Afterwords

Sparse in its telling, Maurice Sendak’s *Outside Over There* is the story of responsibility and rage in answer to the question “Am I the Other’s keeper?” It is the story of bearing responsibility for all others, for some other, more than others, in response to the betrayal of the Other in rage against the Good. It is the story of the passage of the subjectivity of the subject as substitution in outrage and expiation, or, in other words, *original forgiveness*. As Sendak once remarked about his masterly children’s book, “It was the story of me and my sister, basically. She’s Ida and her vexation, if not rage, in having to take care of me.”¹ The story begins before the story has begun, outside over there on the title page, before a page has been turned and any adventure begun. We see an image of a young girl, in blue, diligently and carefully aiding her little sister, in pink, to walk—that most human trait of freedom (standing upright and moving about the world, much as Cordelia lifts up her child-changed father to walk) emerging through an entrustment of responsibility for the Other such that freedom can become my freedom, their freedom. Alongside a fence lined with sunflowers—mysteriously grand—there sits, ominously, an apparition, cloaked and faceless, lurking and waiting. In the next frame, a second title page, and thus still outside over there with regard to inside the narrative proper, still yet to begin, the same scene has become enlarged to find the girl, apprehensive, holding her sister, equally concerned, in her arms, with a yellow bonnet. From either side of the fence, a group of apparitions—cloaked and faceless—approaches, armed with ladder and a French horn. Now the sunflowers appear ragged and have imperceptibly changed in composure with this change in scene. In the next scene, still before, or behind, the launch of the story, the girl carries the child away in the direction of the story, the subsequent page, with her back turned toward us, as a single apparition stealthily follows her as well.

*When Papa was away at sea.* The story begins, as do so many stories, with the departure of the father. Ida holds her sister standing next to her mother; both are facing the departing ship, while her sister looks in our direction but not at us, somewhat apprehensive, her eyes turned to her right in the direction of two apparitions who are also looking, with backs turned toward us, toward the sea.
And Mama in the arbor. The mother sits dejected and abandoned in the arbor with a faithful German shepherd; both look in the direction of the two apparitions walking off to the left of our image with a raised ladder in hand. Ida holds her crying sister, who, as evidenced by her bonnet lying on the ground, is visibly shaken. With the absence of the father and abandonment of the mother, Ida is now responsible for her sister. The assignment is hers alone. She has become hostage to her sister.

Ida played her wonder horn to rock the baby still—but never watched. Elected and entrusted, Ida alone bears responsibility for her sister, more than anyone, including even her mother. This assignment is “immemorial,” since it began before the story in the sequence of images in the title pages. Ida enters onto the stage of the world—the narrative—with her sister, carrying her, and to find herself alone with this responsibility. She enters the narrative in the absence of the father and abandoned by the mother, who, evidently dejected by the departure of her husband, has forsaken her responsibility for her children. Ida plays the wonder horn “to rock the baby still.” This is an ambiguous phrase vis-à-vis responsibility and rage. She plays the wonder horn to lull the baby (note: not “her sister” but “the baby”) to sleep, and yet she faces away and “never” watched over the baby, not even from the beginning. It is an odd attitude and position, since we rock a baby to sleep in the paradigmatic situation of entrustment—the child must trust that we will be there when she awakes—and we look at the baby, reassuring it, into her sleep, lulling the baby to sleep in the kind nursery of our care. And yet Ida never watched. Moreover, we have seen the horn she plays “to rock the baby still” before: prior to the narrative, in the title page, in the hands of the creeping apparitions. The wonder horn “lulls the baby to sleep” in calling on the apparitions to steal the baby away from under Ida’s negligent and indifferent care. She does not bear witness and remains inattentive to the baby; instead, she plays the wonder horn. For what purpose? “To rock the baby still” hits a decidedly ominous note: to murder the baby, her sister. The wonder horn, in this dark light, summons two apparitions in the window, one with a clawing hand to steal the baby away. The baby is evidently not falling asleep but is entranced by the wonder horn, ignorant of the murder that awaits her.

In the next scene, Ida continues to play her wonder horn as the sunflowers have crept farther through the window into the bedroom. Quickly, two apparitions have stolen the baby, who cries out looking and longingly toward Ida, whose back remains turned: it happened behind her back even as her horn would appear to have summoned the apparitions to “rock the baby still”—that is, to the exercise of violence in the night. Unbeknownst to her, the goblins—we now know them to be
goblins—have swapped the baby with a pale-looking ice baby. The ice baby appears as does a corpse: it has the bonnet on, has eyes staring wide open, and is propped up in the crib. In the next scene, Ida, “never knowing, hugged the changeling and she murmured: ‘How I love you.’” The object of her love is the replacement of love with hate. She loves a dead baby. Unbeknownst to her, love has become the desire to murder in her rage at this responsibility and entrustment. The sunflowers have protruded even farther into the room through the window. Throughout this story, from the title page the sunflowers have mirrored the working through of Ida’s ambivalence. She hugs the baby and declares that she loves her, not realizing that she hugs a changeling made of ice. She hugs both in love and in death, for the baby she hugs in love is the baby she wants to kill. Embedded in the notion of rocking the baby still is the anarchic antinomy of absolute responsibility and absolute rage. As she hugs the changeling, the “ice thing only dripped and stared,” and Ida now realizes that the goblins—her demons—had been there. The five goblins who have murdered her sister are Ida’s rage personified and projected within her. In the background, we at first see a ship at sea, and we then see the ship capsized at sea by a storm. Ida’s rage is rage at having been left alone, at being a survivor entrusted with responsibility in the absence of the father and the mother.

Ida, in the next scene, is angry and declares that the goblins have stolen her sister away to be “a nasty goblin’s bride.” In stealing away the baby to become a bride, the baby becomes entrusted to someone else’s responsibility but, more significantly, not Ida’s and no one other. In a hurry, she takes her mother’s yellow rain cloak, brings along her horn, but then “makes a serious mistake.” The mistake is to have “climbed backwards out her window into outside over there.” She makes the passage into outside over there backward—not facing outside over there but backward, still facing the room from which she is exiting. Because of this, “foolish Ida never looking” whirls about without ever seeing the goblin’s cave where her sister is kept. As she floats helplessly and lost above the world, the world below is depicted in a somber hue of colors. We see the baby abandoned in a cave, her mother still lost in her mourning in the arbor, and a mysterious pair of sailors, evidently bored, sitting on rocks. She would still be looking in vain, backward, were it not for hearing a call “from off the sea”—she hears her sailor Papa’s song: If Ida backwards in the rain would only turn around again and catch those goblins with a tune she’d spoil their kidnap honeymoon! Ida finds herself in the midst of a wedding. The goblins “hollered and kicked” and morphed into babies themselves. Armed with her wonder horn, Ida “charmed them with a captivating tune” and caused the goblins to dance in a wild frenzy, against their will,
and ever faster until they could no longer breathe. Ida continued to play her “frenzied jig” until the goblin babies danced so fiercely that they churned into a dancing stream. Ida’s frenzied playing of her wonder horn expiates her shame for her rage against the entrustment of her sister to her responsibility.4

In churning the goblin babies back into a stream, thereby releasing her sister and redeeming herself, Ida expiates the demons within her; for if the goblins at first exchanged her sister with the ice-baby changeling, Ida undoes this confusion, in changing—churning—the goblin babies (the demons of rage within her), thus allowing her to bear the responsibility for her sister. All the babies have been churned back into nothing, except Ida’s sister, who sits there “crooning and clapping as a baby should” in an eggshell. Ida now hugs “baby tight,” knowing that this is not a changeling ice baby, and heads home, back to the arbor, where Mama is still sitting with the faithful dog. Mama has a letter in hand from Papa, which reads, I’ll be home one day, and my brave, bright little Ida must watch the baby and her Mama for her Papa, who loves her always. That waiting is presumably unending—as unending as the patience endured in the entrustment of the Other. In the final image, we see Ida holding her sister by the hands, helping her walk, next to the fence lined with sunflowers, this time with her demons expelled. At times protruding and invasive, at times embracing Ida’s sister, the sunflowers (and other flora) set her narrative against a natural world within which she must undertake her ethical ordeal. Mystery pervades—the mystery of creation, as symbolized by Ida’s discovery of her sister in an eggshell, newly born—this natural world, as woven figuratively into Sendak’s landscapes.5 This mystery is the anarchy of Goodness: to be entrusted with the responsibility of wanting to die for the Other whom you yourself would want to murder, where, in an original forgiveness, we abide in an infinite patience for the Other as well as an infinite postponement of our own murderous being.