Gevalt, or And Then the Strings Come In

Jacob C. Block

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Gevalt, or \textit{And Then the Strings Come In}

\textit{Poems}

Jacob Block

Thesis submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in
   Poetry

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ABSTRACT

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Gevalt, or And Then the Strings Come In engages with history, particularly as it relates to the descendants of Holocaust survivors living in the United States in the twenty-first century, while exploring the feelings of guilt and shame that accompany such a lineage. These explorations take the form of elegies, prayers, direct addresses, while informing poems with less explicit connections to that subject matter in their at-times vigilant, awestruck, and fearful ways of observing the world. In doing so, they seek to make sense of the senseless, and to pick up history’s rubble and create with it something new and beautiful, while never forgetting what brought them to their present moment, and what it means to exist in that moment at all.
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New Words for Memory: A Critical Preface

My poetic process for the last five-or-so years has been a series of pushes and pulls in the service of finding a middle ground between every aspect of what I want my poems to do. Some of this can be attributed to a desire to read as widely and diversely as possible, trying on new costumes, and, if luck will have it, failing to hit exactly the mark I’m aiming for, and landing on something more my own.

Coming into the program, I was writing almost exclusively prose poems influenced by those of my undergraduate professor Gary Young—concise, unadorned language, oftentimes a surreal scenario as a remnant of an early love of Russell Edson’s and Zachary Schomburg’s work. It was work about space and clarity, but, after a two-year post-undergrad stretch of little-to-no reading and writing, followed by an interest in more experimental work by poets like Brandon Shimoda and Aase Berg—work that I still appreciate, but has less direct bearing on my own writing—I’d moved into stranger, more abstract territory. Even in the midst of that more out-there writing, I found myself wanting to pull things back to where they were when I was an undergrad, at least in terms of clarity. Gary Young’s work continues to be a reference point I return to often, particularly when struggling with making my work lucid or concise.

However, an email exchange I had with Mary Ann in my second year might have been the precursor to a turning point. In discussing my poem “Flora & Fauna,” beginning with what I was reading when I wrote it, we touched more directly on the emotional underpinnings of my work and what I was interested in saying, and came to the conclusion that much of my writing is concerned with the vastness, and subsequent unknowability, of the world, as well as the feelings of awe and fear that come along with it. To that, Mary Ann asked me to consider whether I needed to create these surreal worlds or scenarios to explore those feelings, rather than more directly inhabit the world that inspires them. While I didn’t take this as saying those invented worlds weren’t also worth exploring, it allowed me to focus that energy elsewhere, and to find that strangeness as it surely already exists in the world.

This also helped me to find a middle ground between the work I was doing related to family history and the stranger work that preceded it. While there was perhaps a more lighthearted tone in some of the stranger work—or at least more joy in its imagination—the sensation of the strange or the uncanny, as it exists in the world, didn’t feel within reach prior to that email conversation. While I think the development of my work is still very much in-
progress, the logical endpoint seems to be a wedding of the more grounded, personal work and the strangeness that appeals to me in what I like to read and write; the poems seem to hit the mark most successfully when hovering between those two poles.

The first breakthrough poem that, I feel, captured that dynamic as I wanted it to was “Fear of Dying.” The poem is very much of the world I physically live in—no details are invented, or are only in the way the mind embellishes even what it’s experienced—but still traffics in the imagination. The strange, inexplicable disorder of the world—severed feet washing up on beaches, men living way past their expiration date even when living in unhealthy, dangerous ways, et cetera—presses against my personal experiences of going to the hospital with my brother when he almost drowned, or my own hypochondria. This allows the poem its strangeness, its terrified wonder and awe, without resorting to a kind of invention that feels detached from the emotional motor I want to propel my work.

Another breakthrough poem, which came shortly after, was “Davening with My Father.” The poem was the result of reading a lot of Carl Phillips, and wanting to work with similar syntactical structures. What the form allowed me to do was inhabit a more tangible sense of intimacy that I had struggled with, both because of the vulnerability it required and the fear of verging into cliché-by-way-of-sentimentality. However, by focusing so closely on the movement of the language, I felt I was able to write about more direct, intimate events without sacrificing strangeness—in this case, via the movement of the syntax—which gave me license, however unconscious, to let myself examine formerly unfamiliar territory in my work.

As with Phillips, there are several other poets whose work was significant in the development of my own. The prime, Lincoln-on-Mt.-Rushmore example being Larry Levis. My earliest exposure to his work was in my first semester at WVU, in which we read the posthumous, odds-and-ends collection The Darkening Trapeze. The nature of the collection led to an uneven experience, but I found that certain poems, particularly his shorter ones, drew me in. At some point I began reading more of his work, beginning in the middle period with Winter Stars and branching out from there. However, the collection of his—and perhaps the collection in general—that’s had the most bearing on my work is his third book, The Dollmaker’s Ghost. While the book marks his last before his “signature” style of long-lined, multi-page narrative poems, the blueprint of those poems exists in a form with more accessible movements, pieces I can see and more easily work with. The clearest antecedent to my own writing is his poem “For
Zbigniew Herbert, Los Angeles, 1971,” which offered a kind of outline for how I write about my grandfather. In my concern for a balance between unfettered access to the imagination and fidelity to family history, Levis’s way of imagining the tangible details of the past while centering that imagining allows fallibility without sacrificing gravity.

With regard to the poems that don’t deal directly with family history, my reference points are primarily the work of Mary Ruefle and Heather Christle. While the impact of their work is a bit harder for me to directly pinpoint, I think the aforementioned joy in writing is how it most clearly appears in my writing. This is not to say that the subject matter is necessarily joyous, but rather that the engagement with language, and the interaction between different registers—particularly in how the sonic impact of the lyric presents itself in more conversational speech—betrays a more kinetic sensation in the language, a jitteriness below the fold that forces an uneasiness onto whatever control the speaker has over the language. I find myself uninterested in speakers that present themselves as all-knowing, but want to ground them in a way that the speaker knows what the form is doing, even if the subject matter itself is elusive.

I also was concerned in finding that grounding when ordering the manuscript. Per the feedback I got, it was clear that the poems concerned with family history and the Holocaust would be most effective at the end of the manuscript, as the other work was often unable to follow it. The idea, then, became to ease into that ending, to lay the brickwork of the stranger, sometimes goofier poems earlier in the manuscript, and have things progressively darken as it went on. I decided to split the poems into four sections: first the more general, strange work, followed by work about my childhood, a short section of elegies, and finally one focused specifically on my grandfather.

I did, however, want to ensure that my first poem touched on the later themes, even if somewhat tangentially, and so decided to include “Finding God” and “The Railroad Museum” as the first two poems. They both seemed to speak to a preoccupation with the impact of history and/or spirituality on the self in the present, while engaging with the stranger, more surreal imagery of the poems in the earlier sections of the manuscript. I do also enjoy a bit of whiplash in a collection, and wanted a couple moments that seemed to slide in out of nowhere, but not in a way that detracted from the impact of any poem; if I were going to pull the car toward an exit at the last minute, I wanted the sign to give a clear direction, a sense that the destination was ahead, even if the road begins to crack, or the day grows darker and less clear.
Prayers and the Outside World

Long ago I lived in Heaven
because I wanted to.

—Kaveh Akbar, “Soot”

But now the earth-fists
are knocking on the board of the trap:
let us in,
let us in.

—Dan Pagis, “Fragments of an Elegy”
Finding God

Caught him in the clouds and pulled him down to me.
Swung his body over my shoulder and carried him
to my grandmother’s kitchen, where I thought
he used to live. Was wrong. She died two years ago,
while I was gone. Almost like it didn’t happen.
Propped him up against the wall and asked him to explain
himself. In the light, he was nearly transparent,
but wouldn’t speak, so I cooked him her recipes—
blintz, rugelach. He wasn’t hungry. The lights dimmed.

Showed him photos of relatives who’d died
before I was born. He slumped and said nothing.
Wanted to throw him against the wall, instead

carried him home like a sack of stolen bills.
Carried him home and opened my door to Hell,
and all my friends were there to help me take him
to the garden. He was the lighthouse that evaporates
just as the ships come in. He glowed, then vanished
in our hands. That’s not true. He was the crowd
gathered around the apple tree, and he was singing.
This is not a parable. Wisdom doesn’t get results.
Around the tree I loved them, my beautiful friends

burning through the night.
The Railroad Museum

And so I came to find solace in not knowing,
and, digging through the heavy grain of that solace
with my hands, found shame glimmering wildly
and with the accidental grace of sunlight
on the surface of a river, the kind that cut through the valleys
surrounding my home, valleys now bespecked by dead vines,
by impossible fire, by the drought-stripped crests of hills
along the highway, hills that once ached with gold,
and from that ache sprouted railroad tracks,
and from those tracks tended a pain like a low hiss
stretched across the distance.

And so I came to hear the story when I was young,
standing quietly by an empty train car
in the lobby of a velvet-lined museum,
where I was handed a whistle carved from wood
that I could blow into and, from thin air, cast my body as
the hallowed track through which industry runs.

And so I came to know the texture of American Longing,
and became the machine that drives the machine, ran circles
around fruit-bearing trees, felt joy and grew older, drove fast
over the broad backs of highways, walked without purpose
through new towns, scattering the dust of what solace I’d kept
into gutters, across wilted fields, at the feet of everyone I passed.

And so I came to build this castle of small, uneven stones
and the folded letters of my friends, where most nights I look
out only to watch the stars, or press my ear against the wall
in hopes of catching the hushed voices of those I love
in the sound of a train going by, its groan
like that of the whistle I kept on my desk growing up,
its dark shape barreling without hesitation through the valley,
vast and steady and moving the same way I once wanted to.
The Wings Lie Flat on the Body, Gold Light on the Faces

God wakes up inside a barn. God stands up, shivering, and looks around, eyelids gross with sleep, little heart shaking.

God is a whisper knocked across a crowd.
   God has bells for feet.

God strolls along the ringing streets. We are living in God’s “me time.”

God loves to laugh. God made you a crib of stars.

God turns a rib into a telephone so you two can speak. God calls this invention the “Bone Phone.”

God turns twenty-nine every year. God makes memory a thing that bleeds inward.

God shamelessly uses heavy-handed metaphors. God does not own a television, and tells everyone.

God picks out a gravestone that reads: Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

God pitied the crickets—their little membranes singing, every sound they make mistaken for silence.
Unfinished Prayer

o lord this day is for staying alert
may the next be less so
the valleys are burning behind me but I’m doing all right
given room to sleep in the rose garden

o lord everything on land and sea
sounds like sex or applause
it is work to be arranged like this

o lord from my enemy’s mouth
my fist creates a flower but I am unhappy
in my dreams I have no enemies
in my dreams I am unhappy

o lord the love that I once held
for you was the only love that didn’t embarrass me
should the sky soften enough for your hand to reach through
I will die in its shade

o lord if you could eat pestilence & spit light
would you
it is work to be kind with too many seeds to count
it is such hard work to be kind
On Luck

after Olena Kalytiak Davis

Lord, I have shamed myself and made everyone stand witness, lord, have shamed the ground that lets me walk without feeling its ivory haunches crack beneath my heels, lord,

the stream, lord, there’s nothing in the stream, lord, I saw the mountain lion pacing just across the street, lord, saw it descending the staircase and out of my life, lord, once, lord, walked with my eyes down

and looked up to see the bus barely miss me, lord, sometimes want to kiss my friends on the backs of their necks, lord, or tell myself, if I met the evil fucks who took him, lord, I would I would

I would smash them up, lord, but we both know the shape of my limits, and there is no cure for the past, lord, not on this earth pack’d to the gills with cruelty, lord, I keep my eyes right where I need them to be, amen.
The Hole

Is opening again. Is looking like it never closed.
Is making a noise like a backfiring car. Is the rough,
furious donkey kicking. Is where the angel sets
its coat so others can cross. Is wider than a name.
Is spitting from a balcony. Is the balcony itself.
Is the same one my grandfather must have seen
in 1939 collapsing slowly right in front of him.
Is licking its haunches. Is outside a dark bar
shouting, *You’re in MY house, cowboy!* Is jacking up
its sultry piston. Is billowing like a tarp on a lake.
Is a gymnasium filling with smoke. Is ugly thunder
growing in the damp corner of a basement, violently
in love with itself. Is a country without end. We cry
that the kingdom will cover the earth and we let it.
Personal History

1.

Let the record show that you hated it too,
drove your little clown car along the cliffs
of the loud country where you were born,
went out, stretched, and kicked your brothers
to the depths of any pit that you could find.
Anyone would do it. Even you, who were taught
the names of each crack in history’s mosaic
—every year were taught, and listened so close
you couldn’t hear your neighbors burn, or could,
and so what?—you stayed the course, rebuilt
your little house, stuck its little bald antennas,
moved a little further from your little thoughts
with your little head down, so when history took
you in its big arms, you didn’t even think to look.

2.

And one morning you found history speeding
in the car right behind you, fist to the dash,
screaming into the wind. But you were careful.
You were stitching a suit made of warnings,
living eager as a rifle in the damp crook
of history’s elbow. You only knew its shape
when you looked back. You hugged the curves
of the red highway from the hand to the brain.
Saw a dark shape just down the road, sniffed it,
and you said nothing. Your heart opened
at the wrong times, for the wrong reasons.
You walked with your fists in your pockets.
You waited as long as you could.
President Frankenstein

President Frankenstein wake up with lightning and walk into next room.
There, President Frankenstein look at First Lady Frankenstein, who sleep.
President Frankenstein no need look at world.
President Frankenstein turn on TV.
President Frankenstein work all day long hour no rest.
Before, President Frankenstein walk out door find angry mob, now adoring fan.
They love President Frankenstein tell like is.
They no light fire.
They know fire bad because President Frankenstein tell them.
President Frankenstein brilliant mind always thinking.
President Frankenstein gold name scream like hot beacon through night.
There time President Frankenstein get angry, but no one more nice.
Did you know President Frankenstein actually President Frankenstein Monster?
Not even President Frankenstein realize.
Potential Energy

down the mayor of the heart behind my heart won’t step out of his office
down the painting on his wall is a portrait of you

I’m carrying all of my lambs in my shirt
trying not to bleed on them
each of them is named after you
except for the one I’ve named after myself

I’m sure you’ve seen us perched atop the clocktower
gentle whips of steam lifting from our tender limbs

you with your long velvet gloves
swallowing each of your arms to the elbow

me in my gown of eagle beaks
which you mistake for pennies with woozy delight

the clap of soles down every hall
what a joy to live like this in the presence of it

with a sound like a rattling brush every wing lifts
I bet you can see it from all the way over there
This Morning

In the supermarket I saw myself laughing while testing the peaches,
but when I approached myself and asked what was so funny, I didn’t answer.

And when my voice fell from the loudspeakers for a full hour, uninvited
as the voice of God, I hardly noticed, my hands too busy with the oranges,

while one aisle over I passed by myself, with me as a child in my cart
chewing on my fingers, on the ring I wore that used to be my grandmother’s,

turning and turning it. I imagined palm trees painted on my nails like hers,
fronds as bright as bells. While checking out I didn’t say a word to myself,

who was ringing up my items, while behind me I pawed through magazines
with my face plastered on every page. As I left, I was every flower

in the congregation of bouquets arranged by the door, and outside,
I saw myself heading into the supermarket, but couldn’t place myself,

and tried to remember my name on the way home, but couldn’t,
and waited, watching myself cross the road, for someone to tell me.
My Great Hope

I met My Great Hope on the beach. I found him lounging in the sun. Three parrots landed on his finger. But when I sat next to him, the birds flew away. The beach was empty around us. The water calm.

I mentioned yesterday, when I saw the doctor again, for no reason. I asked if I’d told him about the thin muscle wrapped like a fist around my grandfather’s heart. The tired world around that. I didn’t know what to do with My Great Hope, still slick from the waves, the same ones that carried him here in the first place. I waited.
My Day with Paul Celan

Tripping over my feet, feeling blasphemous just to be in his presence, I followed his path across the gravel lot. We began our ride along the vibrant coast in a rusted Volkswagen, a vehicle made for the man still forced to fashion his life like an ant making a hill out of smoke. The sun charted its usual arc down the sky. Pines fell slowly, one-by-one behind us. The view was magnificent, but for all we could've said about it, we didn't. I pointed to the tiny figures in the water—Surfers, I said. He glanced over, said Bloodsail, and kept driving, turning up the radio, quietly counting his breaths. He stopped at a lookout as the afternoon blistered into orange and pink. What are you thinking? I asked. He sighed. I felt like an animal gnawing at its stitches. He was resting in the back when I took the wheel. At the lighthouse, I asked how he was feeling, but he said nothing. I asked again, looking for him in the rearview, but I could only see my face.
Walking the Dog

Always this twist and this
tiptoe when trying, clandestine, to

stop her from spotting a cat,
but she does, and that’s the game:

the way a brisk autumn with a friend
sniffing the bases of trees too early

to lose their color—a bright whisk
of something red, yellow, orange,

distant, then close—is a kind of love,
the sudden pluck of leaves to the ground,

the way someone thought to make the air
easier to breathe the wider the world gets,

a kind of eraser to glide gracefully
over the fragile canals of the lungs,

the way I have nothing new to say, but say it
to unknowing ears that flap with each step

like saddlebags. The way it helps,
even if—or because—neither of us has to notice.
On Hypochondria

Here, where on the way to work I saw a sweater in the road that looked like a tiny gray person bunched on the concrete, no one stopped or seemed to notice. And no one slowed down to glance at the sky when it started to snow, even in April, when flakes dropped as gently as leaflets from a cargo plane. Strangers always find things normal and easy, and still get upset. But I’m in no shape to fix anything in this world that spins because I say so, where there’s no room for the horsehair bow playing my little synapses. Where the body hurts and means it.
Fear of Dying

That the ocean is rising and choked with garbage
and getting warmer doesn't bother me most days,
though it should. Yesterday, the sky looked flat
and wrong, the way a dream is flat and wrong
and halfway-veiled. I donned my paper gown again.
And maybe was four when I sat with my brother
asleep in a hospital bed. A friend had found him
at the bottom of a pool. I was calm then. But now?
Look at me. I've grown careful in the worst ways,
buoyed by inexplicable luck. How do I make sense
of this life—a man smokes his way unharmed through
a century, or a severed foot washes ashore with skin
that gives like silk. Sometimes the ground even seems to
pull downward, like a tulip sagging with rain.
Western Medicine

A cowboy walks into the hospital with his spurs rattling
and a prescription for his father he searches each pocket
he needs his insurance card he will have to wait in the pharmacy
so he waits with us he lights a fire pulls out his harmonica
and sits against the wall dotted with bottles of medicine like pink horns
their small shadows fidgeting he sings and every note he sings is like a spark
chipped off the edge of a soul and set adrift through the stale pitch of the air
I briefly lose the pain that brought me there the place becomes his voice
he sings so loud he turns halfway to dust he’s exhausted we all are
and when the room turns the color of eyelid-light no one is surprised
but the cowboy can’t help himself he thinks it’s a sunset
crying on his tired little horse he rides hard into the red and is gone
Mirtazapine

O sleep o steady braid of heart and breath
o these ancient bodies still churning around my home
small nautilus young crocodile whole forest turned to stone
monthlong days between Antarctic hills
decades of flax bluing the ankles of babbling goats
this blood in the spit in the back of the throat
the awkward throbbing wires in the chest
the swift migration of entire lives to the brain
the stars wagging their years in reverse
the something-in-the-water-here
the have-no-words-for-this-and-won’t
Yes I too am living half-blessed in this room
on my back waiting in the thick suede of night
for you with all the curtains closed
A Brief History of Life Beneath the Firmament

The parrots you sent instead of rain are everywhere now, half-whistle and half-air. They flock like dusk to every roof, a sudden blue as blue and bright as the little equation in their blood will allow.

How many almost died for me, he who perpetually lives, to be here by the phone. What the flowers say? Remind me to tell you about it, each of my lives in a line behind me, strolling town-to-town across a lightless terminal. I’m dashing my feathers with sweat and soap, filling my days until I can see them in the corner of my room. Should I be loved, it will be by nothing more than chance.
On Wanting to Be Loved in Spite of It

Look—the animal laughs. It tries and tries to sing. It mimes whole desolate centuries. The animal puts old gods in new bottles. Its dull shadow stretches and winters the world. It nurses eighty different kinds of shame, strings guilt in long bands over its roof then paints its bones a brighter shade of white. This is not progress, not really—this gets caught with its snout somewhere else. The animal runs worry-first through the wheat fields, lobbing hot apologies at every town it passes. It loves like a knife loves an apple. It waits while its days wander slowly over gentle hills, hiking up their cuffs just ahead of the flood.
Duplex (When we were children)  
*after Jericho Brown*

When we were children, the rabbi told us God’s real name.  
*I’m allowed to say it now, he said, but you should never.*

I’m allowed to say it now, but built my little world out of that *never.*  
The chain of questions grew. I looked for God in every empty well.

And across the plain the cold grew with purpose. The chorus welled.  
Forests left their careless leaves on the floor in rings like fallen dresses.

Today I slip on new fears like fiery dresses.  
Slip into the past like a ring through a drain.

Slip into a thought of my ancestors, but the color is drained.  
Everything dims. Violence snaps at their heels like a dog.

Feel the head of American heat by my bed like a dog.  
My friends inhale smoke on their side of the country.

Each piece of the rocket starts falling away. God bless the quiet country.  
Quiet of the dead. The word not allowed. Whatever it is has no name.
Decree of the King’s Disembodied Head

No fun no dancing no feet no hands no help
no bloody knuckles no knees buckling no language
outside of this language no knowing no tongue
no taste no time no stars but the sun no sun no throne
no stone thrown at bird in a dark bank of willows
no willow no bird no bone no seed no bulb no light
no match no motion no wander no wonder no refuge
no weather no water no food no fire no bruise no
desire no news from the front no front no way back
no land no air no sea no see no err no no no flicker
no flame no heat no fuel no spring no fall no good
no good no good no dead no living no leaving no
question no mercy no nothing. This is nothing
they said What do you have to be afraid of
Flora & Fauna

All morning, red petals streamed from the clouds. It was like being washed by a faucet labeled PETALS. But, as old friends will talk until there are no words left in them, when we looked down we found the street blank, the petals gone. And when someone cried out—a wildflower sprouting first from their neck, then another, and another, all over their body, until they looked like a small garden convulsing in the square—we all gathered around to watch. Someone ought to do something, someone said, but all we heard was the sound of a bouquet thrown from a distant window, down to the hard earth.
Portrait of a Gondolier in the Year 2100

And the thin glass table that cradles the earth—who watches that? He rows he rows he rows

at the slow, ugly pace of the spirit, blows a kiss to the dead he paddles through, singing,

_There's no comfort in waiting, no comfort at all._
Maybe he's right, but I couldn't tell you.

I lived in the world for as long as I could, and died with my head in my hands.
Another Psalm

Suddenly the bridge smelled like cinnamon, and everyone who crossed it did so gracefully.
The river was covered in needles and white, and voices cracked up in brittle flight over frozen lawns.
What else could they do, but fade? It was day one in the season of nights. I didn’t think of you at all.
Life Story with Flagrant Falsehoods

We look at the world once, in childhood.
The rest is memory.

—Louise Glück, “Nostos”

I hated childhood
I hate adulthood
And I love being alive

—Mary Ruefle, “Provenance”
Genealogy

I'm writing this with the petals I found
by your bedside. They shrivel as they work,
getting quieter each word, and darker.
It's easy to make things up. I do it
all the time. I forget them as I go.
If not by sea, my history comes yelled
across verdant lawns, whispered secondhand
in the stiffening glow of old houses.
Years ago, something sent a dog to space
and launched a thousand planes across the sea.
I'm here, and that's evidence of something,
but what? —The field is burning behind me.
Where are you? —Beneath a heavy patch of sky,
the moon like a bright hole punched through.
From Whence I Came

Friends, I was raised in the crook of an invisible arm
and lifted from the reeds, which steamed like pipes
in Davis, California. You were nowhere to be found, a sound
I hadn’t heard yet. My little turbines started to spin. Eight years passed.

This is why the Torah has no vowels. Something about God’s names
and my father waking at sunrise to spark his furnace of belief.

Volumes of the Talmud like red smiles. All morning a blank brightness
coating their spines on a bookshelf so tall I thought it held up the ceiling.

I try to remember a feeling, and can’t. Something about the smell of leather
and the moss that hugs the walls of ancient temples. How, once, I wore this

life like a gown. But when the wind takes me and the dam doesn’t break,
what then? I want processions. Violins. Perfume of orchids skimming the air

like a body carried off on a stretcher. To be loved. To feel a hand
on the back of my neck. To be loved. To not care whose hand it is.
What I Remember of Our Old House
Davis, CA, 1992-2000

Burn-holed like old film, a red X
for every face, the world beige
and always morning, the sun woolen,
as if struggling through a curtain,
the counter crowded with dead
petals from my mother’s flowers,
always flowers, sometimes blue,
which, even in their second
and final silence, seemed to erupt
like applause, the days slow
and all at once, and, in the way
every memory, like a thread,
can only be coaxed out so much,
soon the whole thing unravels,
the cherry tree in the backyard
only starting to bloom when we left.
Davening with My Father

It was—in the roundabout way
that rabbis discuss these things,
with a sound that makes the ensuing silence
seem almost aggressive in its vacancy,
as, over hours, over centuries, their voices
become like wings fluttering—a human matter.
Hardly awake, young enough to be
counted in months, I remember
the sun,
somehow brighter in the morning—
colder, closer to white—over the crib,
my father with red leather siddur in one arm,
my small body in the other swaddled,
while he bent and bowed to the eastern wall,
swayed and bent and bowed to get closer
to something—

something gained on
over the years, across the Grand Interim
that the world can sometimes be—in his grip
the two signposts closest to where he was
trying to arrive. And, in that moment,
I had the ability to think, and, out of that,
the deep red need to think of God,
and I might have thought, *God is here
and he is kind and I praise his breath
against my forehead.*

Once held like this,
between empty walls, above empty carpet,
in the same hand that holds prayer,
and, in reality, not straying so far
as one might or ought or would want
to cop to, still piloting this body,
I have grown less heavenly, it’s true,
yet, really, no less pliable,

and speak
to my father most nights, to God
less often, though I always try to
catch a glimpse before he’s gone.
Hits of the Mid-2000’s

The average American middle school is held together with gluey photos and old clocks, and at some point I gave up on watching clocks, maybe when, at thirteen, I thought I was in love with everyone I met—an idea I got, like most bad ones, from movies. Or maybe when, most mornings, I pulled myself out of bed and onto a field where I ran and ran until a whistle let me rest. There was nothing to do about it. Not even on June 6th, 2006, when a distant fire stained the sun a deep red, and Steven stood in a circle of us shouting about the end of days, which, of course, never came, and I imagine is still on its way, and could it hurry up already, and, by the way, who said love was something so small a teenage boy could bandy it about like a sword that disappears only when observed? After school when Zach and I would walk to his house to hear the hits of the mid-2000’s on the little radio tucked between his baseball trophies, our dreams as boring and bright and distant as fireworks.
Going to West Virginia

No matter how far you go, the highway stays ahead of you, unrolling like a wolf’s tongue in an old cartoon you might have watched as a child while your father, now seated passenger, was at work.

It’s the first time you’ve seen a cloud’s shadow appear whole, and right there, and still. Passing through its darkness is like passing through the first night you called him thinking you were going to die in your sleep, the way your uncle died after calling your mother with stomach pain, and deciding not to go to the hospital, and not waking up. But that call won’t come for another year. And every summer after that, you’ll stand outside of what it means to live each day assuming more will follow, the scroll inside the bottle out to sea. But first you need to drive while your father watches Nebraska’s wind-bent stalks flicker like cards in a boring magic trick, and says, Three more days just like this one, and doesn’t have to explain himself. And the thin air above the asphalt shrugs off steam, and, somewhere, a trumpet lifts its bell, and you want to wave to everything— Hello, gilded American distance. Hello, vast cemetery of the senses, you and I are right to be afraid—and it goes on like this for years.

Until one day the distance says that you’ve walked backward through your life.

And something big that you can’t see slips the heavy timber from your arms, and you have no choice but to accept it.

But whatever end is left picks the blue flowers from the side of the road and places them in your pocket. Worrying will get you nowhere, it says. And you know.
From Whence I Came

California is on fire again. California has no weather, only pillars of smoke in the distance, no matter the distance. And every window tosses orange light, and the wind lives forever, and laughs across the valley. In California, the melisma of the roads is sacred. People in thick, yellow suits march across highways to sift fire out of the hills like sand from a child’s hair. It’s 1977 in New York, and my father’s friends gather before he crosses the country. Out west he finds water and quiet heat for years. He meets a thousand palm trees, and then my mother. Moves upstate with her and stays. Where I am, winter is six months long, and the fire comes only over the phone. I enter my invisible home through the window. I promise I will see you soon.
What Comes Back and What You Take with You

When I was a young, pink algal bloom, delicate hands against delicate earth, the same hands eating happily, atop a distant balcony, striding shirtless, palming plastic pterodactyls, cradling a plastic knife, the neighbor’s dandelions splayed across a blue June morning whose hot velvet rests against my forehead, light as a mother’s fingertips, what little Hebrew I recall: tapuach, shulchan, emet—apple, table, truth.
Sonnet to Whatever is Upstairs

Thank you for the soft California breeze that rushed through
my hair, lifting with the seagulls when I went to the boardwalk
and watched the sea lions bark in the sun, the salted air that stalked
my path, salt that I still taste here in West Virginia. Thank you
for letting me find the boxes from my mother’s old shoes,
boxes now filled with photos and letters delicate as a monk’s walk
across burning coals. Thank you for the bells that sit on the stalk
of my worries, if only for the moments they’re silent too.

And I’m sorry that I stopped making music years ago,
and that my fear of the world can outweigh my desire
to see it through to somewhere kinder, somewhere I could find
if only I worked the grindstone you’ve given me. And, even so,
thank you for this life—so brimming with necessary fire—
that, despite everything, if I could, I’d never leave behind.
Elegies

Most animals, smelling
death on another, back away,
as if repulsed, or frightened; the rest
come closer.

—Carl Phillips, “Revolver”

If I speak for the dead, I must leave
this animal of my body

—Ilya Kaminsky, “Author’s Prayer”
Matzevah

Dear Winter, I haven’t stopped lighting candles
gasoline is burning. I’m writing
to you with the back of my shovel.

A decade ago, my father studied the Talmud
from pages that smelled of vanilla and chlorine,
and never told you. Why would he?

It feels good not to know any better than this—
rams crowd the backyard bleating,
imprecise as falling snow, melodies

in the key of you, the piano in the synagogue frozen shut,
full of little silences fastened to their golden stalks.
And no one here but you to sing.

You’ve left my body riddled with diamonds. I turn every corner
expecting to see you. I’m walking with my arms outstretched,
hoping to find you. I couldn’t stop this if I tried.
Elegy to Be Read Over the Telephone

Still, these red windmills stretch their shadows over bison abandoned on old western film sets in Catalina, surf dashing at the same clip, same breeze jawing the mahoganies, spirits still lucky to haunt in such lovely conditions. Last July imagined the hospital’s traffic of monitors tracking the low fuss of life, while each of your veins was stampeded with ten milliliters of cattle to graze the pain. It was like someone else’s dream. Where I was, the days fell away by the handful, like planes pitched into the distance, into a dull afternoon that, even now, pitches its weight forward, as if leaving its body could let the night in.
Elegy with Two Kinds of Motion

And what might the chameleon or the cherry blossom witness—that one of the byways to righteousness is to pull out all the stops, the sustenance of glamour in the wake of a quickly-made distance from war, the past pressed west, once through Ellis Island and off to the snow-sheathed edge of the city, a small tenement where the deer hesitate to make room for the taxi, but run from the sound of it, the this-all-used-to-be-woods of it, how the decades hid heavy applause in their teeth, their tongues marking the distance between bodies and bodies, blood rowing through the sterile California night, bordered by machines and the labyrinthine current of nurses, an alcove carved by morphine into the violet buzz that summer tends to render under everything, the sudden migration of something invisible from the body—no, not what the light is, but what it does.
Faulty Elegy for My Father’s Father

Who I saw after the war, in Amsterdam, carry his love like a helmet under his arm. Who stood too close to cannons. Who sailed in silence, then tucked years away by decade, like letters between endless bricks. Who lived after the war in a room where he couldn’t hear the world. Who, now outside, wouldn’t want to hear it. Who now, when he speaks, speaks in days. Who now, when he speaks, makes the sound the earth makes when no one is listening.
Taking Care
for my grandfather

it feels like a mistake
for a Monday afternoon to exist
when you are dying and I am dying
at a much slower pace

if I can be honest with you
I hope I never die or else
if I do I would like to die like you
unaware of it even at its center

I don't really know about the spirit
I'd guess it isn't born translucent
when it leaves its little spirit-hole
I imagine it's just paper-thin
and adjacent to light

and by the way I'm sorry
if this is a bad time
or if you've been waiting for a while
you wouldn't believe
how long it's taken me to get here
History and His Impossible Landscapes

If there exists
in my blood a map, it is one I keep
folded for fear
of where it does not lead.

—Leila Chatti, "When I Tell My Father I Might Begin to Pray Again"

Maybe this wind is what he heard in 1941.
Maybe I have raised a dead man into this air,
And now I will have to bury him inside my body,
And breathe him in, and do nothing but listen—

—Larry Levis, "For Zbigniew Herbert, Summer, 1971, Los Angeles"
My Grandfather Never Told Us About Chrzanów

Can’t mouth the name. Won’t embarrass it. Won’t and don’t. Know only static and handfuls of dark.
Found windows in his dam and looked for doors. Would run with fingers on the glass. Would think. Would think. Would raise the empty years and draw the word from under.

Was awful din. Lived God-lost boy and suffered young.
Was starry-blood. Was worn by hush in the cradle of night.

Did still love. Did joy. Was quiet twenty-thousand worlds gone by. Did fall asleep beneath dead oak. Did wake to palm and California wind. Had farthest come to feel it breeze.
Did nurse his faith with gray and wailing heart. Would live whose ghost like flies in spring. Can’t speak it. Won’t start.
In response to the striped shirt my grandmother tried to give to my grandfather

he said, I’ve worn enough stripes in my lifetime. As a teenager in Bergen-Belsen, with the guards distracted, he turned his arm over, pretending to clutch it in pain, to avoid being tattooed with the number 35115. He never told me the number when he was alive, but he remembered it seven decades later.
Duplex (So little new to say)
after Jericho Brown

So little new to say, and too much time to say it.
My grandfather had a sister. I know because he told me.

    The hands of neighbors cruelly move. I know because he told me.
    What’s fire to my quiet room? What keeps not far enough away.

What’s fire to my quiet room? What dust. What dusts whole towns away.
Who works the dense plum of my heart? Whose debt soaks through the door.

    Who—eager, laughing—plumbs the hurt? Who thrives outside the door.
    Men who wanted my grandfather dead still by the roadside waiting,

Their shallow breath skirting the faces of dead. Can you hear them waiting,
White and empty as stars? Sound of something heaved onto stone.

    Town filled with dissolving stars. Only sound of heaving stones.
    In the palm of our evening they burn. We burn them.

Follow the flames to the palms of who named me. I know who burned them.
Who plague the streets. I want to say. Pretend I have the time to say it.
Address to a Polish Balcony, 1933

for my great-grandmother

I could tell you how the future is
an oak tree heavy with eagles, too loud and busy
for love, graceless as a jawbone snapping
briefly out of place. You could tell me if you ever slept dreamlessly
under a chattering roof, your body lit up in blue
by the window. I’ve read about you—

how your eyes found love in a room of luckless young faces,
black milk leaking from every window. How you scattered your time
along the streets of Chrzanów. How you still ring
in my mother’s name. There’s so much I would like to know,
so much left to tell you, little of it good—

I grew bored with God’s absence, so I stopped
waiting. Braced for nothingness until I stopped
expecting nothing. Even now there’s death’s specific silence,
the jangling wind-up of morning, same blue night thickening
like flames across a curtain. I have grown dangerously
malleable, flammable, my fingers uncalloused
and breakable. I pray with eyes closed and mean everything.

Baruch atah

Look how the field grows, look how the heart.
Look how, still, that oak can bloom softly out of you,
who died along a golden rope of stars.
The Poem as I Found It
after Larry Levis

The poem about my grandfather was in the corner of the kitchen
burning in its wicker chair. Its shoulders were thin as coat hangers,
a Star of David half-hidden in the thicket of silver hair on its chest.

I thought that if I looked away, something beyond me might
breathe into being an angel, whose mouth might only know first
and final words, whose wings might sweep away shadows like dust.

Instead, the poem cursed in Yiddish, tore its coat and slurred its speech.
And the poem collapsed on its bed and wept, surrounded by nurses.
The day grew bare and dark. And when the light came, with every animal
gone from the miserable earth, the poem was dodging carriages
in a brilliant village that no longer exists, where mothers cry out
for their sons, each voice, too small for its coat, getting lost in a crowd
that moves toward something it can’t know and doesn’t look back.
Against Passivity

And in November again I think of you—you whose soul the earth must have cared for more than it was cared for by your neighbors who let soldiers take and pack you away into a corner of the city like gauze into a wound they saw inflicted and let grow in the rudderless hope that it would heal on its own, or that, if it didn’t, the pain would spare them, and the sweat on their lips would be from joy and not from work, and the sun would warm them, but not burn them, and the food they ate together at their sturdy, white tables would taste sweeter than it had in years, that the rain would bring bounty, that the world would grow smaller and easier to see to the ends of, and so to understand, a world without danger, where the earth they tread on is satisfied, having taken for itself those souls it cared for more than they were cared for by their neighbors who sang in unison as the sun went down, knowing it would rise in the morning, if only for them.
Mourner’s Kaddish

The prayer doesn’t mention death at all, and neither do I, sitting at the detuned piano wedged against the entrance of that house in Santa Ana, though I go on living, expression rubbed into nothing after a few quick smudges from a holy thumb. Still, I who mistake abundance for good find the room feels no lighter, no emptier. The gray photos sinking into the wall in real time, the slack, gold curtains—what faceless breeze makes it all move? The same one that told me, as a child, it was the sky that reflected the sea. The same that prescribed a heaven of only human joys, a lonely glow that can do anything and chooses this.
Imagining My Grandfather’s Ghost

Find him standing again, hovering
above the bed, snowy villages
projected onto his body, our family
stretched across his face, still there
when I—startled, animal—pass
my hand through his chest,
where, of course, I feel nothing,
as you—

    you as far from here
as I from any stony Polish town
whose grasses for centuries might
push through its cobbled roads,
little arms reaching for the wide nobody
of the sky—

    might expect,
a ghost being always a ghost,
always looking back, perilous and quiet
as a sycamore tilting over a house,
roots emerging one by one, like his silent eyes
on the wall, from a year too small to be a year.
When ghost clutches his chest

    the room darkens.
Ghost becomes a blue star. He doesn’t need to
tell me that he’s in there, or that the pain doesn’t end,
that it stretches like the sea, until it stops being the sea
and just becomes the rest of the world.
Dwelling

Time and time again I enter my family’s past as if touring a city whose buildings were imagined but never built. And, within that city, count line after line of icy villages stretching into the dark.

Each village cobblestoned, snowing in winter, snowing in summer, each and every feeling twinned with a sadness that follows it like a boat’s shadow across a lake floor, just a bit behind and down, always moving. That same shadow crouched behind every joy, and inside its silence a deeper silence. In one village the only language is melancholy. And still, they sing. It’s absurd to even say it—how, as a child, my grandfather once took a train with his sister, who was later murdered with a soldier’s dull cruelty, and, for a moment, must have felt like he was soaring.
My Grandfather's Ghost Walks with Me in Winter

The spirit doesn't take room, it takes time
and makes room—beside my bed when I wake, or later
when, suddenly on the bridge, no one is paying attention,
and the snow starts its delicate interference, and, just as suddenly,
as if every trace of life had never graced the earth
and never would again, every house seeming dimmer,
but warmer inside, my grandfather is walking
next to me, the snow falling through him, skimming
across his frame, his body like a lung
that takes in questions and never breathes out,
or like a hand that only opens. No longer strapped
to the catastrophe of living, he looks more alive,
the way the dead, sheared by memory, always seem
to come back more alive than they ever were.

And how exhausting it must be to linger in the doorway
of the fading house he'd just escaped, where I can still see
the fuse attached to his heart, still stranded in perpetual burn,
like the world stranded in its own hot dying and afraid
to count its days—
    trucks still thundering into sunsets,
children still sprinting past police, dry voices like contrails,
the town where he was born still laden with the hooks of history,
where each morning still has the audacity to dull into an afternoon
as gentle as this one with ghost still beside me, moving
as I move, his feet silent as the memory of an old house,
cold light collecting slowly at its steps.
In response to the striped shirt my grandmother tried to give to my grandfather

he might instead have worn a suit each day, heard voices climb from the streets through a factory window in Poland, and the voices might have been his sister’s children, who he might have visited every Friday evening. When he walked through the door, he might have counted each child slowly, one by one, raising a finger for every face, and said the number with a smile.
Elegy with the Noise Cut Out

for my grandfather

Who knows when I learned what had happened to him.
He never talked about it, and I'd grown up
knowing not to ask, the question like a locked room
I'd pass sometimes, holding my breath.

*

If you didn't know, it might sound formal—Holocaust—
a kind of dance, a hotel on a cliff, a rare species of flightless bird.
Instead, I can barely find the strength to say it. It slips from my mouth
like sand, like bits of glass—the same harsh sound in different shapes.

*

It was easy for me to not ask questions. And still is,
but now he's gone, and maybe that's why I think I'd be able to,
because maybe death lends bravery to the wrong bodies,
the ones that have nothing useful to do with it. Maybe the question is
like the cherry tree in the backyard of the house I grew up in,
which only bloomed after we left, though I somehow remember
its bounty. How it felt to taste what wasn't there.

*

So I imagine what his life was like before
it was pulled apart, and maybe that's why I picture it
more precarious than any other time he could have been killed
by bus, by malfunctioning cells, by his own stumbling heart.
Maybe because a plant just beginning to sprout is beautiful
in a different way than one in full bloom, is beautiful in its possibility.
Maybe because, had he died then, I wouldn't be able to imagine his life at all.
Maybe because, when death gets close, it lands its blows less silently in the periphery.
And what a disappointment to die ordinarily in the wake of that.
For me, with the shining promise that is my life, it feels like no triumph to go
before making good on it. On what? He wouldn't even want me to think of death.
Would have wanted the ghosts so far from me I wouldn't have to name them.

*

My mother believes in ghosts, spirits, whatever fits into a half-Jewish, half-secular frame,
and says he's with me, but I know he can't see the way the snow turns neon blue
at night, the way the red brick buildings in this town swell against a dull gray sky
like words remembered from a dream, surrounded by flowers that weren't even here
when he died, flowers that probably never crossed his mind, because who would stop
to think of flowers with death at each corner of the frame, whipping the crows from the trees?

*

Still, my brother and I brought flowers on the last day we saw him alive,
mostly for our grandmother, mostly because we didn't know what else to do,
and still didn't when we saw him, gaunt in an old chair in his kitchen, in the corner
where no one used to sit, the hot Monday afternoon too beautiful to hang idly
over seventy years of a man's life settling into him at once. We couldn't know
what he was thinking while March slowly crumbled, a goodbye note lingering
in helpless spring, how far his mind, reeling in all directions, went back.

*

And when I think about the other furthest end of his life—
in that small Polish town whose name is like rain missing my tongue,
whose name I never heard him pronounce once, its silent linger,
town where, in my mind, breezes didn't even exist, nor streets
that hadn't run with blood when he was young, only gray buildings
steady under a sun without warmth, endless winter falling onto cobbledstones
in slow motion every day—there's no humanity in the thought. It's a cavalcade
of suffering. It leaves no room for a boy to wake in quiet steps, slowly,
voice like chalk. No sweat beads the brow of its summers.

*

But he never told us otherwise. He never told us anything. He moved
to Southern California, to a small neighborhood of clay-roofed houses,
in a town without weather, where every day burnt to a reliable dark.
But the war, like all wars, never ended—it spread out and shaded each day,
a drop of blood in a glass of water. It followed him everywhere,
only as distant as he could make it, stopping only when he could make it,
a dog-hunger, a slow grimace across the face of what should have been
peace, quiet—whatever other words seem to fit because they mean nothing,
the way pain is sometimes just pain, even in the kind sun and warm winds
of Santa Ana, the only place I'd known to find him, alive and well
in the soft exchange of seasons from spring to summer and back again.

*

That was where, for fifty years, he led a life built to diminish the past
until it became a pale dot, until it dissolved into a slowly-widening horizon,
a bell whose ringing got quieter and quieter until you couldn't be sure
if you heard it or just remembered what it sounded like. Somewhere
in there I arrived and, for years, didn’t suspect a thing, nor would he have
wanted that. I’d run in the grass, go swimming. He’d recline shirtless
each summer—shorts, white socks, gold Star of David hanging on his chest,
star he never seemed to take off, fingers tented over it—with me in the shade,
looking back. I was happy, and he was. Was quiet, and he was, but differently.

*

The food piled up, went bad, wasn’t thrown out, was left
for a decade, his dark office so filled with old documents
they splayed like endless shelves of cresting waves.
Three broken phones on the desk
for who knows how many years. Nightmares
that never went away while he was alive.
And when he died, the earth moved at a different clip.
It felt like we had been left here. What wasn’t
here was like a shadow, every place deadened and cold.
I walked through the city like I was looking
for someone. I felt guilty all the time.

*

And still do, though differently, a bad Jew, who doesn’t fast
when he should, even though it was so ordained
by someone thousands of years in the past,
and I’m nothing if not a sucker for feeling ashamed
about the past. At this point, there’s little left to say,
and what there is seems useless—a message in mirror steam
that not even the dead can see—

*

Where I am, the snow won’t start falling for a few months,
but, when it does, it will be the only time I feel like I’m walking
through the present and aware of it, as though, when the past comes
to me in dreams, it isn’t always with silence and snow,
the world not stopped, but moving too slow to see. I’m sorry.
I’m stalling. You can turn away now. Don’t wait
for me to finish this. There’s too much left to do.