

Tashlich

(Casting away)

My son agrees to meet me on the footbridge
after he's run and sweated for miles—

even lets me place on his head the sky-
blue *kipa* I've stolen

from synagogue this morning
and the two of us tear,

into uneven bits,
the ritual bread I've brought

and toss into the creek the crusts
of our afflictions—

a year's worth of what
some call sins.

Creek waters course, carrying
our regrets downstream

over sticks and stones.
(I used to worry as a child

the fish might eat my sins
and die.)

We recite the prayer of penance
we each know, heart by heart,

year by year. This year he closes
his eyes for a long time, then looks, amber

and intent, into mine—his deepest way
of speaking

sorrow perhaps for the slight
dent in the hood

over the stove that doesn't look like much—
doesn't resemble a history—

except sometimes
 when the night winds toss terribly.

and moonlight bellows between branches—
 I imagine we live in a ruined house—

and speak my regrets for words
 that surely dented

his heart. As a child he used to sing:
 Sticks and stones

may break my bones, but words
 will always hurt me.

Today, on the footbridge, on the first
 day of the Jewish New Year

without a living father, he says *September*
 is a grieving month,

and I say *perhaps it is grief that causes*
 discord—grief left

ungrieved—or is it fear
 of weeping—or a shame

of needing
 to know we are loved?

When the Night Is Near as a Bird

whose nest has toppled,
and the bird seeks out the cotton

of your shirt to curl into— such a risk
the bird takes to love a human,

humans being such scared
thus hurtful creatures

who the sky forgives
by offering up its blueness

and the bird forgives
by flying and folding its wings

at your feeder, and by its beak
that pecks at the thistle in your feeder.

When the night is near as a bird,
the unforgivable is forgiven.

Rivers

When asked my birthplace,
I name the wrong country.

I say *Shoah, Majdanek, shtetl*.
I have taken on the names

of rivers and the bottoms of rivers
belonging to those I loved, who loved me

as well as they could. Their river stones
fell into my pockets.

I almost drowned.
Now I lean beneath maples

and listen to the birdcalls
and the spaces between birdcalls,

between trees and the river,
between the river

and the source of the river.

Nude in Chair

(Ekphrastic poem based on a photo entitled "Despair" by my lover, D.G.)

Take 1

In the left corner of a too big bedroom, she sits, head
in hand, belly soft, thighs dimpled against worn velvet
armchair, dusty blue. Bed in foreground, unmussed

patchwork quilt, mismatch to the pearl buttons
of the black sweater she hugs to her lap, pearls
she keeps buttoning, unbuttoning. My demented

aunt did such things. But this woman, pencil thin
skirt, gold lame blouse both folded just so
on the bureau, appears in her thirties. Long

fingers worry her brow. Lamp with a too bright bulb
stands beside the chair—as if an interrogation
is underway. See how the light slits her body in two?

Take 2

He tears the quilt from the bed. lays the sateen
sheet slightly over her thigh, makes folds
deepens the folds to sharpen the shadows,

or shed light on her flesh-curves. Every shade
of color here—he will turn—to black
and white. Teal bed sheet, peach skin, midnight

blue at the bend in her knee. I am jealous of her
whole body sculpted by his hands, placed—nude
on chair, curled—nude on bed. He snaps

a shot of her neck and its strand of black pearls.
I feel the bite of kisses he burrows onto the left
corner place right above my clavicle—I wear liquid

silver links with a turquoise clasp he gave me.
His mother died three weeks ago. Early on,
she had sent me a "fast read" about a widow

who takes a lover. My lover shoots the winter
blue eyes of the nude, downcast—a still-life—
of his grief—I feel the bite of his distant kisses.

Take 3

At Diane Glynn's, I try on diamond rings,
though he hasn't asked—nor have I—how to
appraise for clarity, weight, certainty.

Diane measures the circumference of my ring
finger, the distance between marriage
and promises of forever he and I keep

making, unmaking, remaking. Only one
breast now, Diane wears a 3-carot- rock,
a bride-white wig, ruby lipstick. A bent

and muttering man wanders into the shop.
Diane shakes her head, rolls her eyes.
Go sit down, she tells him. He does.

Then rises. Paces. *Past two of our fifty
years now*, she tells me. *No words
except "Son of a bitch"*

and "*Go to hell!*" She laughs
as she says these things.
And goes to him.

Take 4

You ask me not to laugh at you
for focusing on the light.
I think of Poppa how he taught me

fabric and beauty—taught me silk
bouclé for curtains, floral brocades
for formal chairs, taught me scallop

valances—how to fold the polished cotton
into tiers, how to drape the tiers—curve
and overlap above curtains for grace, but

forgot to say how the tiers block the best
light from coming through at the top. Poppa
taught me grief, bewilderment, love,

but not where to look for light. In Poland,
six years under yellow stars, Poppa was saved

by darkness. So forgive the times I am blind

to the light that pours forth from the folds
of our unfolding—times I can't recall I live
a lucky life. And you are always an innocent man.

Poppa too—(you look like him—round face,
bald pate, sudden-burst-smile, silent startle),
how his lucky life came too late

to save his family from the arms
of genocide. Poppa, sentenced to survive
guilt's incessant stab of shadows.

Forgive me for seeing his shadows
in the folds of my own face—
I thought was yours.

When You Go into Me, Crystalline: Cento

(Lines from Pablo Neruda's "Love Poems," Muriel Rukeyser's "Book of the Dead" and Louise Gluck's "Wild Iris")

1.

In love you have loosened yourself like sea water.
Or uneasy, wounded by me—

in my body, bells,
dove wings with eyes tired

of my echoing country
and its thrust of live coals, of fluttering flag.

Hide me in your arms
with the living and the dead

walking tranquil in fire-dreams filled
with velocities and misfortunes.

Lodge me at your back, oh shelter me.
Everything carries me to you,

to our house
of the heart where I have roots

upon the earth and upon
the winds and upon the waters.

2.

When you go into me, crystalline,
This is the most audacious landscape:

your skin, a bell filled with grapes,
crosscut by snow, wind at the hill's shoulder.

The hill makes breathing slow, slow breathing after
you row the river of round hardness.

We shall always be, you and me,
sealed by fire.

And we shall always be strangers—

3.

because there is a dark room and a broken candle holder
and its warlike form, its dry circle—

a flower appeared like a drop—
flower of sweet total light—

how triumphal and boundless
the orbit of white—

4.

In me nothing is extinguished or forgotten.
At night I get up to catch my breath.

Yes. There is difficulty breathing.
I am trying to say it as best I can.

Why must it take so long to value the fog
and the quick dark?

5.

I wanted to stay as I was.
It was not meant.

Because in our world
I'm looking for courage, for some evidence

to open on the lowest branch
because I am shattered. Stirred also, helpless.

Failure is my assignment, principally.
It is very touching—

your gift to me—
the perishable, immortal fig—

the commerce of silences and mysteries—
a churning sea of poppies—