

Ghostwritten

Senior Honors Poetry Thesis

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Fancies

Adventure Fantasy

I wonder if early plane flight was
a lot less cruise ship, polished portholes
and perpetual mop pusher swabbing the terminal.
a lot more let out the main lines fast,
the thock, thock of the rope at
tug-of-war with the fastenings

a lot less keep the seatbelt from creasing my tie,
got to make it to this meeting on time,
and a lot more barefoot callus on the stiff as steel deck
rushing to help haul in the big tuna flopping hard
halfway between the depths and the saucepan

a lot more steer into the gale and bite teeth down
on tinfoil to catch the lightning,

a lot less of that silly safety dance,
arms at right angles then slow karate
chop down the aisle, never drop the smile,
now buckle, your seat belt.
now tighten, across

a lot more hardtack, weevil stowaways, storm
number three then screaming your throat raw
over land ho in part because you need release,
part because you need to thunk bare heels
on kickdrum dock before you can cast off start again.

Fantasy Library

I was impressed by the figure
of you standing behind
the polished wood main desk
in my favorite library on campus
done up like a real world
library in the second floor corner of Manning Hall,
the reading room a façade hiding tight steel stacks
threaded up a three floor tower in the back.

I love the green chairs
like halves of upturned buckets
in the children's section, and the low
shelves and tables for librarians like you
to glare over at the loud whisper 3rd graders
who would be drawing isosceles triangles for homework
if this wasn't a fantasy library.

I was returning the first half of
The Sandman by Neil Gaiman,
sliding the thin comics into the slot
opening like a balistraria
into the desk between us.
You reached through the wide end
to grab the books before I'd let them go,
and jumped as if we'd actually touched.

I didn't take the time to check you out
until I was back in the stacks,
down on my knees between beige shelves,
getting the rest of the books
for my fifth read-through
and you came to reshelve my returns,
which needed to be put further down the row
so you trapped us both.

The navy cardigan you wore in summer
almost matched your gray shirt,
and your jeans were blue, too
so you looked washed out
except your bright red belt highlighting
the extra room around your hips,
and how your dangling wrists next to them
were shapeless in the roomy sleeves.
As I forced past you and turned
I was staring at your vertebrae,
foothills of your neck.

I waited for you to indoor run
back to the desk to ring me up
and you started talking about checking out
fifteen books at once,
pronouncing manga with an awe
I've never let past my tongue.
I asked your name only
and hurried out because I wanted
to ask to hold your hand,

then go to dinner and read picture books,
learn that you can draw
and have good sex.
Afterward your fingers would sketch on my chest
as I told my stories
and if you could draw them
we could make it just like our favorite comics.

That night after scurrying out
I scribbled thin bones on
the sides of my poems
and they were not pretty,
but I was up all night drawing.

Now I'm back here
and I'd like to take you out.
Your pictures are so beautiful;
can I hold your wrist and follow
while you draw?

Everyone's Flat-Chested on a Computer Screen

This pixilated surrus on your chest--
like seeing you in bed with glasses off,
the soft pink colors mixed through boxes blurred
in digital pyramids almost stacking up.

Back when we shared a bed and I was blind
I had my fingers see like service dogs.
Now, when I press into your flesh transmuted
the touchscreen plastic slicks a phantom film

a rainbow wash on oiled fingerprints
that doesn't stick, a trick¹ of light.
New glasses render flattened pics 3D
with cellophane and chipboard frames. I want

you taking me apart from bit to bit,
and dithering me down to Kilobytes.
right click and save so you can scan me at
a whim curled tight beneath your tented sheets .

¹ I watched a man online holding a lemon
explain that yellow isn't shown on screens
so he relies on blue and red to mix
and trick my brain to seeing what it wants.

Late Summer Planting

I've come to think of Heaven as
the world, post-apocalypse
foretold by science fiction prophets
who've grown tired writing robots,

where all electric power's died,
our lustful suck is done,
our engines have no gas to burn,
and the grocery stores have even sold their shelves

when once again I measure time
based on plant, plow, and pick,
dance for rain and bless thunder,
write my verse by candlelight.

This Heaven's post-apocalypse,
past nature's ribbed revenge,
like plants that only start to grow,
after the forest's burned and burned.

If indeed, in this Heaven,
I'll need to farm my food,
then my redemption's gathering webs
in a crate of plastic odds and ends.

But pulling weeds from the raised bed
I found in my apartment's lot,
built by someone else's hands,
long forgotten, overgrown,

the dirt at first glance crusted khaki,
but cool and black at a knuckle's depth,
may be the waters of conversion
in which I'll need to dip my head,

not so my eternal soul
will rise to meet some leafy god,
but so I'll spend my last days crunching
these tiny purple carrots of salvation.

Carousel Trap

Coming up the hill with the engine gargling hard,
the rippled brown side of my neighbor's horse
looked impaled upon his rebar fence post.
Like a sadist's carousel mount, he strained his head
into the ground, lips flapping back over teeth
that just grazed the grass.
He munched with his head hung,
never breaking from the illusion he and I established.

Like the red panda that escaped the National Zoo,
found the next day in a bush in Adam's Morgan,
which someone told me is like the Carrboro of D.C.
I wasn't sure if the like was in the panda,
caged upbringing like a pole through its middle,
obscene baggage,
or imagining Greensboro Street in D.C.,
families dancing to college band guitar,
frayed jean shorts and PBR on
poorly engineered downtown turns,
the middle class escaping into rural peace
the poor folk trying to escape the farm,
the city trying to escape itself into town.

Ethnography

Ethnography

From the ramparts around Old Jerusalem
near the Zion Gate
are graves across a stand-stone valley,
the roofs of violent neighborhoods
close enough for a stroll.

Uninterested in the fifteen shekel tour,
I've scaled the small patch open for free,
the wall facing east towards an unseen flood
of cars waiting at a checkpoint,
soldiers handing candy to crying kids
while rough searching parents,
thinking of their friend who last night caught
a pregnant woman with a bomb.

I'm snorting subject matter hard up the nose,
climbing its walls high enough
to jump off and break both legs,

at night wandering late,
looking for the darkest graffiti over Arabic signs,
anyone saying Palestine or peace talks.

There's no customs declaration on
stolen stories, no weight limit
on my back pocket that should be bulging with them,
to be named and bound
and pulled out like a party trick
passed around workshop classmates
at the bar between beers.

Conflict Resolution

“In the conclusion of the tragedy by Chekhov, everyone is disappointed, disillusioned, embittered, heartbroken, but alive. And my colleagues and I have been working, trying, not to find the sentimental happy ending, a brotherly love, a sudden honeymoon to the Israeli-Palestinian tragedy, but a Chekhovian ending, which means clenched teeth compromise.”

– Amos Oz

1. Documentary

Don't play me the airy shriek of the scuds
and show the school children dropping too hard
from unadorned metal monkey bars
to get beneath the thickening layer
of siren wailing, on sprained ankles running
at the green steel door, paint peeling
but no time
 to read the sign
 anyway, some
 are too young to read.

Don't focus on their faces, smudged dirt and tears –
because aren't the sad child's eyes what's shared among modern tragedies? –
but instead on the folding of the world into
a reinforced box, the lines of the room that hold
their shape against the booms overhead,
the bending of time
in the crook of their
tiny jean-cased knees.

Don't then tell me of the too-high battle cries
of kids who throw their first stone
before their first kiss,
because they miss their older brothers and their uncles and their dad,
or maybe because they got bored at the eight-hour checkpoint,
but not as a piece of flying poetry, the rootless dirt
flung from a hand with no patch to plant a flag in.
Both the metaphor and the stone will miss
the teenaged soldier target,
but even a miss invites the thickening layer of tear gas.

Instead, zoom in on the boy lying, trying to worm beneath
the graying air, father's keffiyeh tossed over his head,
and a certain flattening of his world, the rigid tracks
his fingers leave in the dusty road,
the straight path he sees ahead.

2. Options

Generals like the word impasse
because it's easier to press
the button when your hands are tied above it,
but there are always choices in a conflict;
most are like apples, mealy, obviously off,
so that you have to feel the starving before
you'll sink teeth to the core.

It's when I see my people and their people
standing in the dirt yard we fight over,
the youngest combatants tossing
our rotten fruit up in the air,
catching it with the same hand, weighing,
and I notice how many of us are considering
siding with the hunger pains
that I remember how I was made:

3. In The Image of God

Image in this case is synonymous with part-from-the-whole;
like a printed snapshot of me at sixteen,
dressed in a too-big olive-green uniform and holding an Uzi,
grinning with my arm thrown around a real soldier with a straight mouth—
it tells you a lot, but it leaves out more.

There are always options, and it's always been
between these two trees, Life
and Knowledge. It's after I choose like mother Eve and I know
rotting apples hanging from both branches
that I, otherwise eager to own my godly attribute of creation,
start to point out my flatness, developed on glossy paper
with creases in my resin coating,
and how placing the world in my hands, oh Lord,
is like choosing to play catch with your own shadow.

Ghostwriters

Grammee's voice is haunting mother's mouth,
with creaking phrases born in yellow dirt,
the shards and mush of tongues in Babylon
all vying to escape her young lips first.

Ima dear, oh do you hear
30s China on your lips?
Can Daddy place the old world taste
on your every evening kiss?

If Mother's spoken English her whole life
where does she get this Hebrew on her tongue?
I hear cracked voices fleeing from Baghdad,
accenting Arabic to pass the border's guns.

Grammee knew no Mandarin
only broken Shanghainese
and during the invasion
Jews were taught no Japanese

yet every time my mother speaks I hear
the soldiers cross the border of her teeth
to bar the school doors on my Grammee's block
against the filth of Jewish ghetto streets.

Ima, if you told the tale
of flight from China to Israel
would you call East Africans blacks
or scream like birth behind tent flaps?

And me now, eating schwanda and stir fry
awafi offered with the meal's first bite,
how long until those places haunt my speech
or already do they ghost the words I write?

My Friend the Naval Officer

If someone blows a gasket in Iran
and really goes Osama on our ass,
then it's our job to shoot the sucker down.

I guess he meant the nuke, though he could've meant
the turbaned effigy who turned the key.

There're only four guys on our ship who get to say
Batteries Release. Don't you love the ring?
They get to turn the big gun on,
the one we call the Phalanx, that's no joke.
And then it's just like Strangelove in real life:
Mexican standoff, us and the tiny trail of smoke
forty-thousand feet above our heads,
the tiny laser tracker blipping on the screen,
and one guy's finger poised to stop it clean.

PLO Offices In Ramallah

How many times, really, will I be
in the offices of the PLO
other than this once
with three friends on winter break,
showing up unplanned
asking to tourist
hard working government officials
who actually grant us twenty-minutes
interrupting a woman in intelligence
before asking us to see ourselves out?
Not many, so we take the elevator
up not out, grinning at our daring
as it ride to the top floor, imagining
the next hallway spilling before us
lined with famous portraits with moving eyes
or banks of grid-lined computer screens.

Knowing elevators as we do,
it's the unexpected that shakes us,
opening not on expanding space
but tight shut wooden panel doors,
making me realize just how small
elevators are as we stare at polished cedar
etched with Arabic and a picture of the land
no lines for Gaza or the West Bank,
the whole place with its cloudy head
and spear point foot. I've already jammed
the button to go down
when Thomas says we shouldn't be here,
Max whipping out his phone to snap a picture
but only getting our uncertain faces
reflected in closed metal doors.

Modern Resurrections in Jerusalem

The Rambam Synagogue

They call the stone dome
seen breaching over the off-step alleys
of the Jewish quarter in grainy 1920s photographs
the kippah. The bare pate
stuck out, round among corners
until the Jordanian Legion blew it off in '48,
but now it's back, bald as ever,
and white among walls browned with Herod's dirt,
Solomon's dust. The head beneath
the yarmulke with stained-glass eyes
sulks askance towards the other dome in town,
gold plate shining from the high ground,
both buildings with backs and stoned up ears
turned from new taxis, lurching by
the feet of ancient walls.

Messiah

I've heard Jews scoff at the three days resurrection,
but here in the holy land Messianim's beard
is growing too long and white for it
to still be dead.

Maybe back when Constantine gave rebirth to testament
we Jews rejected living saviors,
but driving up Kvish 1 into Jerusalem
today there's no missing the wheat pasted posters:
Yechi Ha'Melech Ha'Mashiach, the Messiah will live.

I want to stop and fill my nails
with scratches of rolled paper,
but now I'm snickering
because the rebbe they've picked,
what a funny beard he's got,
colorless and square,
and he looks so cross
so I imagine him bellowing *I'll save you, grab hold!*
and my choked *to what,*
that twisted rope on your chin?
And what if it's true, and he sprouted angel wings

this old guy, horizontal in his black rumpled suit
and hat, head cocked so the beard dangled down
with all of the righteous rising to heaven
swinging in the wind by tangled fingers.

I know my vision means
I'm not ready for this savior.

The Barrier

One can be certain that the cries of joy
when the wall fell in 1989 were tremendous,
what with the old men born free then sucked
terribly into a new concrete womb,
never hoping for this twice proffered birth,
and those born inside,
about to see what was only old croaked legend.

A tale is whispered
that mixed in the whooping
of the freed men and women
was a stone-cold scream and
the tight tunnel whooshing of a departing soul
as if their sledge hammers broke
some devil's earthly prison,
setting it free to find a new home.

Easy to scoff at
until you see this newer wall,
serpentine twisted along sandy hills.
I've only seen pictures of
that old European demon,
but this one's got the same barbed crown
and the same angry spray paint tattoos.

The wall certainly picked a place to be reborn,
one where believers guard it with turrets
some of the older walls in town are worshipped
and kissed. When finally in Ramallah
they get to come at it with picks,
where will we next move
this idol to our safety?

All Day Inside

Roommate Philosophy

A toast to the question
– why is the Universe? –
asked early when your hair
not even a girlfriend could muss
stood bent up in a wide morning stretch

or after nights our
stomachs synced,
the rehearsed lines
– I'm hungry, me too –
then turn on the lights for two minutes
to grab a fork and the cold
pot of pasta stuck whole in the mini-fridge.

We'd eat in the dark,
crossed legs on our beds
then finish with words
that would spill groggy
from your mouth, face down
in your pillow as if it
whispered inspiration.

I miss
the one time good answer:
The Universe, Nick,
because what other container
for our love but
this glass orb terrarium,
improbable replication
of Coriolis effect and Ekman spiral,
golden pawed, stripe furred,
mica winged animalia
riding continental drift at the helm
toward a mountain raising crash,
the whole thing under
10 billion post-dead spotlights
hanging from the upper reach.

Over Creation

I killed twenty-seven spiders
moving into the new apartment
bringing in mop and broom before bed
serving dirt eviction
repoing dust bunny warrens.
I scrubbed evening into morning,
and so declared it good.

Three weeks of slaughter and I know
the Garden of Eden this isn't.

Eden's where the family's all out
working to bring in the wheat
next to chickens plucking bugs out of dung,
knobbed yellow feet
popped compression scratching
to fertilize grass into goat food.

In the millhouse the spiders sit overhead
pulling their harvest of biters and blight,
above fieldstones set in the thresh room,
a dance floor passed through generations
of claws and hooves and toes,
our browned fleshy feet.

Eden's where the sun tinges my face pink
through a jar of pickled beets
and the sun's pink, too, because it's morning
after evening, and it's very good.

Where Evil is the biblical snake
with arms fit loose into a suit,
power tie covering for bent stick shoulders;

he reaches out to shake my hand, no subtlety,
copping forearm over my bare breast
as he pulls me close, pointing, whispering,
"You live in a hovel full of spiders."

Bad Weather

There're only so many beer bottles I can bend
the metal tops off, sipping away from the TV
as ice shimmers and chatters off the walk outside the curtains,
before the oaty smell of the head,
vapors misting up the tapered glass neck,
become forever the olfactory trigger
for the hours of empty calendar
between now and early bedtime.

Chew

I'm struggling not to buy your death
in plastic skin and pictured grass label,
but I am weak, my flesh craves flesh.

After your life, quick, bereft
of rooted grass and open stable,
I'm struggling not to buy your death.

Your hooves on steel slats, shit in the clefts,
the stench of your pen drove the birds to the gable.
I am weak, my flesh craves flesh.

You and your neighbors live shoulder to chest,
the corn in your trough makes your stomachs unstable,
I'm struggling not to imagine your death.

The cost of this steak is not in its heft,
we've come so far from the farms of our fables;
it's as old as our species, coveting flesh.

Who here is the animal, oh what is left
of my human soul as I sit at this table
and hold my fork above your flesh?
I'm struggling not to eat your death.

Reckoning

Comes a day when whatever vaults
preserve all of our cached data
in whirring banks of hard drives
stacked like flattened hives
with blinking LEDs like bees
flitting in the air vent gaps
will have their honeyed secrets spilled –

All the porn my wife says she never watched
young girls always losing their clothes in odd places
like the zoo and ice cream shops, the Pay Pal record
of the voodoo dolls my adult daughter collects,
and exactly how many times her son's searched
how to make a bomb from stuff at home.

In the old days the priest served the function,
receiving the stories thrust at him even the closest
families couldn't share, and he may have chewed the cud,
but he never spat them back out.

Can't trust these computers though,
either they'll come to life or someone will hold Google up
or your phone company will sell it all for a billion, either way
we'll be published, every logged key,
every password made from our initials and birthdays,
all of the pictures we erased,
and here's a bet –

maybe, between the people too embarrassed
to sully the white bread and butter on their dinner table,
so they never bring it up, and those who love themselves
or each other enough to nod and move on,
it mostly won't amount to much of anything,
just whispers of cloud.

Succubus

Succubus

What if I wrote a poem about, say, your sisters?
There's the young one, fucked from an early age
and never dealing with it, so pretty
now living with her pot dealing boyfriend, twenty-six
so you don't have to hear
her dreaming flashback screams,
or the older one, she's fine
but simply doesn't want to talk
so you feel like an unused diary.

What if I wrote a poem about
the five members in your house,
passing in and out and small talk over birthday cake,
watching Modern Family each on a separate couch
or chair, everyone's pruned laugh
shot straight at the TV so it can't be mistaken for
an invitation to share.

All that heaviness,
compressing these diamond tears
onto your wet lips, warm soft fingers
squeezing mine hard. Let it all go
for that one moment of complete release
before I suck the rest out.

Exorcism

Winter break at the dead house
where it's hard to believe anything past
his locked bedroom door;
could be only this desk peeling
fake wood in strips,
'06 Alienware screen spitting green
off the yellowed blinds, but then they're there

ending islandry with hollow I'm home
and the shouldn't be loud
huff of the couch, lightsaber of TV on,
the curling skunk creeping under the door.

Mom and dad stopped brushing sly fingers
behind passed potatoes before college,
but they still pass the slow burning roll,
careful not to touch too much.

Isn't fire supposed to consume?
not here, the weed dies slow
tiny glint at the end
smoke choking the flame soft.
The only room without the smell
is the plant room, but it's no better.

On at 3 pm is the show about
ladies with cats, with sixty cats,
so they break down her door
and take them away,
tawny, calico, black,
but you don't get arrested for

too many plants. Petunias, begonias,
every plant but the one they use most.
They all sit, slow choke like marijuana fire,
half of them dead in dry dock dirt.
The aloe's curled its teeth on itself,
sick tentacle ooze, no CO₂
so they dry socket heave and rot.

Something shifted when he saw mom
go to work on rock hard soil with a knife,
eleven-inch Wusthof spitting chunks to
drabble on the floor. With every cut the cloud
of fruit flies burst up, her
flaccid hair flipping
with each deep plunge stab.

He ran, grabbed the wrist behind the knife
coughing flies and mom I'll help then dragged
weak plastic pots thumped down stairs
while she stood and stared.

All the plants out on the lawn,
and it's back up into the room,
flies sticking to arms sucking sweat
get the window up and whoosh
we're back, there's mom's smile
asking about air freshener.

Even dad got up to watch
as they vacuumed and scrubbed
just outside the door and wouldn't come in,
so he knew this was the place, air sifting through,
where mom could sit with brushes lined straight,
painting to the hiss of a clean burning candle.

Civil Disobedience Arrest, June 3rd 2013

There's a man hissing and wincing
on the next seat in the gray school bus
as his hands tinge darker behind his back
between the cuffs. The fleshy part
beneath his thumb bruised plum
against the hospital-white plastic ties.

As the bus trundles fifty of us south
those with hands cuffed in front
work paired to jimmy windows free,
two bound hands on each plastic tab, push in
then up, and I can hear cicadas through the heat.

At detention they free our hands
deep indents, I can see the color rushing
just beneath my slow ballooning skin.
I am struck that no one here's in charge,
not the men in hats working screens
or the few in gray camo, strapped rifles dangling.
The lone doctor, leaning in the corner,
flopping his stethoscope on its black rubber tube,
looks furtive, then checks his own heart.

Red-hand-man and I are shunted
through the dance as one, first search,
then prints, sit and wait.
Along the way we meet a man on wheels
who's had his hands cuffed in back so that
he has to sit on them to keep his chair.
He tells us that, unable to get him up
the stairs into the bus they
called a full ambulance crew
to silent ride him strapped down on a bed.

Still, with hands and wheels and all
we have it better than the regular guys,
some in orange zip-up suits, some gray stripes
some with their hands shackled to their waists, and
a kid, probably thirteen,
banging again and again on the glass in his cell.

I watch the him until
it's time to take my mug
and an officer takes my glasses,
then yells at me
when I can't find the camera.

New Toaster

He posts proud pictures of 4 AM waiting,
bare hands shoved in thin windbreaker pockets
and a scarf, soon to be shed.
Behind him, dozens in line,
all dressed somewhere
between winter and summer
in Atlanta November,
thanks given for great deals,
now available on Thursday.

She retweets shots of picket lines—
a middle aged man with a blurred name tag
on a blue vest grown too large
since he started on stamps,
twin high school daughters spending the holiday
striking with mom,
a man who could have grandkids
ringing up someone's last minute cranberry sauce,

but she writes nothing on his post,
silence she wants him to hear as more
but knows he'll hear as only that.

Next, when she spends the night
and the morning after he makes toast
he'll tell her the story and instead of a fight
she'll fill her mouth with jam and crunching.

Endless

My friend in the bio lab at Duke
says implanted computer nodules
are all the rage says that
it's only a matter of time
robots are walking down
the aisle arm in arm with brains,
already at the World Cup
they're unveiling an exoskeletal suit that
noded up to a quadrapalgeic kid's head
will let him kick a ball down the field,
once we map emotions
they'll be able to copy-paste us into
everlasting machines.

We both say we'd do it,
our fear of death is great enough
to computer clone ourselves
so exercise is replaced with
oiling elbow sprockets
and we have to charge at night,
sit upright near a socket
with an arm thick tube spreading
revitalizing crackle into our steel sacrum.
He and I'd be the first to shake hands
and hear a clank.

Lose the doughy softness
of running a hand up a lover's thigh,
lose my glasses fogging underneath
her meat-warm sigh, lose the brief
awkward of noses bumping as I try
to get a closer look at her eyes,

all so I can lose it all forever.

Family Man

Double Cross

I will leave here
and put on
these pressed olive slacks,
face foes in my red-heifer boots,
camp beneath stars seen the same
across the Green Line,
M16 pillowed under my cocked squint,
send plain, censored postcards stateside
where she leans from a chair by the fireplace
to burn them with a hunched back.

I will stay here
and put on
this pressed family
face, earn money and
camp beneath stars seen the same
across the Atlantic Ocean,
our children pillbugged between us,
her hands clasped tight in mine against
redacted dreams recalled in dying coal light as
longing hunches my back.

Youth Advisor

I get an email from one of my kids' parents
requesting I call about a confidential matter so I'm calling
first thing, testing my morning croak against the ring
and then we're talking about her kid and marijuana use as
I'm back pedaling through teetotaling father and substance frontier
pioneer friends, through mom more against the cancer sucking
then the pot itself, through Jess who plummeted honors to Fs
within months of her first time, but there was the boyfriend who hit her, too,
and besides, I snuck rum in the basement and almost got kicked out of summer camp,
but this mom's saying I was the typical good kid, I didn't roll with a weaker crowd,
and her speech has all of the couplings undone between the words
so I'm squinting down the gaps to see if she thinks I'm better than him.

Confessing the Worst I Did to You

Knowing I'd never break your role model
me, I told you about
the alcohol poisoning, sick
twice in the same weekend,
locking myself in two bathrooms to
throw it back up,
one long public hall of urinals
and stalls vacated late at night,
one friend's beach house,
a skeletal ship in a bottle with
furled membrane sails balanced
on the back of the toilet.

You got to hear when
I made out with Bryan's girlfriend,
and how he never talked to me again even
when I apologized two weeks later
twenty minutes, he just stared at his feet,
and I apologized to his tuft of blonde hair
always stuck out his backwards cap.

I told you about
feeling up Phoebe, 9th grade
in the dark theater during *Chicken Little*,
how she never spoke to me either,
and how we went ice skating the next day
with our friend Jonah, the three of us
shuffling along the boards in a line,
Phoebe hiding in front of Jonah
and smiling when I
slipped down on my knees,

I didn't hide from you
the story of the black eye
I gave Tyler he told
the teacher was from a baseball;
poor fat kid, everyone always picked on,
and I punched him.

I even told you
about not getting it up
when she finally wanted to do it,
cleaning up the wasted
condom afterward and the lube stain
on the blue pillow case looked
to me like a shark fin stuck out of waves,

but never did I tell you this:

when we were four and seven,
running down the hall
approaching the right-angle turn
into the living room with the 70s popcorn
finish on the walls, yelling at the
aliens chasing us, throwing fireballs,
you ducked and looked behind,
and I suddenly wanted to push you,
a shove on the shoulder and tripped tiny sneakers,
relishing the muffled crack of your
head on the faux hardwood runner, listening to your screams
grow louder, I wanted to say sorry and not mean it,
so I did.

You lay crying for what seemed a long time,
and I knew I was your keeper.

So different from the time you may remember,
six years later, wrestling on the rashy carpet,
me sitting on your stomach, and afterwards
when you said you wanted to stay in bed
because I'd hurt you, I cried harder than you did
wanting to take it back, choking,
I never did.

Splendid Envy

Brother's new girlfriend is even cuter
in person than in pictures online
and brother looks real good next to her
in his best teal shirt and dark skin,
new stubble on his straight, hard jaw.

Through the window
they're a terrarium of smiles,
and as each grin fades
I want to catch it up to dry
and pin on a collection board
with careful, tiny labels.

There's hope, like viewing
an Earth-sized blue green planet
through a giant telescope,
and semi-desire,
because I've got a girl at home
and friends and a good life,
but still that splendid envy
like being handed a glass sphere
of delicate worth and knowing
in another mood I'd
go ahead and smash it.

1995 Minivan

Four of my high schoolers have a youth group dance in DC,
and I find myself driving them up in my family van—
Paler than sky-blue metallic paint job has lasted
270,000 miles, age tracked against my brother
entering college, one month younger than it.

18 years in the back
while dad drove us up and down the coast,
furthest once from Clayton, Georgia to
the Laurentian Mountains, and countless
between Raleigh and Queens,

leave me quiet up front,
head locked on I-95 so I won't turn to see whether,
holding a French baguette turkey sandwich
as long as his forearm, snacks packed up to his knees
and eyes cast down at a Gameboy screen
there's a tiny version of me back there
still kicking the front passenger seat.

Behind the wheel I'm asking
who needs to stop and pee,
and they'd rather hold it in
a few more exits if we can just find a Subway.
I roll my eyes all teenager
and wonder if I'm old enough to call high school kids kids.

In Subway, two of them have to change their order twice
and another is complaining
she doesn't like any of it,
how do the other people see us
since I'm too young to be a dad corralling five teenage girls.

My mom and dad wouldn't stop
for food except one hour at Trader Joe's on the way home,
favorite craving they picked up in California,
the closest to Raleigh back then in Alexandria, Virginia.
We'd stock sauce and crackers, our favorite potstickers,
and my brother and I each
a full family bag of salt and vinegar chips,
then race south to get the dumplings in the freezer,
the empty chip bags left crumpled on the floor until morning.

Now in the car I'm scolding them
for the trash at their feet,
picking at something hard that keeps scratching into my thigh.
I remember then my mother's earring, melted plastic, colorful star
sharing my seat, a piece of her stuck
in the cushion from our first summer in Southern heat

Southern Jews

Dissatisfied

The Torah is a long scroll full
of Jews wandering the desert surviving
off bread raining from the heavens,
cool rocks spitting water;
their enemies are smited – Egyptians, Canaanites,
Moabites, Cushites, Edomites, all red blood
chunking the sandy grit brown,
God manifested in the charge of battle
as a two-hundred cubit high pillar of fire,
and afterward they're still trying to find
the curtain to lift up,
can't stop not ignoring
the little man behind it.

The 5th Avenue Conservative Synagogue

The regulars murmur nice to pray outside,
but country mouse can't pray in this city

Instead, I'm glancing up from the evening Amidah
through the high iron fence around the yard,
losing the rhythm of my rocking prayer
in the skyscrapers guarding the corner from the sky.

Towering concrete idols
with shaded window eyes
and fire escape arms
reach down to demand sacrifice.

The passing supplicants offer
what they have: bike chains chitter,
the signal for the blind calls like an 8-bit cuckoo-clock,
and a woman slams her hefty handbag on the roof
of an offending taxi as she crosses the white bar bridge,
all sounds up the streak marked rain gutters
where the buildings seem smelted to the ground,

I think back on other outdoor services:
watching the sunrise match the layered sands
at the bottom of Makhtesh Ramon,
feeling no wet but the crisp blow of
rain through the screened in porch of a cabin
in the Georgia Appalachians,
dolphins cresting at Virginia Beach, 7 AM
dorsals signaling the sun in our direction,

and I'm ready to give prayer up for the night
when I spot a tree,
eternal movement against crane-cast frieze,
softest creaking, the wind of god in the breeze.

I know the tree as
ancestor to my siddur,
rocking like Jews working hard to pray.

I close the book on the black
and white print, hearing the leaves
rustled like turning pages between twigs,
their veins rendered in the setting sun
prayerful words in a delicate green scrawl.

The Last Jew of Goldsboro

The southern town suffered from the tracks
that widened out Center Street
bringing commerce from across the globe,

The timber downtown stores, dried in summer heat
would often catch on sparks from passing trains
passing flames along the block.
The firefighters back then weren't
much but a bunch of guys with buckets
and so each train that screeched through
brought both needed goods and fear.

One night back in 1926
most of the Aldermen were found
filling up the firefighter's pails, not with water
but with local brewed corn spirits.
They invited the men outside to drink,
and bring out their pick or shovel.
Come morning on a railcar just outside town
were stacked all of the tracks and ties.

In train times Weil was the big Jewish name
and little Goldsboro was matzah ball hub of East NC
with a grand brass organ in the sanctuary
and the only Jewish cemetery in that half of the state.

Some could blame the town's demise
on those Aldermen, but they couldn't have
kept trains in fashion or
the label Goldsboro from shrinking
on each new map edition published.

There's no knowing if David Weil's the last Jew in town,
but he knows he's closing up shop.
Eight years back the only growing industry
was the soup kitchen, so David lent
the synagogue building for good
The sanctuary still has its ark,
carved in dark hard woods and etched white stone,
metal grid shelves stocked with boxed food reflected
warped in the tall organ flutes.

The largest testament to the Weils
is a marble center piece in the family plot,
near the Rosenthals and the Greenbergs,
and some faded stones etched to last forever
that have barely made it one hundred years.

Youth (I'll Be an Old Man Here)

The tale of the old man who planted a Carob tree
nearby a passerby who wanted to know why
the old man didn't think he'd die before it bloomed
used to be about feeding future generations
but down South these days
it's a parable about not moving to New York

or DC or LA or wherever it is
my Jewish friends are going after college
because up there they have cultured arts,
fermented arts with the carbonated taste of culture,
plus more Jews.

Like in the middle of Times Square they think
there's this carob in eternal bloom,
red anemone stalks of miniscule spiraling flowers
growing into luscious plump spouses
in the rippled brown pouches weighing the branches
down, they can reach up from the shaded below,
crack a pea open and go on a date to the museum or opera.

In the story, the carob takes seventy years to bloom,
so in carob-years New York is just a kid,
the Colonies are barely in third grade,
human society hasn't seen much
of the carob family tree.

It's easy to overlook the sapling down here
poking up between hard oaks. We have a picture
of my 3rd grade youth group, ten kids
unable to hug all the way around
one of those old trees. It's hard to remember
someone planted most of the oaks in downtown Raleigh,
invented the bluegrass chop and barbecue,
even the Torah starts before there were Jews.

Young families are moving into our synagogue
with middle school kids,
something beautiful in their awkward
elbows suddenly too far from their wrists
springing buoyant like new boughs in wind
dancing to Beyonce.
They all want a butt like hers,
though they don't really know why they want it.

I'll raise this bunch up and hope they'll learn,
but chances are they'll keep chasing
whatever it is they don't know why they want,
ending up in New York looking for
shriveled brown pods, crackled husks
shucked aside on the sidewalks.

Mongrel

The Wooly Worm Festival is to Banner Elk
as the State Fair is to all of North Carolina:
short chain link fence squaring the downtown field,
only one half row of food tents
with block letter signs, red on white
reading hand dipped corn dogs or
chicken on stick, and the single announcer's voice through
the microphone that sounds like a megaphone
twanging "Christmas's just around the corner,
and it's always someone's birthday, so you might as well
take home an original mountain craft."

Visiting with his two friends,
the man hopes this is directed at the flocks from Florida
who migrate every year to see the rust-orange
and dark-brown striped caterpillars race up strings
on the big yellow stage, hay from the bale benches
sticking in Gators jackets, and oranges
on half the license plates in the lot.
In truth, he's just as much a market target
as Gramma Gator, coming up from UNC for Fall Break.
He swallows the Tarheel Born in his alma mater,
can easily switch off any accent he's picked up,
and anyway in the mountains he's an outsider.

It was earlier that week
sitting with hot cider in the Bull's Head Bookshop
that another Jewish student had said
she's never felt like she doesn't belong,
and he thought about the too much touchy-feely
he'd picked up from Jewish summer camp,
avoiding eye contact with non-Jewish friends
who came over Friday nights and waited
awkward while the family sung foreign prayers,
and how walking down the street in Chapel Hill,
liberal oasis, you could still get called
fucking faggot Jew for wearing a kippah.

His grandma in New York
had long called them her country mice,
listening over the phone as her Queen's born son
picked up sir and ma'am,
affirming each visit that, while it's pretty,
she could never live in the woods like this.
He made fun of Dad's first y'all along with the rest,
brother saying we're not from here,
and when he started saying y'all himself
he'd add it's just political,
replacing the gendered "you guys,"
but it was also affection,
a growing taste for bluegrass
as he picked up his first mandolin.

The year after high school, living in Israel,
he'd had dinner with a religious family
in a town in the rocky desert,
coming in from the blowing sand to a table filled
with eight children and the mother serving soup,
the kids laughed as he held off from eating,
but he told them Southerners are taught to wait.
He set the table as it was at home,
fork on the left and knife facing inward on the right.

The Jews from DC and up north still ask
if there are really enough of you down there for a service,
and what, no kosher deli?
They laugh when the Raleigh rabbi jokes out Shalom ya'll
at the Yankees come down for a bat mitzvah,
but they miss the truechutzpah of it all,
rabbi nodding over visiting heads at his congregation
in a synagogue on a street of churches

Sitting on a hay bale
in his boots and jeans and flannel shirt,
the mountain leaves like the skin of a white nectarine,
a banjo and fiddle chopping off to the side,
he marvels at the similarities,
his extended Jewish family and this small Southern town,
and how the wooly worms too are sections strung together,
the orange and brown stripes seeming to mix and blur
as one lengthens and shortens itself in a stretching crawl
around the palm of his hand.

Shiva at a Stranger's House

The house is too large now for one.
On the door lined notebook paper
scotch taped on, reads *come in close the door*
we have cats (my grandmother's answering machine
after twelve years alone still says *we will call you back*).

I'm here because it takes ten Jews to mourn.
New family in town from New Jersey
less than one year here and mom's dead.
Worried they wouldn't have a minyan,
I got a call saying show up at 7:30.

I find the living room packed so I stand in back.
Youngest in the room by half, the dead woman's daughter
is much older than me and she's crying hard as her father,
no tears now, says *you all are gathered here because*
you loved her.

I think I should've brought something,
fold out rickety card table is full of rugelah and babka
and cake European Jews eat such sweet food,
rabbi's saying *taste a bit of her*
sweetness these cakes represent
I let myself out without a bite.