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LEAVEN

Aunt Alice reads the last poem
she wrote in the Warsaw Ghetto, 1943:

*Our father, our king
has already been taken from us.*

*We cannot remain much longer
in this bunker. There is no wine*

*or matzah at the table.
There is no table.*

Leah, the daughter of Aunt Alice, leads this Seder.
Each year we are required to tell the story

as if it were our own, keen for our children, slaving,
for Warsaw burning, until all that is left

are pyramids of rubble and bitter bricks.
The dining room fills with the smoke of one hundred

and twenty-eight family members whose names burn
on the roll-call pages of death camps where

being taken took on new meaning for us.
My generation was named after the murdered,

and those murdered were named
after luckier ones in biblical times.

So, Leah was named after Hinde Leah, our grandmother,
who stopped speaking after her husband was taken.

And Leah was named after the tender-eyed
Leah of the Bible, whose womb God opened

as consolation for other woes, who bore ten sons
who begot the twelve tribes to whom

God left an inheritance
of leave-taking.

*

Momma used to say pictures could leap

off walls, which is why she took down the ones

that hung over motel-room beds.
Pictures of tacky flowers in blue vases.

If the Shoah could happen then
anything can happen; pictures jumping

off the wall is the least of it. God's comings
and goings had nothing to do with the case.

Poppa used to say, *I would like to take God
to the Bet Din just once.*

Every day, it seemed, Poppa took God
to his own high court. So much leave-taking

*

to account for. At the Seder table
we ask four ritual questions and add our own.

This year, I ask, *Our Father, our King,*
why do you take Yourself from us?

I know this question is unenlightened,
doesn't hold opposites of dark and light,

inside and outside, as I have been taught to do
in years of study. Yet I continue my complaint:

God, is it not your voice that decrees
this brick and mortar, calls the Red Sea

to split, leaves us a dry path
toward a freedom

of leaving and leaving and leaving
the life we thought we knew?

*

The songs of the Seder are filled with gratitude,
an attitude of fullness.

We sing *Dayenu*, which means,
and that alone would have been enough

after naming each of God's givings and takings.
Giving us dry land. Taking us out of bondage.

Tonight as on other nights, some of us
are stingy with our thanks.

We want consolation
that doesn't involve leave-taking.

*

My beloved left me to this life
saying, savor each bite. He left a scrap

of paper that read: you have
abandoned me, but I will have to

abandon you. Though I sat by his side
my hand on his breastbone, his heartbeat,

his breath, slow and slower still,
I had pulled back

to leave room for him to enter
the great vastness he spoke of.

*

At every Seder table, there is a beloved
who has left, a memory

in every chair. God never leaves
every form, every emptiness.

At every Seder table,
we bite into brick and mortar,

sweet and bitter. Apple,
honey, horseradish.

*

Feeling fullness takes
forgiveness or perhaps just practice.

So I bake a leavened bread,
a braided bread

that rises and rises further

when covered with a moist cloth.

And I thank God for making me
leaven and leaven and leaven

for making me leave and leave and leave
each moment—for each new moment

commands me to unknow.
While I sat beside my dying beloved

giving up everything I thought I knew,
I saw a table turn into what it was,

an illusion of solidity—
the tablecloth rippled like a blue ocean.

At every Seder table, unknowing sits down
in every chair, rises up in every question,

breaks with us the middle matzah, bread of affliction.
All who are hungry, come and eat.

There is manna and fruit of the vine.
There is no table.

LITTLE FLOWERS

I've lain with a man who tells me this: long ago the *Little Flowers of St Francis*, verse after verse of miracles and monk's

poverty and the acquisition of stigmata, made him pray to know the passion of Christ, as surely stigmata would draw

a crowd, multitudes he could save and save, omitting any longing to save himself.

This man I've anointed with oil from the succulent jojoba tree that grows best in high desert, this man who sought to feel

suffering larger than his own, as if his own was not to be trusted—as if the altar boy he had been had not been

lain against a desk in a way that marks a boy into manhood and beyond manhood,

as if a war he barely escaped hadn't bombed out his sense of safety, as if wandering familiar streets

not knowing whether he was inside or outside the marketplace once he returned to this land

from a land marked by blood on the sheets that covered the dead—hadn't sufficed to make him worthy.

*

If I was of a faith that cries out for Jesus, I would call him close, shake out every tenderness

from his lithe body, lay his hands, his unblemished hands, on my dark head, anointing me. Being a Jew, I have imagined

Christ as a spiritual teacher who touched with unending love, never saw his crown of thorns as the cause for his holiness.

I have lain with a man I'll call Jericho because when he told me of his old desire to know the Passion, unseeable walls

between us started shaking, strangely dissolving, and the landscape revealed was lush with *the grotesque*

he did not choose to further describe,

as it made his head ache and his eyes

also, and I call him Jericho because we have begun
building a sound city

with orchids flowering
like God's perfect faces,

and because I mistakenly believed his darkness
was an alien darkness that could invade my body.

*

What would you ask Jesus if Jesus was in this room?
The mystic had asked in deciding whether he was

worthy of the *Little Flowers*. *Jesus is in this room*,
the man I call Jericho answered,

as He dwells in every sunlit, every darkened place.
And as a Jew, I think about another name for God,

Hamakom HazeH, This Place, this indwelling place,
and how do I build a safe place with a man

who sought out suffering as a stronghold
while I have spent a lifetime constructing

scaffolding made of neutrality and distance
as Poppa spoke of his clothes

rotting off his body in a living-grave
where the Polish farmer hid him

and Momma spoke of—
didn't speak of—

so the mystic deemed the man I call Jericho
worthy of poring over those little flowers

for a year, and he watered them with his own intention.
As he spoke his story, I pictured spears, wooden

and sharpened by his unblemished hands,
to gouge-in his pain and I could feel a tingling

in my own palms I feared would not go away

and I thought of Madeleine who cuts and Sarah

who slices and wrists bandaged in ERs,
as we lay side by side before the fire.

*

And I wanted to say, *Keep your story secreted,*
tell me only how you'd feel after telling me,

and then lie in my arms and rest.
But fear and love, when they are joined together,

make me silent, disconnected from memory—
of my own stigmata

though as a Jew I never would have called it that
until now that I have lain with a man who knows Christ

dwells in every sunlit, every darkened room
yet can't get close enough.

*

I have lain with a man whose skin is softer than chinchilla,
whose back I have slid across with my anointed breasts and belly,

closer, and closer still, a man who wraps me in his arms, tells me
he loves me and feels as if he can't get close enough, close enough.

LETTER TO MY DEAD BELOVED

When you lay dying by the bay window in our bedroom,
your wide eyes traveled from me to our son and back again,
over and over, as our son's long body bent and rose beside you,
and I, seated in the big lounge chair, shifted forward and back

in order to accommodate the sway of our son's body,
as I sought to stay within view of you and you of me.
Somehow I couldn't rise from the chair to move closer,
maybe exhaustion, maybe the distance held my need

to prepare to part, held my grief better than closeness,
maybe I wanted our son to be the one closer to you
at that time so he could feel complete in his last connection
to you as I felt completed the night you curled on your right side,

no longer able to speak any more than a few essential words,
water, pain, yes, no, so I spoke our abiding love, complete
forgivenesses, hard work miracle marriage, your missions
accomplished, our good and beautiful son. You nodded, smiled.

From my seat, as I swayed, what I started to see clearly
was how wedded I was to my eyes being the last eyes
you'd look into, my face the last face you'd gaze upon,
I could see my shadow vying for position with each shift

of our son's body, felt how it had been with the three of us,
each wanting to be the shiniest apple of the others' eye,
I recalled your words a week before, saying,
 Holding opposites all is joy. And finally, I gave up

wanting to be the last face you looked upon,
decided it was not a metaphor for anything
I understood, knew you loved us both and your eyes
loved us both and everyone won and everyone lost.

**THOUGH I KNOW, IN THE END, WE ARE BURIED
UNDER EVERY TREE
IN THE WILDLY IMPERFECT GARDEN**

1.

I buried it so you'll never find it, you said,
after returning from behind the house.
You were speaking of the custom-made
white neoplastic brain-dome you had donned
for one hour a day for six weeks, the dome
you brought home to me after the last treatment
the way our cat comes home with his kill
dangling between his teeth, the dome mapped
with black straight lines that connected
tiny black stars into constellations
of suspected tumor sites. Anyplace inside
that steel room had made me weak
in the knees, doubled over at the waist
even though you kept smiling at me
from under the one thing you had
come to count on, all those tiny dark stars
clustering together on a reverse heaven.

2.

Where will you bury me? You asked.
It was Sukkot and I had just come back
from sitting under the dome of white
stars and woven branches of the harvest
hut where I had posed the same question
to my brother, *Where will I bury him?*
I don't know why I was surprised
your thoughts and mine intertwined
like open branches of the Sukkah roof
draped with ripe yielded fruits.

3.

Bury me under a tree,
you had whispered and so the night
you died our son and I lay down on October
ground in the Woodlands section of Shalom
Cemetery under fat and lean trees feeling for

the right spot. The first plot, our son said,
was big enough, only for a cat. The one
he and I settled on lies under a constellation
of fine-trunked trees, so you can watch
leaves budding, turning, tumbling toward you.