"Tales of Teancum Singh Rosenberg"

Epilogue

BY JAMES GOLDBERG

1

They say he wanted to be a weaver, like Kabir, but developed an inexplicable allergy to thread. No matter, he said, that part was all metaphor anyway: what he really wanted to weave together were the fragments of stories that had been kept in corners and boxes, fragments that hung in the air or got stuck between the teeth at dinner. And so he wove, sometimes by day and especially by night, and produced great rugs and tapestries, both for living people and as tributes to the Singularity of God.

It was only when he hung them outside that he realized they were all written in a language no one spoke. He was devastated.

One day he complained to God, said "Why did you make my mind a loom—was it only for this?"

Some say God began to answer him slowly, and the words filled the rest of his years. Others say God didn't answer at all for a long time, until quite suddenly at the end.

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But how shall I begin to tell you the stories he lived? How can I express what they mean to us? As Herschel of Ostropol to the Ashkenazim, as Nasreddin Hodja to the Turks, so is Teancum Singh Rosenberg to my people. He is less wise, perhaps, and certainly less witty, but he is ours.

He's a fool, he's a folktale, he's a broken half of a hero. He may or may not have even ever existed, but his tales are still our language, and for someone's sake, our language ought to be spoken, ought to be stored in books and kept for a day when somewhere it's desperately needed.

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Accounts of his childhood are most likely retroactive creations, projected back after people began to tell stories about him out of a need (like mine) for some sort of beginning. Because of this, they are improbable and often contradictory.

In this sense, they are entirely typical of childhood sketches.

One account has it that his home was an idyllic paradise—until he was born. The first thing the infant Rosenberg did was to shake his fist at the sky itself, and the next thing the sky did was to cover itself in grey so as not to have to witness his insolence.

The sky remained grey for nearly two years, until the child began to speak and cursed it; the sky responded by pouring down unceasing rain to drown out Rosenberg's words.

When, after some time, the ground realized that the rain and drudgery had been sent on the child's account, it begged the sky to take them back. The sky consented, leaving Teancum's father's farm to wither and dry until it blew away.

Perhaps there is some truth to the story, and that is why our only homeland is the wind.

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In another version, Teancum's parents quarreled bitterly even before his birth. His father alternated between periods of indignation, righteous or otherwise, and deep depressions. His mother, on the other hand, was quick to apologize for her own temper—but just as quick to remember during the course of her apologies what had made her so angry in the first place and burst into a heat of rage again.

If his parents were loving and good during the day, they tore the house in half fighting at night. If

they were loving and kind at night, they tore the house into hundredths during the day.

If Teancum himself was often torn in halves or hundredths in the course of these fights, that may serve to explain something about his later nature.

Perhaps it because of the way he was torn that we still tell fragments of stories about him.

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The clues Teancum Singh Rosenberg gives us about his own childhood are as follows:

When one host asked why he tended to eat so quickly and how he had become so generally itinerant, wandering forever from place to place, Teancum Singh replied: "As a child, I had to fight with dogs for my scraps. I've kept the scraps, so somewhere inside of me the dogs remain also."

A mother of one child and a father of another were talking in a courtyard once—mourning the damage their poor skills as parents would no doubt do to their children's minds and souls. Overhearing them, Rosenberg remarked: "Half-broken children grow up wanting to heal the world. Why raise a child whole and content? All it will want to do is amuse itself and eat."

Once, a conspiracy against his life forced Teancum Singh into hiding. He avoided harm, he told a friend, by playing games with a group of four-year-olds—though three times their size, he was otherwise too much like them to be detected.

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So much for the enigma of his beginnings. Accounts agree that as he aged, Teancum Singh Rosenberg was given two gifts from God: the loom of his mind, and the aching desire to fill it with the stories of the past, woven into an aid and protection for the present. Searching for that help, we search through his stories. And yet it is *his* desperate search for stories that fills the oldest stories about him.

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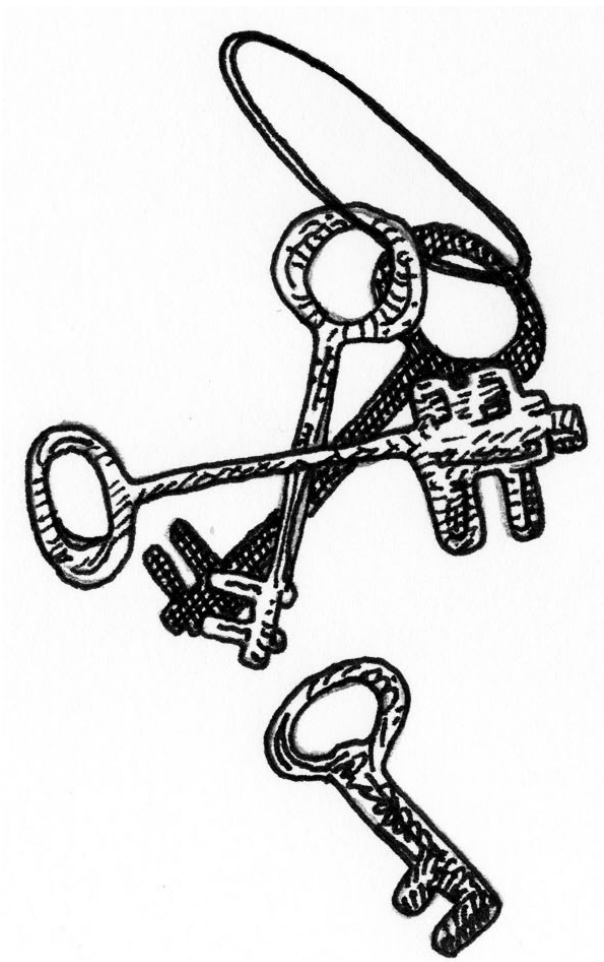
They say he would have given his thumb to learn the story of Eklavya. He would have let a worm bore through his leg without crying out to learn of Karna's fate. He would have gone by night, risking the wrath of the Emperor, to take the head of Tegh Bahadur if that meant he could hear one more tale of Gobind Singh.

He would have traded his home and wealth, if necessary, for the record of Nephi. Gone mute through life just to know what happened to Korihor. Hidden in a cavity of a rock for Ether's story's sake.

If the Messiah himself had come, Teancum Singh might have asked him to wait just a little longer while Teancum finished memorizing the legends of the Zugot and the Tannaim. How could you receive His Coming without some stories that tell you He will Come?

"Sometimes a story is a key, and the lock and the treasure chest are missing," he said. "All the more reason to gather the keys, and quickly!"



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For three years, Teancum Singh Rosenberg refused to cut his hair.

"The son of two lions should know how it feels to look like one" he said.

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The Huma is a bird that always flies, but almost never lands, a bird which one cannot catch even in dreams. They say, though, that whoever can touch even the shadow the flying Huma casts wrests the rule of a kingdom from destiny's hands.

They also say that Teancum Singh was listening to his grandmother tell a story when the Huma flew by. Some say the Huma even circled him, but he stayed still and listened, even when the shadow came within the reach of his hands.

Why not chase the Huma? Why not take the time even to reach out his arm? He could have used the power, and any accompanying protection. We could have used it—even the memory of someone else's success can inspire. But—no. His hand stayed still, the shadow passed.

"Why chase after a kingdom," he said, "when in every old woman's shadow are worlds without end?"

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"The scraps that I fought for," he once said "were the traditions of my ancestors.

"And oh, how the dogs fought to take them from me! How hard they tried to tear them to pieces!"

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Once, Teancum studied the names of his ancestors with such intensity that the prophet Elijah was forced to come personally on his chariot of fire to ask him to stop: Rosenberg had drawn so much of Elijah's spirit to himself that there was little left for the rest of the world. Not wanting to disobey a prophet, Teancum Singh obeyed, but, being unwilling to surrender the *intensity* of his study, channeled the energy into chasing after Elijah's chariot instead, determined to follow him back to heaven itself.

Teancum followed the chariot one mile, and then twain, at which point it crossed a river that was the gateway into heaven. But the river was swift as well as deep and wide.

Teancum cried out, "Elijah, wait! How do I get to the other side?"

Over the water came Elijah's laughter back. "You *are* on the other side" was all he said.

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"We never know who we are," said Teancum, "because we never understand God.

"And yet He is always wrapped in our history, always hiding underneath our skin."

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Another time, Teancum announced that he would visit the Temple in Jerusalem. When others heard of his plan, they scoffed—said, "What wealth is in the House of Rosenberg that he could journey over an ocean?" Said, "He would have to walk, and you can't walk on water with such heavy, callused feet."

Rosenberg only smiled. Later, he took off his shoes, covered his head, and whispered to Baruch Moroni Brar, "The Wailing Wall must serve as both the Western and the Eastern bounds now. We all stand in the Temple, but how rarely do we recognize its Holy Ground!"

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Most often, he freely admitted himself to be blind to it. "I was born less to see," he said, "than to remember that there was once a story in which someone saw.

"And, if Drona doesn't keep me from it, to share the story of that old story's half-forgotten existence."

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Every quest requires obstacles, and Drona was Teancum Singh's greatest. Or perhaps it was the other was around: Drona's was the quest, and Teancum Singh was a pebble in the path, a would-be obstacle who went almost entirely without notice.

They met only once, though they shared the small-seeming space of a single world. It is, therefore, impossible to understand Teancum Singh Rosenberg without knowing something about Drona. One of the things we most desperately want from Teancum is for him to prove Newton's laws by being Drona's reactive opposite, though we understand that our Teancum was never Drona's equal. How could anyone compare with the latter's influence? Some say the spirit of Drona still fills the earth.

If Teancum is a spark in the darkness, Drona is the moonless night. And why should the night notice just one spark? If Teancum is a freshwater fish, Drona is the ocean, and there is always room in the ocean for one more fish's corpse.

If Drona is a vast warship, though, Teancum is a leak, and in that, at least, we take hope.

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They were both teachers. Teancum was a teacher with few or no pupils; Drona's students were drawn from every land. Teancum's lessons were like a hole in the pocket; Drona's could line the pockets with gold—he had always been known as a master of craft. Almost every craft.

"There are few skills he hasn't mastered," said Rosenberg on a particularly bitter occasion, "Two of those, unfortunately, are mercy and truth."

Few cared to listen to Rosenberg for long unless all other alternatives had been exhausted. The perceptive and the ambitious, the leaders of today and the leaders of tomorrow, flocked to Drona and hoped to touch his feet.

"Nothing makes me feel so sick," Teancum said, "as remembering that Drona will rule this world for longer than you or I can hope to live."

Would Drona have recognized himself in the Weaver's accusation? He was, after all, never acknowledged as a leader in the world, but rather as the servant of the leaders. And he would have felt bound, even in the absence of leaders, to his sense of duty to a certain view of the world.

"Even Drona lives under Drona's thumb" Teancum is known to have complained. "Even Drona is darkened by Drona's shadow."

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What did Drona know best? The martial disciplines, with their pursuit of pure excellence. The discipline of duty as an ethic, duty that pre-empted further exploration of right and wrong. What did Drona know? How to serve Kauravas and to serve Pandavas as if they were Kauravas; to instill in the Pandavas through his devotion an arrogance that made them act like Kauravas. "If good and evil were cousins," said Teancum Singh, "Drona will try to make them brothers.

"If they are brothers, he would try to convince us that they are one and the same."

Would Drona have assigned himself such intent, any intent? His role was not to propagate any new view, but to perpetuate an existing order. Drona is a symbol of order—an order in which we do not and cannot fit.

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"In these days of Drona, our choice is to starve or else be devoured. In the days of Drona, the dogs are no different than princes and kings" Teancum said. When pressed for evidence of these claims, he offered the following:

"How did Eklavya gain Drona's notice? He shot the mouth of a dog shut."

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And yet it was the mouths of our ancestors and not the mouths of the dogs which were closed. So often our mouths are closed out of habit still, and it is to this impulse that the Weaver Rosenberg speaks.

"You should say the Truth," he said. "The Truth should be spoken in our tongue, in every tongue! Never mind what happened to Mansur!"

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Friends told him to be careful. Friends warned him against likewise attracting Drona's attention, of

making him feel a duty to punish Teancum Singh as he had Eklavya.

They advised him, above all, to show a certain outward respect for the status quo. If you speak the truth, they said, do so softly.

"You can push the envelope, Teancum" said one woman, "but gently, so you don't make a noise by tearing through its edge."

"I want to break through the envelope" he said, "and then turn back and set it on fire."

His friends thought he went too far saying so, tempted himself and fate.

They were right.

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"The Prophets are my witnesses" said Rosenberg, "God and Drona have never seen the world in anything like the same way."

"To Drona, the world simply *is*." And the Prophets—what do they say? "They show the world as God's story: unfolding, surprising, a story within a story without beginning or end."

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Sometimes pieces of that story upset him.

Baruch Moroni Brar records that Teancum once took off his shoes, covered his head, and unrolled another page of the earth, which is a scroll. He wept then, and Baruch asked why. Rosenberg replied that he would have sworn and yelled instead, but that he was trying to act like the God in whose presence we all stand.

(After noting the incident, Brar emphasizes that whichever page we find ourselves standing on, we must not forget that when this world ends, the scroll will be rolled up again.)

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Another time Teancum is said to have witnessed a miracle in the desert: a rock turned into bread. He then asked God to show him a second miracle, and turn the bread into rock again so that he, like Jacob, would have a place to lay his head.

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Why are we drawn to these stories of Teancum, even when they makes the least sense? Perhaps because the role of the protagonist in folktales is to mediate reality, sometimes even by stepping outside of it.

Especially by stepping outside of it, if only to show us that such a space exists.

2

It happened once that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarphon were in the same Sunday school one week. Teancum Singh was late.

When he arrived, they were discussing the nature of prophetic reliability.

Rabbi Eliezer said "Only when two or more prophets speak the same truth can it be considered equal to a word of the Lord. As it is written, 'whether by mine own voice or the voice of my servants, it is the same.' 'Servants,' not 'servant.' When a prophet speaks alone, he may speak as a man, but when he speaks with the intent and witness of another prophet, their words are surely Ha-Shem's."

Rabbi Tarphon, however, said "It is also written, 'whatsoever they shall speak when moved by the Holy Ghost shall be scripture.' That is, even the words of a prophet speaking alone are surely of the Lord when he is moved."

Rabbi Ben Azaryah said, "I am like a man of seventy years old, and yet I could not succeed in interpreting this scripture until Ben Zoma explained it to me. 'Moved by the Holy Ghost' means the Prophet cannot remain the same, he must be moved to speak against his natural prejudice and inclinations. Only then are his words surely also the Lord's words. Otherwise, the counsel is binding but the perfection uncertain."

Rabbi Akiva then said, "What does the saying mean, that the Prophet will never lead the people

astray? Is it not written, 'all we like sheep have gone astray.'? 'We' is the people, 'All we'—this includes the prophets. And it is also written, 'The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen!' It is possible, then, for a Prophet, also, to break faith, for a Prophet, also, to fall."

Teancum Singh answered, and said, "The Prophet can never lead the church away from the Lord because a Prophet can never escape the Lord. As it was in the days of Jonah, so it is in the last days: even a disobedient Prophet does not cease to be a Prophet, and even his rebellion is swallowed up into the purpose of Ha-Shem. A prophet is bound to the Lord, even cursed with Him: as it is written, 'the burden of the word of the Lord.'

"God will forge every prophet into his Story."

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And so he searched again for stories, believing in their potential and malleability, in both their absolute and relative significance. He knocked on the doors, begging people for stories. He knocked on the doors even of abandoned houses, inhabited only by ghosts.

Why did he search, again and again, forgoing meals and abandoning shelters?

"The only way to see this world clearly is to see it from all the different worlds inside of it. That is why only God will ever see this world clearly," he said.

On a certain kind of story: "I don't remember history to avoid repeating it—I know I will repeat it; I am not afraid of repeating it—perhaps this time I will notice the hidden treasures, the unexpected possibilities for healing."

"We move through stories, we love through stories, mothers give birth to children but we have to clothe them in stories or they will freeze in this cold."

"Stories are my meat and drink today" he said. "Stories are this night's shelter."

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Another time Teancum said, "Every movement must have its parables—even Shiva couldn't move the world without the parable of his dance."

"Without stories to move us, we are doomed to stay the same. That is why Drona and his servants hate the stories I search for. But the loss of every story shrinks the world: does he really want the world to be so small that there will only be room a single eye?"

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"The dogs know I am looking for the scraps they still wish to tear. The swine know I am looking for lost pearls.

"But who am I to stop? Even if they turn and tear me, who am I to stop this gathering I take part in?"

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He had sworn to go to the ends of the earth gathering stories, but his quest took him also to the center. Knowing what the consequences might be, he went and studied in a school that took Drona's image as its Guru as part of his search for a certain story.

When Drona found out, of course, he shut the school down. But not before demanding payment. Teancum offered his thumb, as is customary, but Drona said, "I already have Eklavya's.

"My price is your tongue."

The Weaver Rosenberg shook with rage. Never had he so desperately wished to put a javelin through someone's heart.

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After Drona demanded his tongue, Rosenberg went into a deep depression. He couldn't speak, of course, and the silence was like the Underworld to him.

Perversely, rumors began to spread at that time that the silence had given Rosenberg enlightenment, or that his deep mediations had endowed him with mystical powers.

The only power he ever claimed, in any case, was invisibility.

"The secret," he is said to have written, "is this: learn to see your soul through another mortal's eyes."

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One scrap of his writing from this time has survived, though it may well be a corrupted copy of an earlier document, or else an outright forgery. The scrap includes this line:

"Oh Lord God deliver me in thy due time from the little narrow prison almost as it were total darkness of paper pen and ink and its crooked broken scattered and imperfect language"

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He slept more often then, though fitfully, slept half the day and half the night in restless little snatches.

He dreamed, then, more than usual, they say, and it pained him terribly not to be able to speak the dreams to those around him.

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When awake, he often behaved as though a madman. He pushed rocks up hills and watched them roll down again. He moved into the desert, ate locusts, planted a gourd for shade and then stopped watering it and let the sun scorch his skin.

And yet, some stories say, he was also often coherent and kind when he was awake in those days. Did work for others that was physically demanding and thankless, perhaps trying to wear himself out for his next battle with morning and night, perhaps desperate to keep alive his surviving sense of purpose.

Perhaps he did it to feel whole. Even the broken sometimes feel their wholeness. Somehow, Teancum Singh carried on.

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Did he ever truly despair, ever resent all that he had lived for?

Yes. At least one time.

Some say the silence drove him to it, made him feel as if there were too much trapped under his skin. Others say he was simply tired, and that he likely would have grown tired in any case.

They agree that once, though, he lost the will even to be himself.

In a certain city, he had heard, people who wanted or needed extra time could purchase it from a certain craftsman called the Time-Blower. The Time-Blower would take old, used, unwanted time and draw it out of the bodies of those who wanted themselves lightened of it, then work it in a forge and blow it into shapes for every occasion.

In his storefront, there were round, dense, dark pieces of time for people who needed to catch up on sleep. There were double-edged pieces on display he blew specially for people to make up missed appointments. The Time-Blower also crafted cavernous clear pieces for people who just needed time to think and squatter, squarish pieces for people to work in. He blew old time into wings for people who wanted to have fun, and hung them right above his window. He made long, curved tubes for children trying to reach a certain age more quickly and kept them in a case behind the counter at the back.

When Teancum approached the Time-Blower and scrawled him a message saying what he had come for, he was ushered out of the storefront and back through an alley to a separate entrance. He heard a drunkard moan. "I think you took more than I'd already forgotten...I told you, I only wanted to lose what I'd been lost for." The Time-Blower mumbled a quick apology, but the drunk just grunted, then rolled over and fell asleep.

"How much?" asked the Time-Blower.

Rosenberg motioned for paper and pen. "Everything," he wrote. "It might take a while. The time I keep inside is deeper than I've lived for."

And they say the Time-Blower's eyes got big and hungry when he took his first real look at the size of Teancum's veins, thick dark cables that marked their course visibly like river-maps on his skin. The Time-Blower tried his biggest and fastest needles first, then worked his way down to his daintiest and most delicate ones—but every time he'd get the needle in to suck the old time out, the vein would collapse. Sixteen times he tried, until Teancum's arms were riddled with barren holes and the Time-Blower's hand ached, but nothing flowed out at all.

Teancum Singh got up and left then.

He was no prophet, but he had his own burden from the Lord.

3

Years of silence taught Teancum, again, how to sleep. He learned a new serenity, one that requires neither reconciliation with nor rejection of things as they are, only patience with the paradox.

He ate consistently again for the first time since he'd lost his tongue, training himself to remember tastes he could no longer experience instead of recoiling at the loss of what our people accept as one of mankind's most significant senses, the sense that gives


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us memories of home and family, a sense that most clearly approximates our souls' ability for longing.

He took, against his former habit, to rising very early, and tried to feel the way Guru Nanak's singing of Japji still hangs in the ambrosial pre-dawn air.

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The world went on without his voice or noticeable influence. Sometimes good, compromised and disfigured almost beyond recognition, triumphed over evil. Sometimes evil triumphed over a few broken fragments of good and then gradually lost force, decaying from active evil into little more than residual momentum.

Tens of thousands were born; tens of thousands died.

Then hundreds of thousands, thousands of thousands, died in the battle at Kurukshetra.

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Kurukshetra.

The very name hangs in the air when spoken; it is a heavy incantation. It summons the smells of charred bodies, sights of death and broken weapons, cataclysmic, mindless slaughter. Did wrong triumph? Did right triumph? We hardly remember; the battle lasted so long, so many last screams long.

Geologists say that limestone is made from compressed biological matter; it is the stone of the once-living. At Kurukshetra you could dig through a foot of human lime.

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They say in the battle, one man ate another's heart in revenge. A perfectly honest man told a lie. A warrior whose identity rested only in his sense of duty had doubts, hesitated to strike. A son of the sun, of the morning, fell—forgetting the words that might have saved him. A land that had been holy was drowned in blood, and when the moon rose at night it was also covered in it.

Half the world died, and Drona died with it.

Baruch Moroni Brar had been there, but survived.

He called Teancum Singh to come salvage something from the carnage.

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Kurukshetra and Cumorah—why is meaning so often hidden under land known for the meaningless? Why are the Golden Plates always hidden under the site of a ghallugara, a holocaust?

At Kurukshetra, Teancum Singh spoke to men's bones, gathered their stories just before they became dust. He spoke to the dust, gathered stories that had lived in men's bones.

How? How did he speak after so many years of such painful silence?

They say that on Drona's corpse he found and reclaimed his own tongue.

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"Once I had wished to kill him for his evil," said Rosenberg, "but every evil has a brother—you could kill the world before evil was stopped.

"And before you could finish," he said, "evil would find you in its line of succession. Perhaps I am evil's brother, too."

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They say he gathered Drona's story, and was taken aback by its beauty. Saw that there was a kind of honesty even in Drona's most brutal betrayals. Saw how Drona, in turn, had been betrayed—by his best-loved pupils, and more deeply still by the very order he had believed in, the very order that is still perpetuated in his name.

They say that passages of the story were so harrowing that they could never be written, only spoken, and that other passages, more moving still, could never be spoken, only sung, and that the most moving passage could only be prayed.

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They say he turned to the future to gather our stories, then…and prayed we'd have the strength to live them. ▪