the one who gave him the blue rabbit’s foot that Annie now was shaking in front of his nose. It scared him. It usually hung on the door of his room.

Annie had given him a quick pat on the head and walked out the front door. She left it cracked open. He heard the car drive away. He went back and sat in his room with the wire squares, with his leealee—that’s what he called the green cloth—and a bottle. He wrapped his fingers around the wire and listened to how still the air was, how empty the house. He thought about how it might feel to go outside through the open door by himself. There was a crow making noise in the yard. It was very hot. He wanted to take his clothes off—he was wearing a thick corduroy jumper with triple rolled cuffs that rubbed together when he walked---but after a half-hearted try, he couldn’t undo the shoulder buckles.

The door to his room stood open; the door to the house stood open. It was wrong. He slept, like a pig in the sun, Annie would have said. When he woke up, the little bit of milk in the bottle had soured. He was hungry. And afraid. There was no brother then, no Annie. Only him, alone.