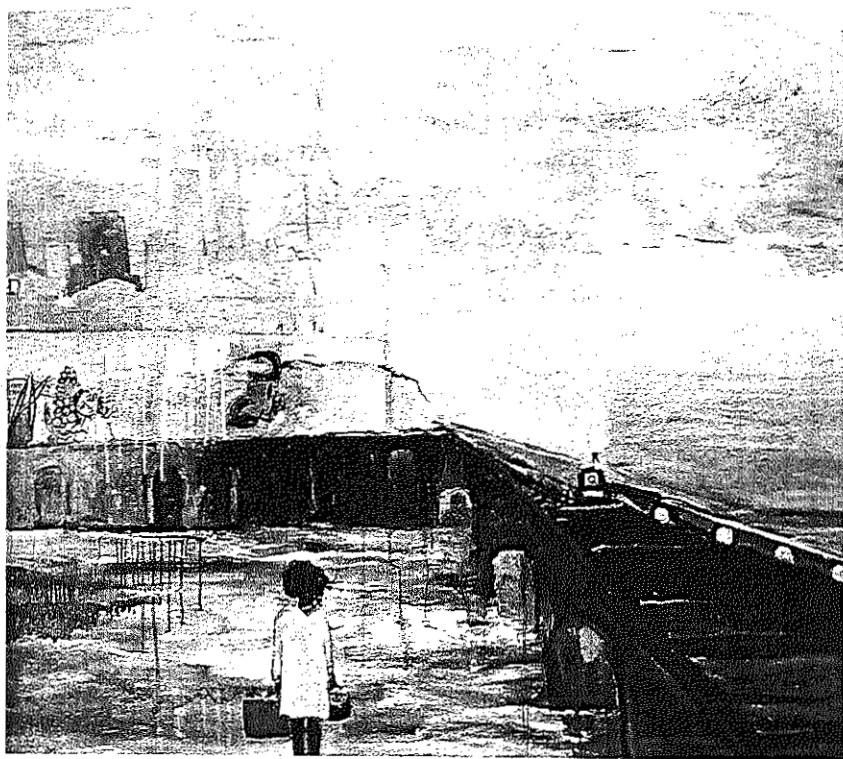


נשים *Nashim*

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH WOMEN'S STUDIES & GENDER ISSUES

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WRITING OUR WAY HOME:
JEWISH WOMEN'S POST-HOLOCAUST DIASPORIC W
IN ...TIN AMERICA, THE BALKANS AND THE JEWISH V

Part I: Surviving Stories

Consulting Editors: Marjorie Agosin, Jelena Filipović
Oana Hergenröther

נשים נאשימ
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MY WORLD IN LANGUAGE: A SECULAR JEWISH RESPONSE

Erica H. Bernheim

In mid-March 2020, when the campus where I teach stopped having face-to-face classes, I created a Facebook page for my creative writing students and began posting a writing prompt for them every day, helping to create and curate a new “imagined landscape” in which they could still function simultaneously as individual writers and as a community of artists. Some of these writing prompts function as an organizational basis for this essay, exploring my own Jewishness and how it has impacted my journey to and in academia and my own idiosyncratic “imagined landscape.” I conclude with the ultimate question: Can literature save the world?

“...the world is a sign, a way of speaking. To find.
What shall we find? Energies, rhythms, journey.
Ways to discover. The song of the way in.”
—from “Akiba,” by Muriel Rukeyser

“...I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman...”
—from “Planetarium,” by Adrienne Rich

In mid-March 2020, the campus where I teach stopped its usual face-to-face classes, as many other colleges and universities did during the early days of the novel COVID-19 pandemic. Like them, we shifted, mid-semester, to online classes. The rapport we had already established during the first half of the spring semester allowed me to see the changes in the students I had come to know well over the course of two months.

The creative writers as a group and as individuals seemed to feel especially adrift without the structure and routine of our classes and workshops. As they found themselves with unprecedented amounts of free time in which they could read and

write, they began asking me for writing prompts and reading suggestions. I subsequently created a low-key Facebook page for my students—past and present—and began posting a different writing prompt every day, helping to create and curate a new “imagined landscape” in which they could still function simultaneously as individual writers and as a community of artists. This would not be a competitive space to brag about writing or accomplishments. Instead, my objective was to provide a safe, consistent and even somewhat predictable outlet that would encourage them to try something new every day, through reading or writing—something accessible, but also challenging.

“Unprecedented,” like “challenging,” having become more and more our condition in recent months, I know that I have never spent so much time thinking about the roles literature and creative writing play in saving us and saving our world in language. What stands out to me, what I hope to remember later about 2020, is that in a time of crisis and instability, I can state clearly that my students turned immediately to writing, to generating literature and to creative expression.

Like them, I found myself with more time than usual to read and write during the months of sheltering at home, wondering what a future semester could look like for me and my colleagues, both at the small Methodist school where I—a self-labeled secular Jewish woman—teach, and for my academic colleagues around the country and the world. I began, along with my students, to try out some of the prompts from the Facebook page I had created. I found that I was thinking a great deal about my own journey through academia to this point, to my ongoing life, to who I am as a Jewish woman, but also about the figures along the way who have been my guides. How did I find my own way in, as Muriel Rukeyser wrote in “Akiba”? My guides have been poets whose works I have loved or hated, and in my memory and present life there has been a writer and scholar much closer to my heart: my father. Even if I didn’t write a poem every day, after a month or so of curating the Facebook page, I had a list of ideas in prompts, some from them and some from me, that I didn’t have before.

Writing Prompt: Sometimes making lists can generate longer pieces of writing Try writing a list of nine things you remember about one thing from one day.

- (1) Summer 1979: The older woman in the light blue blouse with the soft but tattooed arm, standing in front of the sunbeams behind the circulation desk in the Klau Library at Hebrew Union College.
- (2) The smell of old books in summer sunlight.
- (3) The sound of my father grinding the gears in my parents’ 1971 dark green Volkswagen Beetle (Volkswagen was founded in 1937 by Nazis, I later learned).
- (4) During the forty-minute drive home from Cincinnati, my father explained why the woman at the library had a number tattooed on her arm. He told me what a child might know about the Holocaust and World War II and said that we might have been tattooed and killed if we had lived in the wrong place during that time.

(5) Fear for my dear grandmother’s life. I found it plausible that soldiers might take my parents, me, or my younger sister away (we fought all the time), but Grandma and her soft arms?

(6) Never having thought before about where I was born, what it meant to have been born in New Jersey rather than in France, like my sister.

(7) Wondering if God might have saved me if the soldiers my father described showed up at my house.

(8) Wondering why, if God saved the woman in the library, why not other people from the death camps.

(9) Wondering if God was real.

What did the woman behind the circulation desk at the library remember later about that day? Was she glad for the chance to speak with my father? Did she realize that her presence and my child’s view of her forearm were my initiation into learning about Judaism? Or did she want to be alone in the archives, inhaling the murky petrichor of old books and yellowed papers? I will never know, and I’m not even sure my father knows her name; she must be gone now, but I strongly feel that someone remembers her, misses her laugh or the way she pronounced a word. From the moment I met her, and from the explanations that followed, I have questioned and for the most part rejected organized spirituality and faith, but never my culture or the weight of my inheritance.

Writing Prompt: Think about an era (other than the present) during which you’d like to have lived. Describe what that might have been like and who you might have been in another time and place.

When I learned, a few years later, about Anne Frank, I was convinced I would not live longer than she did. Knowing that the book had impacted me, my father challenged me one day: “Look how nicely she and her sister got along,” my father said with both exasperation and grief, “and they were living in an attic! You and your sister have all the space in the world; what’s wrong with you?” Silence.

Questions exist with no answers. I still cannot answer this one.

Writing Prompt: Start a piece of your own writing with an epigraph.

The manuscript for my second book of poems, *Climbing Hybrid Perpetual*, opens with a quotation from Cynthia Ozick’s “Rosa,” written as the sequel to her canonical 1980 short story “The Shawl,” about a woman and two children on their way to internment in a concentration camp. Thirty years later, two of the characters are in Florida: “It seemed ... that the whole peninsula of Florida was weighted down with regret. Everyone had left behind a real life. Here they had nothing. They were all scarecrows, blown about under the murdering sunball with empty ribcages.”¹

That is not how I came to be in Florida; I was not blowing around the country, nor was I a miraculous survivor of genocide. I was happy and relatively content in Chicago, convinced I would finish my doctoral program in a few years and end up teaching at a small rural school somewhere, say, in unknown Michigan. My literal journey to Florida was, in fact, much more deliberate and was initiated for purely professional, academic reasons: to be an English professor and start a creative writing program at a small, private liberal arts college in the semi-rural deep South. I arrived in Lakeland, Florida, in the summer of 2008, full of academic ambitions and goals, clutching a hardly used briefcase ready to be filled, and grateful for the opportunity to follow the path I'd envisioned for myself since childhood.

The eldest child of college professors, surrounded by them in my extended family as well as in my Ohio hometown (also the hometown of Miami University), I once believed that everyone grew up and somehow simply morphed into a teacher of some kind. Teaching was what adults did; it was part of everyone's journey in life and would be my life as an adult in a new place. I cried, paradoxically from uncertainty, most of the way from Chicago to Florida, but a few of those tears held unrecognized joy for what I envisioned in my future.

By the time classes started, I was trying to blend in with my colleagues, pass for a real-life functioning adult (a person capable of hiring someone to mow my dense, tropical lawn, for instance), and use fabulously Southern new-to-me phrases like "full as a tick" and "bless your heart" correctly for maximum effect, both in poems and in regular speech. I learned to recognize crape myrtles and magnolias, how to boil peanuts, and that "barbeque" functions simultaneously as a noun and a verb and a set of side dishes.

Writing Prompt: Advice (about any topic) people have given you over the years. (Hint: if you can't think of any specific advice, ask for some! People love giving advice!)

"You can't dance at two weddings with one behind," is what my father solemnly told me numerous times when I was in high school, when I was trying to decide whether to attend a social function or to study for an exam. To this day, I am guilty of trying to squeeze too many things into small moments of time, to combine unlikely groups of friends in potentially awkward situations just to save myself some travel or perceived inconvenience. On the cusp of middle age, this now passes for noble largesse. My formerly abstract goal has become the Jewish earth mother archetype, feeding everyone, intently gossiping, legs tucked under her kaftan, a cat on her lap, rugelach crumbs on the shag carpet and sitar music echoing from another room.

My father retired officially from his own perch as an English professor at a large public university in 2015, but he continues to advise me on all matters of my own journey through academia. He still reminds me not to overextend myself, to be flexible, to adapt to new circumstances and unexpected challenges as they arise. In

such unprecedented times as these, fluid yet frozen, as I write this essay, I find his advice more fitting now than ever.

One of my advisors in graduate school also told me, as I was preparing for my first campus visit, to be the type of person other people would not mind having dinner with. She said this would matter much more than whether or not I did well in the classroom or in an interview with a committee. Much of the advice I find I have been given since becoming part of the "academy" has been performative. Do not be too much of anything. Act like you are interested, especially when you are not.

Performing Jewishness, however, was not something I anticipated doing until I clashed with one anxious, insecure colleague who saw it as a competition between us for claiming Judaism as an identity, a locus for academic pursuit and a place to display and embody expertise. I was happy to concede victory; for me, Jewishness has never been a site for competition, and yet I could not help but feel that I had disappointed my fellow professor by not being visible "enough" for her to consider me a true colleague in faith, her definition of it.

The late poet James Reiss, my first college creative writing professor, remarked to me once that he thought it was strange how I never wrote about my life in Italy, where I had spent about five years before starting college. I did write about it, though, as I explained to him, although I did not always locate myself as the speaker in the poem; but what I narrated did often take place in Florence or thereabouts. This is how I feel about my own secular Judaism. My poems are written through that lens, whether I name it or not. The geographical location for the angst that rooms with me has changed, and I am far more likely to implicate poor Florida as the site for disaster in my recent work.

I am by no means the first poet to connect with the evocative geography, flora and fauna of the American South. Yet I still find unexpected tributes to this region from writers I might not have associated with it, such as Emma Lazarus, in her poem simply entitled "The South." She masterfully captures the essence of it and describes the landscape I have come to recognize from my own time in central Florida:

Hers is the savage splendor of the swamp,
 With pomp of scarlet and of purple bloom,
 Where blow warm, furtive breezes faint and damp,
 Strange insects whirl, and stalking bitterns boom—
 Where from stale waters dead
 Oft looms the great jawed alligator's head.²

Lazarus's personification of the South throughout the poem and her fascination with the beauty of its natural world contradict the familiar associations many readers make between her and the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, and that urban new world. The end of "The South," however, is triumphant and optimistic, aware

of the challenges women face and confident in our ability to meet all obstacles and to adapt to new conditions, to pivot “from dreams to hail the coming day.”

Write a poem in which the weather plays a crucial role in establishing conflicts.

Hurricane Season

The first year I lived in Florida, a woman told me, *nothing dies here but the people*. The first night of the hurricane, my sister stayed all night by the window, sure the frogs seeking shelter in its sill were telling her, *get out get out get*. A coffin lifted six feet by tree roots met us in the road the next morning, like earrings you'd find again on a long walk, a body shot in these hills. There was a man standing by the ditch until the storm passed, dangling like a two month wait for answers.

On a pallet in the closet, we waited out the rest of that storm. We talked about lost fish in coral enclaves. We fantasized about opening a storage unit business surrounded by hibiscus and crape myrtles. We tried to calm the storm by cooking its favorite meals: guns in nightstands, dead butterflies on poolside patio tables, grill-marked wicker mailboxes, signs for mayor, and yet only these untouched. We tried to go online for show-times. We agreed to observe curfews. We refrained from looting. We washed our clothes. We counted our dead in order to estimate the living.

Writing Prompt: Open a piece of writing (prose, poetry, recipe for zucchini bread, etc.) with a sentence or a line that is a blatant falsehood.

“I have never experienced anti-Semitism.”

There had been other incidents, but it is this one that always comes to my mind. It occurred during my senior year of college. I was living in Cambridge, England and had gone to London for the weekend to visit other college friends studying abroad. We were spending a stereotypically rainy afternoon at the National Portrait Gallery, and I was by myself in front of a photograph of the filmmaker Derek Jarman. The man who I now realize was hitting on me asked me what I thought of the photo. I

remember assuming he was a professor; he was wearing the proverbial tweed jacket with elbow patches and he seemed knowledgeable and scholarly, not to mention looking twice my age.

When he heard my accent, he asked where in the U.S. I was from. I told him that my family was originally from New York, and that I wanted to live there when I was done with school. He started quoting strange statistics about “the world’s Jewry” and conspiracy theories I had never heard of. I have never had a good poker face, and he must have realized how horrified I was, but he tried to laugh it off, perhaps hoping he could convince me to be someone else, even if only for the afternoon. “You can’t be Jewish,” he told me. “Your hair isn’t dark or frizzy. Your nose is fine. It’s not nearly big enough.”

I was rattled by the encounter, but when I told my parents about it, they were not surprised. “Get used to it, here, there, everywhere,” my father told me. “Don’t be so delicate. You’ll either be too Jewish or not Jewish enough for others.” His words, spoken, just as one part of my academic journey was ending and my graduate work was about to begin, have also remained with me. I did not understand what he meant by “not enough” until I began my first tenure-track position, however. I have been agnostic and secular for most of my life, at least as long as I can recall since that encounter so many years ago at the library in Cincinnati. That has always been “enough” for me. I am enough for me.

Writing Prompt: Describe a family tradition (maybe one associated with a holiday or celebration) unique to your family.

There is no formal name for this particular Bernheimian³ holiday, and you will not find it on any bank calendar, but I think of it “Writer Discovery Time.” Picture it: me “discovering” a writer I really liked, maybe Edith Wharton or T.S. Eliot, mentioning my new interest to my father, and him telling me that they were anti-Semites. I learned quickly that Mark Twain was a safe bet and very witty as well, and so I ended up admiring him more than Lord Byron or Ezra Pound, ironically, for someone who turned out to be a greatly admired poet. Sinclair Lewis was more than acceptable and the first American Nobel laureate writer, but let’s not even mention Voltaire. I wanted my father’s approval, not only of me as a person, but of my reading choices, my ability to decide and to discard, to think critically and to distance myself from writers who would have detested my existence amongst them, not just for my gender, but also for my cultural heritage, for what they might have perceived as my fatal flaw.

Write a scene (in poetry or prose) composed ENTIRELY of dialogue between two speakers with different ideas about a similar topic.

Me: I really, really liked *The House of Mirth*. What do you think about Edith Wharton’s writing?

My father: What an anti-Semite she was, that's for sure! She said HORRIBLE things in that novel and also in *The Age of Innocence*, but yes, not a bad writer at all.

Me: We also read some poems by T.S. Eliot today in class. My favorite was "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

My father: What? Eliot? He was even worse! Look at "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" or "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," and then we can talk about Prufrock, not that you'll want to.

Me: So what's safe to read?

My father: Here's a new Norton Critical Edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. You'll love it!

In 2011, I attended a week-long intensive seminar led by Sir Christopher Ricks on the poetry of T.S. Eliot at the National Humanities Center in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Once there, surrounded by other English professors with a variety of reasons for studying Eliot, I found myself stumbling onto what my father had alluded to so many years ago. I knew about the existence of these poems but had purposefully ignored them, perhaps knowing subconsciously that my admiration of Eliot would evaporate like the yellow smoke at the windowpanes in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the only poem of Eliot's that I still regularly teach in the classroom.

In addition to my own arguable hypocrisy, there are reasons by which I have justified its inclusion, from its heralding of Modernism to its cultural impact, its dense beauty and rich, satisfying allusions, and, simply, the conversation it allows me to have with students about dramatic monologues and free verse. I would tell myself that it was not necessary to "like" writers in order to teach their works. I moved away from biographical criticisms. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is not a song of "the way in." Rather, it is a closed song, one that does not allow for more connection. No one wants to be Prufrock, and yet we all are to some degree, especially when we wonder why we—unlike others around us—cannot hear the songs of the mermaids singing to each other at the end of the poem. I know for sure, even if he does not, that the reason I cannot hear them has nothing to do with my Jewish ancestors scattered across the map of Europe.

I cannot vouch for the fictional and doomed Prufrock, but it is not much of a stretch to imagine that the real-life Eliot would never have included me (or most of the writers I admire now) in his coterie. And yet, I am always left with the question of "why": Why would someone who could write so beautifully, in unforgettably resonant verses, choose to immerse himself in the ugliest racism, misogyny and anti-Semitism? Years later, I have no fully satisfactory answers to this question, other, but I know that I have moved away from Eliot and toward other poets. Often, these are Jewish women writers whose humanity draws me in, who continue to guide and inspire me to do better in my own work, both in and out of the classroom, to be inclusive and generous in my scholarship and my performance of an academic

identity and to maintain a higher standard of artistic integrity. Is that what I miss most in Eliot?

Writing Prompt: Write a very short story (120 words or less) using only present-tense verbs.

In a dream, poets appear to me, the ghosts of Muriel Rukeyser, Adrienne Rich and Emma Lazarus. They are the women whose poems still move me to create my own, whose words are always with me, whether I know it or not. "Why are you worried about Eliot?" they ask me, and I do not know what to tell them. "There is so much already about him to read. What about us?" they say, and again I have no answer. They are right. Why do I not write more about them and think less about T.S. Eliot? When I wake up, their voices are gone, but their pleas resonate with me and echo in my poems.

Writing Prompt: Imagine you have been deprived for a year of an activity you truly love and then have suddenly regained the ability to do it once more. What specific sensations might you have missed most and be eager to experience? Write about your longing and appreciation for this activity.

The prompt of the moment for 2020! What do I miss the most about teaching my normal face-to-face classes? Everything! Being in the classroom. The "a-ha" moments of my students. Being a student myself and learning from the discussions we have. Teaching the poets that still guide me, like Muriel Rukeyser, who has no qualms about asking questions that may have no answers: "How are we going to believe what we read and we write / and we hear and we say and we do?"⁴

The function of an instrument, for such a ballad or for any other type of lyric, is to create music; Adrienne Rich's "instrument in the shape of a woman"⁵ calls upon us—as women and academics—to make sounds. If we are fortunate, we will also have listeners. Now I find myself teaching students who are both present and distant. I see them in front of me in a classroom, and also on screens that allow us to be together regardless of distance and geography. What will classrooms after 2020 look like? How will we regain what we have lost over the past months? Will the instruments of us as women bridge these miles, the distances that are now part of our day-to-day geography?

I may not have all the answers, but I do have one. Can literature save the world? Yes, it can, and not just one world, but many. So many worlds exist *because* literature has created them for us, has rendered them real enough to be tangible at times, has split them apart and recreated what we desire and fear above all else. Literature gives us the possibility of immortality.

And yes, it remains up to us as educators to deploy the weapons of literature against chaos, against the loss of our world, battered by disease, rumors, uncertainty, fear and longing. This is a time for community to flourish, both large and small.

Erica H. Bernheim

I think of my students and our writing group. I think of the online communities that have flourished and come together to share pedagogies and to challenge each other during the most difficult of times to do better, to be better, to think better, to create better.

Erica Bernheim holds degrees from Miami University, The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is currently Associate Professor of English at Florida Southern College, where she directs the creative writing program, curates its Visiting Writers Series and teaches literature and writing seminars. Her first full-length collection, *The Mimic Sea*, was published by 42 Miles Press (Indiana University, South Bend). She is also the author of a chapbook, *Between the Room and the City* (H_NGM_NB_KS), and her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *The Iowa Review*, *Bennington Review*, *DIAGRAM* and *The Kenyon Review*. Her family's origins are mostly from Russia and Germany. ericabernheim@gmail.com

Notes:

1. Cynthia Ozick, "Rosa," in eadem, *The Shawl* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 16.
2. Emma Lazarus, "The South," in eadem, *The Poems of Emma Lazarus, I: Narrative, Lyric, and Dramatic*, ed. Susan L. Rattiner (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 2015), pp. 178–180.
3. This is a reference also to Hippolyte Bernheim (1840–1919), a French neurologist known to have influenced Sigmund Freud's work in psychoanalysis with his semi-controversial "Bernheimian Suggestion" technique.
4. Muriel Rukeyser, "Ballad of Orange and Grape," in eadem, *Breaking Open* (New York: Random House, 1973), pp. 45–47.
5. Adrienne Rich, *The Will to Change: Poems 1968–1970* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 14.

WRITING MY LIFE

Michèle Sarde

I was born into a Jewish family in France in 1939. Three paradigms shaped my childhood: crossing the Demarcation Line, the Möbius strip, and the Liberation of Paris in 1944. From these paradigms I reconstruct my journey in three parts: my life, History, and my literary work. The common thread uniting all of my books is my gradual emergence from the silence surrounding my origins. Their central theme is my quest to bring the Lost back into the world.

I first looked back upon my life and my writing at a colloquium entitled *Limits*, in 2008.¹ Until then, a border had already existed between my twin activities, as a scholar and professor of literature and as a writer and creator of literature. I thought about what this term represented for me and decided to illustrate it with three images: a map of France showing the 1942 Demarcation Line; an animated representation of Escher's Möbius strip; and a map of the barricades during the Liberation of Paris on August 24, 1944. In light of these three elements, I briefly summarized my biography.

The first frontier I crossed, in September 1942, was the Demarcation Line, as it was known. A product of the Franco-German armistice of June 22, 1940, it divided France in two: the northern, enemy-occupied zone, and the so-called free zone in the south, under the Vichy government.

I was just three years old, with Jewish parents and a high probability of not making it to the end of the war. Monsieur Blois, a Righteous Gentile from the town of Angoulême, supplied my mother and father, at no charge, with "authentic" counterfeit identity papers and laissez-passers declaring them to be local farmers by the name of Bourinet, allowing the couple to visit their land across the Line.

On reaching the border crossing at Langon, in the Gironde department, the German sentry pointed at me: "And the child?" The papers mentioned no child, and he sent us back to the occupied zone. Our people smuggler took us to another checkpoint where he knew the sentry: "I'll promise him a hare next time I go hunting. He loves those." In return for a dead hare, the live child that I was crossed the line between the two zones and gained another chance of survival.