

“running and returning”

רָצוּת וְשׁוּבוֹת

32 poems to carry the Voice

by Lisa Grunberger

A limited edition

for the first birthday of

*Rachel Gavrielah Pearl*

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הזר פיר איין אין קול.  
פון נזקייטלעך דינקשאפט איז די פרייד.  
פון געסנאכט פלאהרן  
די דינקשאפט פון שטאהרן—  
פרייד פרייד, פרייד פרייד.

יעקב גלאטשטיין

*Listen to the voice.*

*Joy in the linked longing.*

*From sheafed flames*

*the longing of origins*

*their joy, their joy.*

YANKEY "YASH" GLATSHTEYN



*When you commit to study  
study comes like ash from a cigarette,  
like heaven from the top of a newborn's head,  
it comes and comes, splitting the roots,  
climbing the stairs to heaven,  
and it cannot be stopped,  
just bequeathed.*



## PROMISE

---

Abraham looked from north to south to east to west,  
his neck tired from looking at a sky with seeded stars.  
He tried to recruit his son to count with him,  
but he was busy underneath a car, his face dirty.  
come wife, come count with me, for the stars  
are like you, new and old my bride, come count.  
But she too had grown tired of waiting.  
she had buried one boy in the last war  
that changed nothing but the cost of bread.  
come to bed Abraham, I will heat the oil  
to massage your stiff neck. But Abraham  
continued to count stars, and sometimes  
swore he heard them answer in a future tense.  
on declining days, he could hear the screams  
come from as if under the ground, and then  
he counted with ligation, as if the counting  
itself was a gift of who and what, and he and why.

## THE MEMORY OF MY CIRCUMCISION

---

with the scent of smoked fish and fresh paint. The scent of a crowd invades it and blood, of course. And hands larger than my head and momma's cries. The wine red dribbling down a bib that tastes like sour milk when I suckle it. What is there to eat, where are the angels? It is less bright and the door is open, I feel a throbbing and someone laughing and I'm holding onto a slender finger. Momma's finger? I see a candle flickering. There are poppy seeds like small ants stuck to the inside of momma's wrist. I try to lick them off and she thinks I am trying to kiss her. Nothing is as it appears. When I am about to cry they mistake it for laughter. When I am about to shit, they mistake it for thought. When I am about to laugh, they turn away, as they are busy with something other than me. This I figured out quite soon. When I dream they wake me. When I'm awake they want me to sleep. A confusing group of people who seem to do and say the opposite of what they mean. What is it they want? Everyone's gone. What's that roaring hum? The thing they call the cat runs under the thing they call the couch. A vacuum. To clean up the crumbs from the coffee cake I didn't even get a chance to taste. When will I grow teeth? When can I bite the hands that feed? She puffs her face, blows the candles out. She's on her hands and knees trying to move the cat. But it's no use, the cat is holding her ground. Good for you dear cat, don't let them be the boss of you. Soon I will be strong and sit up, soon I will be able to defend us both, to intercept the mail. We'll run away. Are you cut too? I like how quiet you are. From where do you come originally?



## JONAH'S PRIMEVAL LONGING

---

Home is near.  
I, in the desert, amongst the dancing cacti

try to sleep  
but it is no use,  
the stars carouse all night,  
the sky is a whale of murderous refuge.

I went down to the river  
in my dream  
and begged to die.

When I awoke  
I was covered in goat's hair.  
I spit on the ground  
and the spit was gone.

sucked up. I vomited  
cities, lovers, birds, and worms.

where my right hand was, lay my left.  
where my left hand lived, lay my sight.

I tried to grow wings,  
but it was no use.  
I was alone.

1. when my Father was moving  
from being to being nothing  
I was about to go for a bike ride.

His right hand raised up  
out from under the blue blanket  
and he pat the bed for me to sit.

I sat and stroked his face  
so thin and unshaven it appeared two dimensional  
slender as a coin, slender as the Flatiron building.

2. In summer, we could sit in the yard for hours  
eating cherries, throwing the pits  
the dog would chase.  
we're planting cherry trees he'd say.

In winter, we raced through bowls of green pistachios  
seeing who could crack them faster.  
we'd set aside the sealed ones,  
the ones that stubbornly refused to be opened,  
the ones with no crack.

Daddy said, they have secrets  
they can't bear to share with us yet.  
He poured the uncracked nuts  
into a ceramic bowl.  
it became our bowl of secrets.

He never disturbed the bowl  
but sometimes he would lift it to his ear  
as though it were a sea-shell and he were listening.  
He would nod his head.  
He was a quiet man.  
A serene smile would spread across his face.

3. In the end you will taste cherries and light.  
You will listen to your Father's slow breath,  
place ice chips on his cracked lips.  
You will listen to the final rattle  
and remember a baby's noise maker-Daddy's keys.  
You will close his eyes and seal his lips with a kiss.

4. Any stillness I possess belongs to the scattered pits  
in a yard where another family lives  
in the midst of cherry trees  
they cannot see.

## REBEKAH: LAMAH ZEH ANOKHI?

---

*I do not know the path of the wind  
or the full content of the womb,  
nor the actions of God.  
I have gone.*

*where he sees camels,  
I see him and fall, dizzy, I see.  
I was shaped in a hidden place.*

*I cover myself,  
ask, why I, why this  
inside double-kick, these  
thousands of myriads invading me?*

*why this blessing, that curse?  
This hidden desire stirred by camel dust?  
why this flesh of my flesh,*

*already something else?  
This struggle, within.  
This slippery womb-toil, births  
me, into reality -- crib, cry.*

*and milk. Rain is shadow  
broken. They will call me,  
I will break apart the world.*

*I am become inside.  
sky grows within me.  
why does the hair curl at the nape?  
why be born at all?*

*one death; and all the while,  
it was the other death, over there,  
where the shadow dare not tread.*

*For a long time, she resisted,  
why his dream,  
his nation, his life,  
these stars?*



## THE MAP WAS NOT WISE

---

The map was not wise  
but its rivers sustained him  
like the old pair of stars  
he slept under.

neglect of the blood  
in his stool swept him  
into a contest with the butterfly  
across states lines.

He flirted with clouds, wiled the day  
reading thick bios of presidents,  
his calloused fingers gliding  
gently over the page.

when he arrived at a place  
that was no longer there  
he laid the map down, for  
he desired little but a space

in which to move. An unreliable guide,  
it was like a selfish lover, like his mother  
broken with dementia. Ants crawled  
across its body, rain drenched it, sun dried it.

map bore its folds well.  
Hidden in breast pocket, back pocket.

one year in deep pockets of green cargo pants.  
He wished he could fold himself up as well.

be partly useful, a kind of wise,  
to guess at territory, the way  
a Friday night fortune-teller guesses  
a gold ring's history.

It was a map of little texture  
and many colors. Disproportioned.  
Mixed with coffee, it retained the stain.

A stranger tried to sell him a new model map -  
it'll get ya round much ez'yer, match ya up  
with what's what out der. This map'll take  
you to where you wanna go, fast and efficient, my friend.

He ran away and didn't stop until night fell.  
He rolled the map lengthwise.  
It became his walking stick for miles  
before its familiar folds pressed against his cheek.

It comforted him to know it was the Adirondacks,  
loyal as the moon, pressing into him.  
Come morning map was orphan and beggar, but he,  
still a soldier, stroked it, until it became a gun

## JACOB'S PERSONAL SUNSET

---

*allows a darkness to fall.*

*shrunk earth*

*beneath wandering feet, he collides  
with the place: Do not beseech me.*

*Like a man who crashes into his friend  
who is also moving toward him.*

*The place to which he is traveling  
is traveling toward him.*

*The sudden sunset births the prayer in darkness.*

*Altar, wood, bound limbs, a knife, an angel's  
cry - what have I passed over? Take your  
Father's stones as pillow and dream what you have passed.*

*Angels moving up, Jacob, moving down, Esau,  
a ladder, Jacob,  
heaven, Esau, earth, Jacob. You have  
traveled far and still do not know.*



## THE EVIDENCE OF DOORS

---

begs for a footnote.

Hitler walked through doors  
kissed no mezuzahs the record shows,  
ate vegetables and fruit outdoors  
on a long picnic table

that could have ended up a door  
but was fated to be a long table  
around which SS soldiers ate wiener schnitzel  
chugged Gewurtzaminer, bit into crisp apples.

The table could have been the door  
the door could have been the tree  
from where Hitler's apple fell.  
He liked his apples tart.

Devoured sweets late into the night.  
other men smoked pipes.  
when Eva Braun walked through the door  
heads like trees to spring turned.

Leni Riefenstahl put down her camera  
to stare at Eva's body  
the way a new prisoner stares at his cell door,  
the way a watch maker stares into the gears of a watch.

Maybe doors serve no evidence at all.  
Maybe doors shoot blanks.  
Hitler never entered Eva.  
Eva entered Hitler a thousand times.

stars flickered. Fruit fell off trees.  
Polish sausage ate the sunlight.  
Hitler loved how Leni could shoot naked bodies.  
Did Hitler come yet?

Smoke spirals up  
steeple-like into your open mouth,  
a door. It's raining Hitler.  
He's fetching his paintbrush

## GENIUS

---

*some genius, some Einstein  
needs to come out into the rain,  
look rain in the eye  
and design a new umbrella.*

*For today, sitting in this cafe  
saw a thousand umbrellas  
rise and fall as though they  
were kites or birds or children.*

*I saw adults wrestle with dying  
wind-swept umbrellas and children cry because of this  
billowing brokenness. And old women  
I saw with canes and bags.*

*And I saw their struggle  
against umbrella until they folded it in  
surrender to awning for shelter where  
they stand until they surrender to the rain itself.*

*some genius, yes, needs to create  
a new canopy for us.  
For we seek  
a different kind of shelter.*



## THE HOUSE DID NOT SPEAK

---

music played every fifteen minutes  
and pendulums hung promiscuously,  
heavier than the apples on the trees,  
and acorns, cats and mice wandered the rusting shed

that housed rakes and mowers, the neighbor's son's  
old motorcycle, blood dried on the deflated tires.  
There were snow-powdered almond cookies  
in the shapes of crescent moons,

and one and a half survivors in no shape  
but what flesh gives rise to every morning  
when some still thank God for open holes  
through which piss and shit and tears can flow.

There was a white and brown dog  
who was fluent in Yiddish, English, and German  
and half fluent in Hebrew depending on the time of day.  
Inside the house there was no history

but only fractured toledot,  
on an unsuspecting suburban street  
that faced a dirty bay,  
repeated like a winter sky

SELMA MARIA OMA

---

The faucet drip is a defiance  
you drip drip drip the brown bottle empty  
of peroxide over your 87 year old head  
into the pink into the pink porcelain sink  
emerge a soaked white blonde czech fish  
wrapped in a Disney pink towel

when you died at 96 six months  
before mother I did not cry  
I became a question mark and you  
who smells of nivea and stale sanko  
you saw Krystallnacht

you hid in plain site as a woman  
named Maria, you the commie anti-Jew  
who smoked long thin cigarettes and  
drank whisky on a Tuesday afternoon  
while we watched Luke Kiss Laura on General Hospital

you who refused English, who nightmare'd in Deutsch, now  
twenty years after you visit me in the Long Island kitchen,  
adjust my hand around the knife that cuts the mushrooms,  
you who rarely touched me, today you cut while I asked  
about children drinking dirty street water on all fours,

asked you about my Father who escaped so late--  
why didn't you touch him, asked about how your blonde hair  
saved you, your straight nose, long limbs, Maria I called you  
and asked the names of the Polish girls you accompanied,  
one on each arm, to church every Sunday, while miles away  
Jewish smoke blackened the air

you died with peroxide hair Mama Maria,  
Oma Selma I buried you in a pine box  
you would have snubbed as sentimental  
burn me you might have said  
as I should have been

but you were not burned  
only your parents your husband  
your brother and his four children  
my hand was your knife today  
and you were a young girl  
with blonde hair in a braid

playing Beethoven on a piano  
your Father bought from Prague  
your spine is straight  
your hands caress the keys  
like light against an ancient map.

## SHE GIVES THANKS TO CHILDREN IN THE PARK

---

Thank apples for snakes,  
thank snakes for knowledge.

Thank mirror for distortion,  
thank frame for preservation.

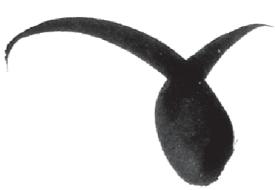
I thought I would keep you,  
but you fell apart, flew away.

I will not bind myself to joy  
but to Isaac's laughter,  
swinging his clasped legs  
around the branch of his favorite tree.

I will not blind myself  
to the flying kisses he casts,  
into the dark future of a girl

standing by a tunnel,  
tattooed with graffiti they can not yet read,  
where the moonlight hides within  
each inked letter still wet with shame

I will not wait for the angel either,  
but grow my own wings,  
stutter away into the appled sun.



## EYE WRIT'S TRAVELS

---

*eye writ moves across the mountain page,  
her cheeks puffy with the dust of sinai,  
egypt's mortar buried under her ragged nails.*

*The light is similar to the dark, its texture of moon,  
sandpaper and snake skin. eye writ moves slowly  
from Jerusalem to Babylon, Persia, Spain, out of Egypt.*

*she misses a train again. eye writ does not stop  
to taste the mirage. eye writ jumps rope, a course braid  
made of horsehair and rooster breath.*

*she kisses Liberty's chapped lips,  
her torch circled by movie projectors  
and hairspray, she pushes carts filled with potatoes and onions.*

*overhears talk of Vegas showgirls, she pushes  
brushes and cigarettes, milk bottles and knives,  
eye writ walks the cobbled streets of the Lower East side,*

*longs for a child, many children, shelter,  
something unbroken. eye writ gets a nosebleed  
climbing a spiral staircase, a neck ache straining to see*

*the sky scrapers, she looks where language  
melts into an open scream of no and why,  
she buys ear plugs, goes to the matinee*

where she sits and allows herself a good cry.  
eve writ sells the movie to strangers  
after a long and bumpy flight to california

with a man she calls Buddy.  
Buddy smokes cigars and golfs,  
buys Ralph Lauren ties while eve writ

gives birth, shops. He likes to pinch  
her ass when she peels stamps off envelopes.  
she has a hospital named after Bud when he dies.

eve writ, in exile from her own disaster,  
changes her name, crosses borders,  
the stars crumbs of light in her eyes.

death a dreidel around which children  
gather and gamble, shouting out Hebrew letters  
like snake eyes, old gypsy names, a toothache.

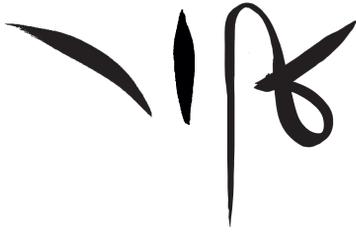
neither young nor old, Eve writ waits  
to womb the world. In between her ears  
books are always burning.



## Part Two

## DREAMING OF EXILE

---



### 1. Light

*I love the afternoon light in my parents' bed-room, now mine. Not only because it's an unusual shade of yellow, as it comes off the Bay water through the old lace curtains, but also, because I only saw it on special days, when I was home from school. Holidays, or days when I was deliciously sick, too sick to go to school but not sick enough to stay in bed all day.*

*I could sit in the kitchen with my Mom and help her bake an apple cake. In the afternoon, while it was baking, we'd go upstairs, lay down in her bed and watch The Mike Douglas show. The light would come in as if it were a guest with a straw hat and a basket of raspberries and we'd lie there and smell the light mingle with the baking apples.*

*About fifty minutes after, I'd follow Mom down the stairs, her heavy familiar steps shaking the house in her pink slippers, the ones she'd use to kill crickets in the middle of the night when their chirping would keep her awake. Mom placed a huge mitten on my small hand and slowly opened the oven door. She pulled out the rack and handed me a toothpick so I could test to see whether the cake was done. I could barely see the top of the cake. I remember slipping the toothpick into the center of the cake. It had to be done with great delicacy so as not to leave a hole. I felt like a surgeon. Mom would instruct me to look at the color too. It should be a deep golden brown. This dough, pressed with our own hands atop the apples, had become a hilly landscape.*

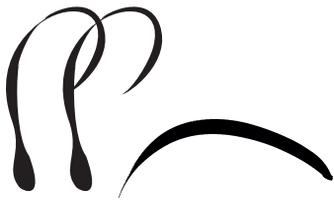


## 2. order

every time i turn round the dead end that leads to my street i, a jewish woman, make the sign of the cross. i'm hoping my house hasn't burned down.

once, i had convinced myself it was gone because i had stayed away too long. in my prolonged absence i had betrayed it. i pulled over before the final turn and rebuilt the house from basement to attic, filling it with everything i could remember to save.

i vowed to clean it up if it were still standing when i pulled in to the drive-way. But this was a lie, for secretly i liked the explosive clutter of it. How it seems to stretch like a woman's womb to contain my life and memory. Ghosts and erasers, pencil sharpeners, old checkbooks and the sewing machine i use as a night-stand. The house is in a constant state of birth, a disordered order, and i'm feeding it things, adding sugar to the yeast. or, i'm like a nursing mother drinking an extra glass of milk.



### 3. Space

I worked at the King's Palace Diner on old country Road in Hicksville when I was eighteen. Five years later they had moved the Diner down to the corner where the gas station used to be. I always imagined buildings had roots, were permanently affixed to a particular place.

When I was in kindergarten my teacher called my mother complaining that I didn't know my address. My mother was appalled. She said to me, "Lisa, where do you live?" I told her "18 Arden Road." I think I began to recite my phone number right after, as though they belonged together, were a song, with lyrics and refrain. "18 Arden Road. And 599-7486" The problem was, I hadn't mastered the word address.

When I returned the light was different. The way it struck the bakery counter with its jumbo chocolate chip cookies, raisin rugelach, poundcake, lemon meringue pie, and Russian coffee cake. Eating my spinach-feta omelette in a booth in the corner, I felt like I was floating in space. Like the booth would soon levitate.

Everything seemed out of proportion, because of the light.



#### 4. Embrace

Sometimes when I pull into the drive way and the house is still there, painted peach over the old teal blue, I want to run up to it and hug it, to lay my cheek against its bricks and shingles like a lover. To spread my arms out as wide as they'll go and take it all inside me, all inside me. To imprint it on my body, in my body.



#### 5. Director

Both my parents died inside this house, in the bedroom, in my arms. Sometimes I think if I moved it (and here I see myself as a director) -- they'd return. "Yes, guys, one, two, three - LIFT!" I can hear the tearing, like lifting a jumbo band-aid off an open wound. And plop it goes to East 9th street. Parents enter stage left. "They look like immigrants. Make-up! Make-up! Jeez. Fix them up. They look like they've been through hell."



## 6. Voice

*You see, I'm pregnant with them. They loved me into being and I house them in their own music. Star's music. I am a ventriloquist and a dummy. Who's lap will you sit on tonight? Whose voice will you throw? Into whose body will you breathe life?*



## 7. Breath

*By night-fall, my strings are tired. I have remembered much, moved the pieces around, directed, danced, shovelled, prayed. Time to sleep in the bed they died in.*

*I know the music of this house, the way a mother knows her child's cry. Its croaks and moans, heat gurgling through the pipe's veins, refrigerator buzz. But I've never heard my own breath as I sleep, as a part of this symphony. Tonight I shall record it. It will change everything.*



## 8. Morning

*In the morning I discover my breath sounds like apples bubbling beneath a sandy crust pressed with mine and my mother's hands. It is good.*

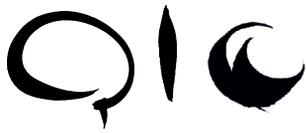
*1 sit at the kitchen table drinking coffee, eating raspberries. 1 listen to my recorded breath, like seeing yourself in a mirror for the first time.*



9. Name

*1 rewind the tape. Begin again. This time 1 feel her quick, efficient fingers pressing into me, kneading me, shaping me.*

*1 name the breath Apple.  
It is my secret.*



10. Secret

*1 imagine with whom 1 will share it, how will 1 move it, uproot this secret, spread it like jam onto the body, the bread of someone else's breath?*

*Into which lover's sea-shelled ear will 1 whisper?  
Which one will 1 lie in bed with on one of those delicious afternoons, to witness the light pouring through the curtains? To whom will 1 tell my story, the story of the burning house? The story of the apple breath, that kills and creates with one brush-stroke, always one toothpick away from crumbling.*



## Part Three

## WHEN I WAS A WOMAN

---

Bloom undergoes many metamorphoses in *Mabbot Street* and perhaps the least spectacular of these is his change of sex. — Anthony Burgess on *Ulysses*

the branches bowed to me the bus' wet roar made my ocean eyes  
tear when I was a woman all knowledge was a bread of thorns  
my bird breasts raged for more. I was biblical, fallen, a drip  
with seed. Flowers bloomed when I breathed. I slipped into indecency  
was arrested for impersonating an Italian heiress paralyzed  
from the neck down. when I was a woman I built a room of my  
own, no wallpapers, no yellow, brick by brick with a fire place  
that worked, when I was a woman I slept alone and wept for  
more alone, I walked city streets buying time with broken meters  
when I was a woman I forgot nothing — Confucius, Roosevelt,  
Mussolini, Walt Disney — were my children — bad, selfish, lost,  
evil boy-men. I was always hungry stared at marble statues for hours.  
I loved chicken wings and pistachio ice-cream chilled champagne  
and black berries. I liked to read naked on a mountaintop in California  
where I could smell the ocean's salt rise up, an offering just for me.  
This pleased me, Lord, it did, when I was a woman the slender tires  
of ten-speed racing bikes aroused in me elegance and symmetry,  
old horses trotting down Old City Philadelphia on Continental Square  
carrying Alabama tourists turned me into one myself, my mane blowing  
in the June wind, the gold specks in my gentle eyes bulbous twilights —  
darkness reconsidered for pitch. when I was a woman I liked  
the small-boned feet of princesses, the muscled hands of kings.  
one minute the sun, the next, a door opens — the future pours in.



## WHENEVER IT IS WRITTEN

---

*whenever it is written, ein la - there is not - there essentially is. Bereshit Rabbah 38:21*

1.

*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine  
my mother sang to me  
in a room with a pink shag rug  
a Mickey Mouse night light,  
white curtains that would turn yellow.*

*outside it snowed.  
outside it rained.  
outside it sunned.  
My head became heavy in her arms.*

*When she told me  
I kicked a hole through the wall  
in the bathroom with the porcelain sink.  
The towels covered it  
until they too turned old and faded.*

2.

*In synagogue when they opened the curtains,  
took out the Torah from its hidden place,  
and processed it around the room,  
she kissed the spine of her sefer,  
grazed it first upon my head,  
her soft arm reached into the aisle,  
forward and backward.*

*Her voice rose from her hands  
that held open the book  
as she once held my head  
and sang to me.*

*I am jealous of nothing,  
a genetic island  
only in a world without imagination.*

3.

Tell me  
I was switched at birth,

and Darwin's monkeys  
are winged angels made of clay

eve did not know  
and Sarah didn't laugh  
a muted laugh that echoes  
through the yellowed curtains

Tell me blood runs through me  
the color of oedipus' eyes,  
the laughter of rams, train cars,  
oma's screams, coral freckles, varicose veins

Tell me my Father was a Protestant banker  
not a clockmaker from wien with the eyes of a dove.

I would hear her crooked tone-deaf voice  
I would touch her moving lips with my sleepy eyes

in the modest room  
on top of the garage  
the damp room  
that smelled of gas and perfume.

This is a country for old women  
with endlessly thirsty loins and endless lashes  
that curl up to heaven like the Torah scrolls  
recoiling in on themselves in burning Poland.

Doesn't every room smell of something foreign and familiar?  
Doesn't every room bear a song that passes and remains passing?

4.

every room is filled with the absent mother.  
Go build an alibi that binds memory to imagination,  
death to laughter, barrenness to fertility.

Go sew some towels that hang over absence.  
The land that I shall show you is a glut of stars.

## MOMENTARY

cherry blossoms arrive  
enter and exit on the narrow street

sometimes a single branch  
sometimes the tree itself

The cuckoo today keened  
in an elegiac tone

it flew away  
but its echo remains

in the last ultrasound  
you held the umbilicus  
the way Lady Liberty  
holds her torch, the way  
a warrior holds a sword.

will you be a tightrope walker,  
my girl, with cherry blossom eyes?

Tell me you know  
how to contort time

Tell me this season  
will be different



## GARDEN

---

where are you, he said, you're going too fast.  
she covered her face.

when he closed his eyes he wandered  
into her arms. she held him still as a dove.

Then they found themselves naked,  
and lost their names playing hide and seek.

she hid behind a sweet potato.  
He turned it into an apple.

There was no middle to meet in.  
He walked slowly, she walked fast.

she said I want to meet your parents.  
I have no parents he said.

I will always be one who is eaten he said.  
He said I want to take you to Paris

First prepare the ground she said.  
she said I tend to confuse fantasy and desire.

He said I tend to remember the future and imagine the past.  
she said come closer, soon the sun will be taken.

I wonder what I will say, he said, and his feet followed  
walking from one place to another

until there was little choice but to arrive.  
I am hungry he stuttered.

Here I am she said,  
so am I, so am I.

## NAMING

---

*If I could call you love  
in every language, every dialect*

*of every language, I would.  
But it would go on and on,*

*endlessly. Every time someone  
greeted you hello, a string of love*

*without end, not even the poets  
could survive, and love would ruin you.*

## WITNESS

---

*I dreamt of God in the witness chair,  
fidgeting on the pale wood,  
fingers busy counting stars.*

*Twelve Richard Geres sat on the jury,  
their zen-calm hands in orange-robed laps.  
Gere's gaze was steady as a drunken goat.*

*When the feminists stormed the court,  
The judge was naked, all hell broke loose.  
The lawyers scratched their porcupine heads.*

*Then the black letters  
danced around God,  
who was filing her nails.*

*My mother came with an apple cake  
on a grand platter with a doily and a pot  
of tea, a moat filled with bullets.*

*Mom, when did this happen? when did you  
become a traitor? Did you really love me?  
I felt so loved, so secure, so needed.*

*I was crawling through mud, slinking  
through a foreign field.  
I saw a child dig a grave for his mother.*

*I pointed the cake at the witness,  
when the Rebbe of Prague  
arrived in a chariot, I didn't know*

*if it was meant to be funny or sad, but  
I would have done it all over again.  
God bowed deeply and my mother*

*wiped the mud off my naked body,  
and gathered the spilled bullets  
with her open mouth like a dog.*



## SECULAR JEWS

---

The secular Jews sang the loudest in the streets they called by numbers  
for they had long ago rejected names. They called man 1 and woman 2  
house 3 and tree 4 they called child 5 and sky 6

and when it rained they called the rain rest and sat under rest until 8 the sun  
rose and 9 their lips opened and 10 their hands turned up like leaves towards the  
11 moon and when the plane 12 landed on the narrow strip they cried 13,

tears of joy, for they were being saved from those who chose to see them 14,  
as nothing but Jews, Yehudim, rootless cosmopolitans, homeless wanderers,  
shylocks 15 with sidelocks 16 and when they ascended to the heavens 17

after fastening their seat belts after rejecting even wonder as a substitute  
for faith they observed the rabbis 18 pray 19 before they ate  
and they looked down at the land they were forced to leave

and they touched their hooked noses 20 their hearts 21 and like babies  
like monkeys they mouthed the words the children mouthed  
as they climbed and climbed they sang Shema 22

they sang Echad 23 they sang Ve'ahavta 24 and when,  
after a thousand years they landed on new soil they bent their tired bodies  
and kissed 25 the soil and their tears mixed with dirt 26

so the secular Jews sowed seeds of mercy,  
became trees of life, wrestled their way back to a wilderness,  
a tent with no trace

## MY MOTHER IN APRIL

---

my lonely mother in heaven  
rains upon me  
on this dogwood day  
of paper and falling petals

my mother with the crooked smile  
tells me to close my eyes  
and make-believe

my mother separates  
light from darkness  
in silver teaspoons  
steadily spooned into my open mouth

my mother unstubborn, sublime  
turns me into a giraffe in April  
feeding on the highest branch  
a miracle of spots and transformation

my mother teases the life  
out of my hair  
my egg follicles invisible  
my kitten's morning purrs on my breast  
a pillow of baritone longing

my mother rocks me on a wave  
of kindness  
so all day, all day  
I suckle on honey flowers  
while acid rain stings strangers cheeks

oh mother of morning  
mother of evening  
the stapler has run out of staples  
and the milk is sour  
the blackout took its toll  
on us all

## VARIATIONS ON WINTER

---

The wind would not let him sleep  
or was it his new child.

Did Jerusalem shimmer  
with ice crystals and snow?

\*

A lost ladybug  
sits on her tongue.  
All day she prays  
for sun to sing.

It is no use.  
Winter refuses.  
Something lost has found  
a temporary home.

It seems we are alone.

\*

There is a well that is frozen  
in his mind  
where lovers meet  
when the sun is high.  
There is wine and always will be wine even in the desert.

He lost his hands in the war  
but she knows how to caress them using stars as balm  
her lips water, her voice touch.

\*

when the green love  
vanished  
her muscles grew

she sailed a ship of songs  
unraveling a spool of  
mothers and fathers

the waves gathering  
into one body at midnight  
she multiplies into a thousand ladybugs  
hoarse with memory

\*

she feels form simmer inside.  
knows she must turn inside out.

The cat stretches her paw  
towards her as if to pause her,  
lies on her back, exposing everything.

A perpetual full moon  
arrives from the ocean,  
stays like an unwelcome guest.

if i promise you nothing,  
and give you everything  
will we be even.

\*

The clock man, in love  
with the sound of Italian and Irish names—  
Bozozo, Kitzpatrick, Digiorno—  
repeated in a baritone rosary.

He shuffles from room to room  
in worn leather slippers  
praising mother's apple strudel,  
clipping a hangnail with a silver pocket knife.

his white fruit-of-the-loom gufiya  
over his belly like a sky  
that prophesies snow.



## DESIRE

---

*1 have wished to wake it gone,  
to not be invaded, sucked and sick.  
1 have wished for life to grow inside  
and 1 have wished its opposite.*

*In one breath 1 have wished and wished and wished.*

*once 1 had a fish, a Jack Dempsy,  
that rose to the surface of the water.  
Daddy flushed it down the toilet.  
1 slept through the minor slaughter  
in the pink bed with the shag rug below.*

*we do not know what we want.*

## PINE CONE

*I have nothing to sell  
except this pine cone  
stuck inside my bra  
behind my vest  
under my hooded coat  
of down. I've carried  
it for years and I can also  
tell you the story, or many  
stories, that go along  
wherever the pine cone goes.  
Its name makes a fine tale -  
its shape and texture,  
and oh, where I obtained it  
and the occasion of its  
having to be hidden.  
All this can be yours, sir,  
for a bowl of soup and roof  
for it's been raining  
and I'm cold  
and I will tell you the secrets  
of the sky and why the ocean's  
blue and why true love  
is a cannonball and mother's  
teeth itch at night  
especially during a full moon.  
If you were to throw in  
a slice of bread -  
stale or fresh makes no matter -  
I will tell you how that little girl  
walked into the Asian Art Museum*

and named all the buddhas and bodhisattvas  
For a mug of hot coffee, black,  
no need for milk or sugar,  
unless, of course, you have it to spare,  
I will tell you about war and poetry,  
the two cannot be separated  
Do not be alarmed  
sir, for now I will bend over  
and remove my shoe to show you  
a bank note from china  
in which a lizard is wrapped  
and I will, for a light back rub  
and a slice of cold meat,  
unweave this tale too  
for I can sense from the way  
your thin lower lip quivers  
I have peaked your interest,  
your appetite is whetted,  
is it not, or shall I move on  
to the next house  
I see their lights still flicker  
and they have the added  
bonus of children who love  
long snakey stories  
with no beginning and no ending --  
what shall it be, sir  
for I have nothing to sell  
but a pine cone married to  
the queen bee in a forest  
in darkness so dark  
it drinks its own light.

## CONSEQUENCES UNDER DOG WOOD

---

How did I come to sit by the perpetual fire  
in Washington Park reading on a bench  
dedicated to Mel Rosenbaum under a tree  
where only five years ago you might have sat  
while you waited for your wife to complete her chemo?

But the unintended consequence--  
this phrase returns to me more often now,  
under the same tree I sit with our baby,  
arms over head as though sunbathing in the cool air,  
every cell of her a holy intention: eyes, lips,

nose, hands, toes, all perfect intention.  
How have I come to kiss these parts of her  
a thousand times by daybreak?  
on a different bench under a different tree  
a thin man sits Indian style in a triangle of light,

sneakers and socks apart from him,  
a cane beside him. He looks towards me  
with his Modigliani face as I pull  
her out to feed. Before a water fountain  
where children play, world without end, on the grave

*of unknown soldiers, today her breath is enough  
to lighten all burdens answer all questions,  
and when it will diminish, when the compromise will begin,  
when she will walk away, as if toward me,  
something else, a balloon lost in a branch,*

*the lace of a suspicious sneaker stuck  
in the dogwood--oh let her be blessedly exempt; no,  
no, we must include everything, look Rachel,  
the trees, the fountain, the cane, the man  
dying in the fire's light, a star, so green*

*it is spring it is April it is wednesday world without end,  
don't cry, don't cry, don't cry we sit on freedom's belly,  
rise and fall on the great Whale's fatty memory,  
enough to live on, this intended breath of life,  
star and sky, of milk and honey.*



## THE ARRIVAL OF THE STARS

---

The stars arrive but they are too small.  
And they need light to glow light.  
A flashlight is recommended.

we peel them off one by one.  
It takes time. You stand on a desk,  
I below you. we begin. I apply light

to a star and I hand it to you.  
There is no darkness yet  
and it cannot be rushed.

we wait until dusk arrives  
to see our day's work.  
stars scatter the ceiling

we have come to call heaven,  
soon she will suckle my breast.

a star of milk.  
one day we will give each small star  
a story, we will fatten them up,

give flesh to light, however small.  
This is what we do, we wait for the stars  
to arrive and we look.

## MERCY AND WOMB

---

*Rachamim, Hebrew for mercy from the root Rechem, Hebrew for womb.*

*Mercy kicks in my womb, obsolete, anarchic and new.  
A little girl in a red and white polka-dotted dress  
runs 'round and 'round the tree.*

*Whitman says, beware the roots,  
while Amichai lets her fall and bleed.  
womb of mercy, watch me kick.*

*Plural as grapes and birds,  
You make me big and round as the sun.  
You precede me.*

*Let me hear you stretch your limbs inside me.  
You flutter, a butterfly, mango, pepper, banana.  
You weigh less than everything I have lost.*

*womb of mercy,  
protect us from the Book of Life,  
the ram's horn, bees nests, falling bridges.*

*The wails of labor and rattle of death already  
in the first night of love.  
swollen I sit with mercy,*

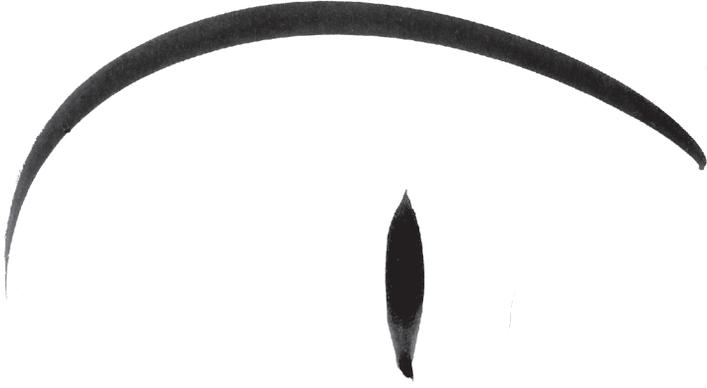
*my womb a beggar, for so long empty as my mother's was.  
oh merciless plural compassionate one,  
keep her forty weeks inside the desert womb.*

*oh merciful womb, tear me open,  
and, when I am fully torn from her,  
let her be full with mysteries--the dew,*

*music and light, blood and memory.  
As I cut her away I cleave  
in the same cut to her life.*

*Pray her cries to feed us, pray she suckle us into mercy.  
Rechem everlasting, protect the helpless,  
create a fence around chaos.*

*Dance us into the blinding firmament  
where we choose  
the kick and push of life.*



## IF WE ARE LUCKY

---

when the light descends  
we buy yellow tulips left over  
on sale from Easter. It is Friday.

we light candles, place our heads together  
with the infant's wobbly head, our hands  
layered over her still soft scalp  
and we recite the Hebrew.

Miles plays in the living room,  
pizza's on its way,  
there is an old knife on the counter  
where baby bottle parts lay in pieces.

I think we'll make it till she's 30  
you say, and its music is a declaration,  
question, command and plea.

we look into her blue almond eyes  
knowing it will be the last thing we see

## ALONE

---

And Abraham returned to his books  
for the party was a bore. He smelled something  
as he neared his door - meat, tears, rain?

where do I belong he wondered  
as he brushed the night off his shirt,  
his black hair curling at the back of his neck.

The door was open. The shabbat roses had opened  
minutes before. The dog sniffed around his shoes.  
The cat tugged at a loose lace. Abraham

limped to his chair and lit a cigarette.  
He closed his eyes and saw his wife's  
heart beating, her brain register the autumn leaves.

Invasion: Here I am. He was rapt.  
His wife called it: the attack.

Letting the cigarette burn in a dirty ashtray, he took out his penknife,  
drew a lamb beside a river under a sky of clouds.  
The desert moves inside him. Abraham feels a growth,

coughs up ancient sand. A mountain.  
His throat on fire, he begins to sing.  
Even the rams laugh at his song of praise.

## IF I LIVED IN JERUSALEM

*If I lived in Jerusalem  
I would turn my body inside out  
I'd hear the muezzin sing and scribble  
something sweet inside my gold-leafed notebook,  
half a falafel sandwich at my sandaled feet.*

*I would cop a feel off a soldier's gun  
peaking through his uniform.  
If I lived in Jerusalem  
history would flow through me.  
I would wrestle with God in the flesh,  
get her in a head lock,  
tumble down a hill  
as tourists shot digital photos of this minor war.  
If I lived in Jerusalem  
my fame would stretch like a woman's womb  
from the Negev to Haifa.*

*I'd walk the land like Whitman walked Brooklyn.  
Are there bridges in Jerusalem? I'd walk those too.  
I'd find new words for old things:  
war, sun, mountain, man.*

*If I lived in Jerusalem  
I'd rub my body with oil  
and roll in rooster feathers and ram's hair  
I'd testify against myself and unbury  
my son again and again with dirty claws.  
I'd sew a dress out of the paper place-mats  
covered with crosswords puzzles intended to distract  
restless children and lovers weary from sex and war.*

*If I lived in Jerusalem I'd infect the world  
with my twin desire for peace and home.  
I'd write a thousand poems  
about wanting to be left alone.  
If I lived in Jerusalem  
I'd dream of Argentina, Paris and Rome.*

*I'd dream of the statue of Liberty  
cloaked in a veil, her charcoal gaze  
lowered towards the groundling sea.  
I would wake with a mouthful of salt  
my eyes stony stars  
ancient shrapnel from the wailing wall.*

*If I lived in Jerusalem  
I'd put Abraham's knife  
to my own throat,  
kidnap a single goat  
so the seder would cycle  
and cycle with no end  
of God or Angel or coffee or tea  
until Eliyahu Ha-Navi's wine cup never emptied  
until the afikomen's secret was forgotten  
until the children began not to care about its hiding spot  
until the house filled again with chametz  
and the shabbat challahs unbraided themselves  
inside the intestines becoming flour and water and  
yeast again I would become a wooden ornament  
hanging from a nail inside a house  
that does not separate  
this from that*

## HOW TO TELL A STORY

---

*You could start at the beginning  
with separation. You could  
pull out a man from a woman.  
You could plant a tree and stir.  
or you could start with emptiness.  
A voice. Add form. Letters.  
Paint them thick with black ink.  
You could start with loneliness. And  
loss. Then play with seeds and rain.  
chisel desire to the bone.  
Bury it in a mountain of snow.  
wait a thousand years. Begin  
to dig until you see a crack of light.*





## Part Four

## 1966: BIRTH TALE

---

I imagine my parents on a movie set.  
At the airport they rent a mint green cadillac.  
They travel in style, my Mother in a pale blue  
polyester pants suit she sewed herself,  
my Father sports a hat and leather shoes.

They arrive early for my birth,  
just as they paid all their bills early.  
They are immigrants; their resourcefulness  
comes out of a fear of being exiled.  
Their rage to arrange time comes  
out of Hitler's rage for order.

In a Florsheim shoe box filled  
with old Amoco bills and tax receipts  
from the late twentieth century, I  
find the parking garage receipts to  
the Miami Beach Hotel where my parents stayed  
when they came to pick me up from Mt. Sinai Hospital  
in Dade County, Florida, April, 1966.

If ritual is an attempt to set things right,  
so the fire, the dance, the drum beat, the kiss,  
are all just right, like the stars in the sky,  
that ancient ritual of night's order, then  
ritual gives hope to life's messy imperfection,  
its roughshod disorder. If done just right, ritual  
has the power to reverse life's smelly accidents  
and irreversible spills. If you believe in its spell.

I imagine they stop at a diner for breakfast  
where my Mother asks my Father  
"how can you eat?" as she finishes her  
plate of blueberry pancakes and black coffee.

They press the elevator button to, say, the sixth floor,  
in the hotel room, there await diapers, plastic bottles,  
and blankets all packed back in their new Long Island home.

My Mother tells a mini-skirted receptionist  
who wears a peace pin on her blouse,  
who they are, but the girl can't understand,  
her Israeli accent thick as Turkish coffee.

They are escorted to a waiting room  
where my clock-maker Father steps up close  
to the grandfather clock as though it were an anxious Father-to-be.  
It's 7:23 am. I won't be born until tomorrow's breakfast.  
Patiently they wait, hands folded in their laps.

It was an underground parking garage.  
I imagine when it begins to rain at 5pm  
my Father is relieved that the car is protected.  
It is safe, my Mother is safe, and I too will always be safe,  
with a roof over my head, dinner at 6, boots and a warm winter coat,  
a proper breakfast. When I am sick, there will be hot tea,  
and rice pudding, Vix Vapo Rub and flannel pajamas.

When the doctor comes out of the operating room  
with his head hanging down, my Mother whispers  
in Yiddish "oy, etvas ist eppes nicht gut."  
She doesn't take my Father's hand, but steps  
right up to the doctor's body where she meets his chest.

The doctor says, "The baby's mitral valve may be damaged."  
My Mother says, "we'll take her just as she is. What nonsense  
is this. She's our child. You don't return a child  
like a piece of clothing, because it's damaged!"

when she first came to America, my mother  
did piecework in the garment district in the 1950's.  
she sorted through damaged clothes  
to see what could be salvaged and sold.  
pull a loose thread through a loop - and azyo!  
good as new. she was a master at saving sweaters, i heard,  
made magic with her hands, even without the proper tools.

when my mother tells her version of this story,  
she ends by leaning into the table covered  
with fruit salad and borsht, chopped liver and blintzes;  
in a low voice, says, "You know what? It wasn't even true.  
Your heart was perfect. You were so beautiful,  
the doctor wanted to keep her all for himself."

when i was a teenager, i cringed at this part,  
rolled my eyes as far up in my head as they would go,  
as though this couldn't possibly be true.  
i didn't feel anything close to beautiful.

In ritual retellings called stories  
we fix things so they perfectly align.  
The storyteller is the director of the action,  
chooses the details, like the mint green cadillac,  
the blueberry pancakes, the blintzes.

*In the Hebrew Bible, the calf is sacrificed,  
bled a certain way, prayers are said.  
The Levite priests were nothing  
if not obsessive compulsive.  
experts at making this unholy life holy.*

*My parents too. They could turn lemons  
into gold, survivors to the core. They are gone.  
In the blanks, I continue to weave their story.*

*I place the parking receipt in a frame,  
hang it in the hallway, next to my Dad's  
favorite grandfather clock, the one he called Sam.  
My heart skips a beat every time I pass it.*

*I feel holy and beautiful, forever chosen,  
and woven. They were my prayer and my answer,  
and they waited, sat vigil, always prepared.*

*They saved everything, including me.*



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