

**A Young Man's Art**

*(for Bob Dylan)*

A strum belly-deep  
a voice rising from the Iron Range,  
boots broken-in on indifferent streets

homeschooled with a radio and 45s  
harmonica licks following the Mississippi  
through this split nation, its twisted history

inventing a past out of circus side-shows, a corduroy hat  
a river-raft swapped for a four-door  
always one more corner to turn

for a troubadour with fingers crowned in calluses  
who crashes on couches walking distance to Folk City

its cramped tables, black plastic ashtrays, two-drink minimum  
the stage a spotlight confession, an accusation in F major  
a distillation of late-night conversations preserved in alcohol,  
then amplified

and the word was a match to a wick, a flare for the phrase  
that flays  
a handout of runaway verse  
hanging in the air like the last tonic chord

**Pomegranate***Tu Bish'vat, 5784*

Decide on a whim to buy one—  
this rosy hand grenade,  
this smooth sealed-in-upon-itself.  
Score it carefully and pull it apart  
the way a video instructs you.  
So many arils, so closely packed,  
it's almost terrible to look at—  
though how neatly fitted, how fragile  
yet intact, how brilliant as rubies.  
Curl back the pithy inner skin,  
strip it away, let it rise and float.  
Scoop jewels from the water,  
heap them in a bowl. Taste the sweet,  
the sour, the small explosions,  
the crunch of bitter seeds you swallow;  
trace the stain on your white blouse.  
You've heard eating this is good for you.  
As you eat, think of 613 *mitzvot*  
just as faceted and interlocking,  
most of which you'll never fulfill.  
Think too about fertility and love,  
about every possibility you fear  
must have withered long ago.  
Consider rituals you haven't cared for,  
and the holiday you're observing;  
a country you've never been to  
you're determined must survive.  
So many metaphors—choose one.  
Next year perhaps another.  
Meanwhile, recall this fruit,  
how perfectly it filled your palm;  
remember the knife, the breaking open.

## **Fifty-Eight Steps**

*A terzanelle*

Sirens howling before the dawn  
Fifty-eight steps to the shelter below  
Emerging again to the light of morn

Missiles rain down from a distant foe  
Boom boom boom as they land so near  
Fifty-eight steps to the shelter below.

If I leave the house I am filled with fear  
For where to shelter if the sirens sound  
Boom boom boom as they land so near

I tremble as missiles roar to the ground  
Iron Dome shrapnel falls from the sky  
For where to shelter if the sirens sound

The elderly stumble, the children cry  
Searching for shelter in the open street  
Iron Dome shrapnel falls from the sky

The elderly stumble, the children cry  
Sirens howling before the dawn  
Searching for shelter in the open street  
Emerging again to the light of morn

## Woman as an Aramaic Incantation Bowl

curses of demons                  curses of humans  
                  swallows of the wounded                  I'm cursive scripted  
 smooth              rough              coiled  
 find me hidden in a dusty corner  
 a threshold              a hillside              courtyard of the recently deceased              I'm dirt-  
                  swallowed              beet-colored              beaten              lips on fire  
                                  throat preserved these centuries  
                  my clay absorbs grief              I hold  
                                  a serpent eating its tail  
    call him ordinary  
                                  hidden in my bowels              but I'm rambling  
    I can do the job  
                                  terracotta  
                                  (with or without eggshells encrusted)  
                  I'm like an amulet              calm  
                  on my knees              I bend over  
 stain the ground              chanting until  
                  they bury me face down  
                                  and the serpent within  
                                  escapes

## **Cycling Though New Orleans**

I ride on silver spokes  
down streets with French names  
to Jackson Square  
the scent of chicory and  
fresh *beignets* from the café.  
It is early  
so I have the levy  
and a mauve Mississippi  
all to myself,  
her banks smudged soft in primeval fog.

I wave to the artist I met yesterday  
as he opens his shop  
stop to listen to an old man  
caressing his violin on a park bench  
his magic hands  
the color of the burnished wood.  
He plays me good morning before I ride on.

I pass tiny houses  
painted from a mad palette  
of turquoise, magenta, mustard  
all carpeted in deep purple shadows  
Porch swings creak like crickets.  
*Fleur di Lis* on everything  
even the garbage cans.

Live oaks bent in arthritic poses  
their Spanish moss beards  
grown back since Katrina's unkind trim.  
Geranium and "Wandering Jew"  
knit into lacy balconies.  
A man gathers empty beer bottles  
in a flour sack  
last night's bourbon on his breath.

I pass a gingerbread mansion  
whose bricks have seen more than  
a hundred summers.  
The garden is lovely with lilac  
the porch long and deep,  
but I see  
way in the back  
the old slave quarters.

**Blue**

There were times when her head needed a soft landing  
A gentle glide to a silent space  
Away from the ordinary everyday  
Of clutter and noise and dishes and kids  
And jarring school runs.  
Sitting alone amongst puzzle pieces and discarded Lego  
The fog of motherhood would overwhelm her  
But in a synapse snap she could transport herself to a special place  
Her piece of perfect paradise  
Just by closing her eyes  
She was producer, director and star of her own film, unwinding in vibrant colour inside her head.

She skipped lightly down a cobbled pathway that curled through vineyards down to the sea  
A sheet of shimmering blue that twinkled seductively  
She was hot and young and carefree again  
As she settled under a cyprus pine, its fallen needles infused with lemon, mint and sage  
And watched the interplay of sun and sea.  
A blending of turquoise, aquamarine and cobalt  
She dove in with delight and let the cooling waves cradle her.

Some foreign sound jarred her reverie  
“Mom, I’m hungry! What’s for lunch?”  
The film faltered and flickered  
And “The End” appeared in script inside her head  
With a sigh she raised herself and searched for frozen chips  
While a wistful smile lingered gently on her lips.

**In Memory\***

We never met, nor shall we ever meet  
but I know you through your poems  
that stand up and breathe  
they talk to me and reveal  
your love for Israel, its history and people.

You received joy from nature's gifts  
and now, through you, I hear figs falling  
I see ripe olives being picked from ancient trees  
I feel the hot, soft sand as you walk by the sea  
we shall fly through windswept branches  
and, together compose poetry.

*\* Judith Weinstein Haggai and husband Gal were murdered 7 October 2023*

## **Ancient Ceremony**

At my grandson's *brit*  
the adult males – uncles, grandfathers, father –  
gathered around his cherub face, his tiny  
arms and legs, still red, and of course the other  
limb, that was the focus of their attention,  
intent on welcoming the next generation  
into the family, the clan, the tribe.

A *brit* is such a masculine celebration:  
who spared a thought for the distraught mother? –  
a quivering mass of nerves and hormones, huddled  
alone in another room, and wracked by shudders  
as one faint wail was followed by another.

*He cried less than his brother three years ago*  
said the proud father, struggling to console her,  
but she only relaxed when, in her arms cuddled  
and full of milk, he fell asleep on her shoulder.

This ritual is so ancient, no-one knows quite  
how we acquired it; *was* it God's command?  
Did we get it from the Egyptian? From the Hittite?  
Or perhaps, for reasons we don't understand  
it was Neanderthals who first decided  
to do this to their sons? One thing we know:  
it must have been a patriarchal society –  
mothers, had they been asked, would have said no.



## **Underground**

My dog plays in the garden  
The phone rings out a sound  
I've left the door ajar too long  
and they are underground.

I organize the bookshelves  
the soft and leatherbound  
and smile in silence in my home  
as they are underground.

I dress in soft pajamas  
with laundry strewn around  
and I ignore each sock and shirt.  
They are still underground.

I read another story  
My once-lost keys are found  
I simply go about my day  
while they are underground.

I live the same day over  
just like a tape rewound  
Each week becomes an itching blur  
as they stay underground.

I say again that I am fine  
with rancor all around.  
Of course. I'm good. What else to say?  
They're starving. They are bound  
and when will they be found?  
We stand on higher ground  
with ashes all around.  
I strain to hear the siren's call  
and they are underground.

**Resonance**

“Shall I pray?” I ask in my head as a magnet one hundred thousand times more powerful than Earth’s magnetic field scans its content, focusing on a hole long left in my left lobe by a skilled woman who handled a scalpel to cut out a tumour when my now-eight-year-old dozed in utero.

A blue blanket over my limbs and torso, I lie, eyes shut, arms by my sides, in the confined space-ship-sterile tube, the resonance machine’s cadenced hammering & beeping louder than a man’s voice through headphones singing “Tell me that you love me.”

I doubt there is anything out there. Mom, I don’t think of you enough, do I? At least I write poems of you. Want me to write some more? And amid the cadence, I don’t even believe in talking to you. You’re nothing now. Still, I emerge from the icy white cylinder with a smile. The technician is so nice, calls me “*Mami*”—Hebrew not for an embalmed cadaver, but for “darling.” And a friend says, “positive thoughts are a form of prayer.”

## **Run and Return**

How I love those Jews  
who tossed off religion  
tumbled head over heels to taste the secular  
like the “wicked” son at the Passover seder, who at least shows up.  
And when the blind grandfather stumbles over the words  
he gently leads him back:  
“Ve he she’umda” -“This is what has stood by our fathers and us.”  
And when the young man with the black hat holds out phylacteries with tangled straps  
entreats the bareheaded boy in the market place  
he shrugs and obliges, though he no longer believes – since a Jew must lay tefillin.  
And when Yosale, the glittery drag queen, who used to be a yeshiva boy  
opens her act, she grabs an energy drink mixed with vodka  
raises it to her red, red lips  
and without even thinking, chants:  
“Blessed are you, Lord, King of the universe  
by whose word all things came to be.”

## **Motherland**

You want me in pieces.  
Silent pieces.  
Burned pages.  
A memory with no mouth-  
like the jewish museum you love:  
dust, ash,  
nothing sharp.

I am not a country,  
but I carry its wound.  
I am the daughter of flight,  
of exile,  
of return.

I come from cracked mirrors,  
names scraped off,  
homes buried  
under sunlight  
that pretends.

You want me soft.  
Still.  
Grateful  
for the violence-  
as long as it's dressed well.

You sharpen your certainty  
on my skin.  
like a number you gave me-  
so you don't see my face.

You want my grief cut to size.  
my fear in full sentences.  
my birth apologized, excused.

Wrong land.  
Wrong mother.  
Wrong motherland.

I will not explain.  
Will not perform.  
Will not bleed beautifully  
so you can call yourself good.

I will not be  
less alive  
so you can feel pure.

## **The End of Everything**

The wood is dark here  
although I know it well

One by one friends head home.

No goodbyes, most  
I never see leave.

Maybe  
they have people waiting  
mothers, fathers  
with food on the table

all the jams, jellies, sodas of  
every childhood summer  
long gone dogs, cats,  
warm kitchens, open arms.

There is silence now, vast sky  
the glide of planets I  
cannot name.

I am terrified, although that is  
what it must be

I would not have missed  
a minute  
of this life, for anything.