

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 *mitzvoth*
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

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 de 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 cypress 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 Gad were murdered 7 October 2023.
The phrases "I hear figs falling" and "through windswept branches"
are references to Judith's poem "This, too."*

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 rewind
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’amda” —“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.