

The Merit of Ancestors

1. Try to Remember

Try to remember moments you can't know.
Not just the long slow summers
at the beach. The high rolling waves you rode. The sand crabs' nips.
The time your mother took you to see
Jack Kennedy, hatless in the bitter wind
coming in off the East River as he leaned
over the five-foot-tall labor leader
and warmed the old man's hand in both of his,
hair on fire in the bright winter sun.

You should remember moments you can't know.
Not just your father speeding through the Seder,
your mother's off-key voice that cracked
as she tried in vain—every year without fail—
to reproduce her father's *nigun* for the closing song:
Chasal siddur Pesakh kehilkhato

You must remember moments you can't know.
More than the conversations that swerved into rapid-fire Yiddish
when you came into the living room, though you did make out
some of the hushed names and words: Mottek, Rivka, pogrom, lager.

Remember the moments you can't know.
The murders, a few months apart, of your great-grandfather
and your grandfather along with two hundred thousand other Jews
in the Ukraine and Poland twenty-six years
before you were born. The way your grandfather
used to look up from his Talmud, walk over to his open study window,
stand there as your mother bounced her ball in the yard just outside,
and count every bounce.

2. What My Mother Revealed

Every Friday morning the slaughterers' collective would gather in my grandfather's study and place the week's earnings in assorted currencies on the large table,

where, from the time she was eight, my mother, his youngest, would count out the shares as her father beamed at her from the head of the table, where, other days, he'd pore over his Talmud.

A couple of years later, when she eyed him from her position on the floor of his study, distracted from her math homework by having glimpsed a classmate being beaten by his father as she'd passed his house after school,

in answer to her question he wove a long tale about the one time his own father struck him, when he was ten, as she was then—he had climbed a rickety fence to spy on the Bratzlaver Hassidim who'd descend on their town, Uman, for the entire month of the holy season to lament, beseech, fast, and sing wordless melodies at the grave of their leader, this abandonment of family in the holy season a topic of derision and gossip among the native Jews of Uman. The boy came upon an empty square, a ramshackle grill, curling smoke, and spitting fat, a slab of beef so huge it was probably meant to feed the entire teeming hoard who'd left their wives and kids. "I tipped it over," he said exuberantly, having raced home with the news. "The beef crashed down, oil and dust everywhere!"

“Oh! No!” The father raised his arm and smacked his son downward across the face, so hard he knocked him to the ground.

“It’s a *shanda*, a great wrong you’ve done, my boy,” he said, lifting the son to his feet. “Whatever we say about them inside our home—and now I discern my own fault in this matter, and your mother’s—you must never forget they too are Jews, they are human beings, like us.” Abstracted, he shook his head slowly from side to side, wrapped the boy in his arms. “Now, my child, I must, now, I must go out to them. I must deal with this,” and grabbed his hat and jacket and left.

3. *What My Father Revealed*

Of his mother
he never spoke. Of his father,

two facts and one action.
He owned a dairy
in their hometown in Poland.

He died of a stroke in 1933.

Once he happened to notice
the embroidered *parochet*

the curtain covering the ark in his *shul*
was frayed at its edges,
and he replaced it with one

more beautiful
which he had ordered
secretly and put in place

secretly. Though my father

had reread the tales of
Tevye der milkhiker in Yiddish

for decades and he'd sigh, a tender smile
fraying his pale blue eyes, as he spoke
of Tevye's daughters and their father, tiny

upheavals and huge ones, never was there
any slippage between a
the fictional dairyman and the dairyman
he actually knew
as well as one son knew one father.

4. Ceremony

Though he would live
another six years,
one of the last times
my father made himself clear
was on the first Thanksgiving
after the stroke, with only family
present, the nine of us standing,
crowding the living room
turned dining room of my brother's
four-room apartment, he in his wheelchair.
It was the first time he met
my stepdaughters, aged ten and six.
What I remember is how busy he was
with them and my eight-year-old niece
for a long time, gesturing at them
and at the rest of us milling around him,
pointing, beckoning, his frustration slowly
sharpening as none of us, not me, not
my mother or brother, nor either
of our wives, managed to decipher
just what it was he was after,
his language having been shattered
entirely, leaving any hope of certainty

shattered as well—we weren't even sure
he grasped that I had married. Persisting,
attention now entirely on the girls,
my father eventually
got the three side by side
facing him, and then, by touch
and gesture, as they
seemed to be catching on,
fine-tuned the arrangement
until they stood left to right,
youngest to oldest, and his eyes,
panning slowly, met theirs,
one girl at a time, and then he reached out
wide, wrapped all three in his arms
and drew them in, smiling, then shaking his head
familiarly in what had to have been
dismay and amusement at the alacrity
of the kids and the density
of the burdened grownups,
as the family at once became one.

5. My Father Speaks

Deuteronomy 6:4-7

You have forgotten me. The claim you're fond of—
that you think of me every day when you shave—
what sort of remembrance is that?

In your prayers you murmur the wish
I rest in peace—peace from what? Are you remembering
my chronic rages, as vague to me now

as the fine sleet of winter? Or is it only
an odd sense of proper manners, as if
you really believed in prayer? Better

to speak about me to your grandchildren
in the evening and the morning—
that might calm the restlessness I feel

that has only grown sharper
in this shadowy place, or, even
better, to remember when I could still

swim out beyond the jetties, with you
on my back, your little nails scratching
the skin over my collarbones

as you clung to me in fright and glee
with all your heart and all your might.
Best of all, swim out beyond

whatever breakers hold you back, now,
think of me, and do not be afraid.