

WITHOUT WITHOUT TITLE

ZOHAR ATKINS

To say the same thing is what's difficult.
To say the same thing about the same thing is the most difficult.
Martin Heidegger

All problems are concentric.
Maurice Merlau-Ponty

Bereishit

Before God could separate the upper and the lower worlds, light from day, earth from water, he was sitting in a tiny room, unable to move. Whenever his mouth would begin to open to say "Vayehi," he would be overcome. Each day, God would wake up, intending to create the world, and each day, God would be unable to. Sometimes he'd find a physical reason. His hands were too shaky. Other times, he'd find a distraction. Other times, he'd just stare off into space or turn on AngelNews. God surrounded himself with blueprints of his world, but the execution was not something he could bring himself to do. Perhaps on some level God understood that the Creation of the World was also his goodbye, the inauguration of a world that would grow not to need him. Was he ready to write himself out of existence just yet? So Gabriel came before the Lord and said, "I know you are afraid. I know the world you'll make will not be perfect, that it will only be one possible world and not the ideal world in your mind. But if you impart to it all of your love, you will find peace."

Protest

No sooner do I say, "Let there be light"
then a horde of angels arrives with their signs.

"No more oppression of darkness!"
"Stop occupying our empty wild."
"Down with the visible!"
"God Should Know Better Than To Speak."

Even the walls of my hotel lobby seem
to sing out against me.

But then I remember, I'm God.
Soon the angels will want to go home.
In the end, nobody will remember how they held hands,
soaring together, like a school, into the tear-dusk firmament.
How they laid their celestial torsos down in a row
to prove my world a desecration.

Nobody will hear their words of lament,
"Holy, holy, holy," as anything
but praise.

Sin

I.

According to the Zohar, a sin is never as defiant as it seems.
Rather, the sin, if it can be so called, always comes
from too much of what is proper.

Idolatry is not about worshipping the wrong thing,
but about failing to wonder, Who is this?

II.

Kafka says the sin was that they made the tower resemble
a deity, the first Statue of Liberty.

Barth says it was that they assumed
their ingenuity would bring them closer to God.

Nietzsche says it was that they stopped too soon.

Bourdieu says it was that they took a natural word, "Babel,"
and leveraged it into the brand of a Multinational Consulting Group.
This is the true meaning of "Let us make a name for ourselves."

III.

Whatever the case, nobody agrees—
as if a story about the scattering of tongues
were a cipher for an interpretive chaos to come.

"To read about Babel is to participate
in its dysfunction," says Steiner.

The more we try to interpret, the deeper it gets.
Our genius for asking trivial questions
enshrines the very Diaspora we seek to escape.

How many bricks should we use?
Should they be made of rice paper or holograph?
Can the tower's shadow be cut through enemy airspace?
Can folks in PR really be considered *builders*?

Concealed beneath pages of commentary
is a small note in child's handwriting:
"I still can't find the word *sin* anywhere in the story."

Fake Judaism

Abraham, says Deleuze,
could only become a Jew
by first being a goy.

Inside every pintele yid
is a Pinteresting Gentile.
And inside every Gentile

is a unique ignorance
of the Midrash
that the Torah was given to everyone.

*

I have studied the yud-shaped pool of blood
like an exhausted hunter sniffing out the air for some lentils.

I have adorned myself with Bilaam's staff infection, and the lines on my face
record the litany of psalms I have struggled
to compose
lispig, tongue-numb from the frost of imagined taiga.

But never could I hear
the night-ram bleating out
Zohar, Zohar.

*

I've heard Bialik forbade himself from writing as a kind of sign-prophecy.
A desperate gesture towards the emptiness of his devotional rebellion.

The way Hosea names his daughter "Ee-Ruchama," meaning there is no mercy,
to demonstrate that, so too, God will have no mercy on his children.

The poet's silence is an almond-shaped abandonment.

Holiness, an incorrect password
to a door that has no lock, no gatekeeper.

*

To be a Jew is to pervert metaphysics
so that what matters is not ideas
about the thing or the thing itself

but the voice, departing into blessing.

A piece of fruit, embezzled from paradise
by speech alone. By speech, alone.

The Fall

I.

Adam looks in the mirror and sees Eve
peering at the snake in the corner of his eye.
He winks at her, but she sees only a blink.
She thinks there is something in his eye, perhaps
a small puddle of envy or grief or a curious piece of dust.
Her attention turns to her prop, *Gender Trouble*.
The snake, meanwhile, pretends to immerse himself
in Linnaeus—*Systema Naturae*.
He uses it to redirect the light in Adam's mirror
so Eve's book looks like a piece of forbidden fruit.
The letters on the cover look like bite marks.
Her face appears flush and unblinking.

II.

Eve studies the lines on her husband's face
which, on closer look, resemble a snake,
He is dreaming about life beyond
the garden's walls, the pain of labor,
a home of wood and stone.
The lines on his face swell into grooves.
He begins to cry out for Ur Kasdim and Haran,
for Babel and Sodom, for Beit El and Canaan.
Eve places her finger in his open mouth.
It tastes like pomegranate. He wakes
to find Eden unrecognizable.
Their bodies seem like foreign objects.
He takes out a fig leaf and starts journaling:
"When God began to create heaven
and earth..."
Eve, annoyed by Adam's phubbing,
and demoralized by her inability
to cure his neurosis
leaves him for a snake oil salesman.
Soon, Adam realizes his mistake.
However, it's too late.
To win her back, he must agree
to a *ménage à trois* with the man
he regards as a snake.
He refuses.
Instead he pretends to read
while watching them on his phone.
The irritation of the screen light
causes him to blink incessantly.
The salesman, however, thinks he is winking
and interested in consummating.

And so the vectors of their love
continue to twist and coil out through Paradise.

Cain and Abel

Cain was the first to present his power point on inspirational leadership.
His argument was tight and his slides were sleek.
Everything supported his core message: No poetry without readership.
When he finished, he looked out. The great hall was empty.

Abel went second. The room filled and there were hors d'oeuvres a plenty.
He spoke without notes and in praise of prose. His voice was meek.
No one could hear a thing, but what they could
Convinced them to appoint him sentry.

Cain was standing in the back. His face fell. His bowtie crumbled into paint.
A fire alarm went off, as if the universe could hear his sole complaint.
"Why is your face fallen? Haven't you heard of re-entry?"
How could he respond to such a question when he was feeling so bleak?

And besides, why was a fire alarm talking to him?
"If you hire a new head of sales, all is well," it said,
"But if not, bankruptcy poses in baby cobra at the New York office."
Cain was perplexed. This was like nothing he had ever read.

So Cain turned to congratulate Abel.
He considered using the nearest mic to bash in his head.
But thanks to his leadership coach, he took some breaths
And recentered instead.

Abel told Cain about his new prose initiative,
Invited him to join, assuming he was able.
Cain said, "Can I get back to you by Friday?"
Abel said, "I need to know now."

So Cain said, "No."
It was no small thing for him to take a vow.
And besides, who was this guy to be so pushy, anyhow?
At that moment, "Young Abel collapsed."

The cause of death, the doctors said, was inconclusive.
Some say drugs, others shame.
Some say every explanation's a fable—
We can neither blame Cain nor Abel.

The Binding of Isaac

Twenty minutes away, a young Muslim is dying of bone cancer
In an Israeli hospital. His sister refuses to donate her marrow
And the young man cries out in darkness, "Allah, Merciful One, I know
You are punishing me for all those naked women I visited."
And under his rage is the sadness of tank-ploughed olive groves.
We read about it in our seminar and debate the pros and cons
Of hugging him. We refer to human touch as an intervention.
"Who are you to love me?" We hear our fantasies shout back at us.
And so it was that Abraham, having heard the angel's voice
And felt her tears, untied his only son, saying, "God has provided
The offering for us." But Ishmael insisted Avraham had heard wrong
And said, "My place is here, on the altar." And Abraham said, "Isaac, Isaac."
And Ishmael said, "*Hineini*."

Some Pogs

These are amassing: each
Striking a neighbor, as though speech
Were a rote performance.
Arranging by class

To meet as far as this passage
From the world as collecting
With it, you and I
Are suddenly what the pogs try

To tell us we are:
That there, merely being there
Means something; that soon
We may thrash, horde, replay.

And glad not to have invented
Such nerdiness, we are surrounded:
A silence filled with noises,
A score-board on which emerges

A chorus of grunts, a boyish morning.
Flipped in a halogen light, and moving,
Our memories put on such brilliance
These accents seam their own events.

Meaning's Search For an Amanuensis

"There's no such thing as primate anguish,"
pipes the philosopher, himself an ape.

But his friends hear only the sound of his wanting.
Or so he imagines, as he paces around his eucalyptus,

since that is all he can hear of them. The eucalyptus
is not yet eucalyptus. It is not yet his.

"They are not really my friends, though they resemble me,
he thinks, "for they do not resemble their resemblance to me."

There is an old ape saying: "Heaven is an echo chamber
where angels gossip about an unknown earth."

Another goes: "Truth is the bad-hair day of falsehood."
And there are some who say, "Man is the self-hating animal."

It came to pass that the ape converted to Judaism,
but could not find a minyan, so he became a Buddhist.

He said, "I would sooner believe in the Messiah than God."
The ape looked down and saw that his penis was big,

like in the magazines, but there was nobody to tell.
Was he a man, or just a being who liked to measure

his hardness? "I am not my penis," he chanted,
to the personified wind, which seemed to be listening

parasymphatically, and responding in kind,
"I am not my velocity. I am not this cold, whipping awareness

of cheeks, this pressure against language."
The ape knew it was not the wind that spoke.

He's been reading Wallace Stevens.
"Can an animal be post-modern? Post-colonial?" He asked.

Where is the New Left in a world of one?
Where is Abel, my brother?

The ethnographers came into view
like a mirage of a mirage.

They were in love with the idea of a self-conscious, solipsistic animal,
although and because it undermined their discipline.

He was the perfect fantasy, and this embarrassed them.
They felt alive. They didn't want to appropriate

his culture for their own gain. On the other hand,
what could be more urgent

for the human race than preserving
and learning from this rarest of species,

"Simius Philosophicus Solipsisticus"?
So said the fundraising brochures. History books tell us

a different story (according to the blurb):
the ethnographers had found themselves in a bad marriage.

They needed a subject that would solve their communication issues.
After "ingesting an unspecified amount of psilocybic mushrooms,

they discovered Fred." According to legend, they also discovered
the telepathic nature of discourse, and founded a theosophical school

on the doctrine that every speech-act either implies
or prophecies a time when it will be perfectly understood,

as if speaker and listener were one,
or, as their students elaborated, as if flesh and time

were two faces of the same
dilapidated emptiness.

Fugue or Fondue?

I.

For what duration
can purpose be
suspended?

A question like vinegar
and mustard, like
an unmowed lawn.

Answers like beloveds seem
not the one. Like you assumes
unnamed berries poisonous.

II.

"Knowledge needs ignorance
as vision needs shade,"
says Ockham,

the apocryphal lilacs,
cavities, fledgling
similitude.

Fugue or fondue?
Directions take time
to dissolve.

III.

But, what of the sea,
the hidden boat one
with the threatening wave?

What of distance
shores faint
against the lurking eye?

What of your fear,
the unsubstantiated word
substantiated?

Dialectics at a Standstill, Broken Middles

I am reading of subjunctive leviathans
whose mating would mean the end of days,
and so must be maimed and salted before their times.
The violence of fiction.

I am reading stories of the Anthropocene
(George Saunders, Ben Lerner), and the Talmud,
Masechet Brachot, which is a kind of blueprint
for managing the strife between care and carelessness.

I'm told by some "great man" that muteness is slavery.
That freedom begins with a shriek
in search of a word.

In the middle of a dark city, I found myself
in an abandoned, unmarked warehouse,
remembering the car ride there,
packed in with a shaman and his son,
discussing the politics of Peyote,
then caught in a perfect mandala of love
where the children of refugees hold each other
across history.

Elias Canetti begins *Crowds and Powers* with the claim
that human society is organized around the avoidance of touch.
The size of a building is proportional to the owner's fear of others.
Only in the crowd—the rock concert, the political rally—
do we grant ourselves permission to accept the foreigner's graze
as our own sensation.

Tonight, I traced the lines of a lamp through blur and blink,
until each field and object were a perfect conversation:
cars and car lights and honks and wind. Each leaf
stirred in a merging of charmed particulars.

What guidance comes from the truth of a tuna burger?
What petals break love against rhythm in the impossible reading of an e.e. cummings poem?

A woman looked into my eyes and spoke to me in the flickering
third person:
"He's legendary. Don't you know
we're going to get married?"

At the Pina Bausch concert, the ungraceful was made graceful.
The audience became the stage. Each outfit a dance
of normalcy, ecstasy, and shame.

"Man is the being who would beat himself into duckness."
The word darling has a thousand meanings.
Each piano note might be a concealed orgasm,
and each moan a psychoanalytic joke.

Last night, I met a man who circumcised himself in Providence
at the age of 27, because he was teased as a child
for being named after his grandfather, Adolfo.
His theology is "There better be something or else I'll kill myself."

Entering a restaurant, I see the order as a curated chaos.
The word for voice in Hebrew is also the word for thunder,
so that it is impossible to tell if revelation means God speaks
or the earth simply quakes. The history of religious war
turns on this double sense.

The scribes of old did not distinguish between innovating and preserving a text.
And apparently, the ancient Semitic word for "soul" originally meant "throat."

Today, the youth speak of their desire to "get turned," meaning "drunk."
I laugh through the ever-cited gloaming, not far from the reservoir we chose to bypass,
holding your shoulder, because in this moment, the world and I are married and I am all in.

Feedback

I think I would have to hear
it to see it succeed.

What kind of aura or absence
of aura does the non-poem seek to

s(t)imulate in the page-mind
of the scrolling-machine?

What sense does it hope
to enlist, enjoin, crochet, misprize,

elicerate? Is language hypo-
glycemic here, or just fixture-

intolerant? What's the imitation-
thresh-hold? Is a question

the statement's genizah
or the opposite? Rabbi Ish-

mael says all citations must go
the way of green-tech

before they can gain brand recognition,
but Akiba says every spec is the logo

of silence. He was stoned for pretending
to be Akiva, or else the manuscripts differ

for no [*drashable*] reason. *Shakla*
v'tarya is a fun phrase to pronounce.

As is fun phrase and Discipline
and lawn finch and pain juice,

as is *Pain Quotidienne*, Pan-Arabism,
and *Je suis Juifs*. Don't let the "s"

mislead you. It's there.
The ingenious thing

is that things require
other things

to justify themselves
as things.

My attachment to
this particular work consists in

identifying you as its author.
To picture your nimble fingers

picking their way through
the phonetic alphabet layout

on your lit-up product-placement
for Steve Jobs is not without pleasure.

Complex though it may be to borrow
Latin-based words, the wait is usually

worth its waste in alt-lit and sub-alternist
reviews. Let the leviathans rave

recurrently to their German electro house
of Being music. And let the corrupted Isaiah get a shout-out,

too. You can take the coup out of Qumran,
but you can't take the pro- out of prohibition.

Language caves
in on history

history caves
in on a joke caving in

on an injury. New York
is Israel in drag, explain Diaspora's *Hasbarists*

Hasbara really means explain.
Propaganda is a prop of the proud, apropos

of their sadness, fear, & de-moralization,
explains your mail-order-shrink.

Russia is Turkey is Thanksgiving, is
Squanto's squint, pardoned by the obvious.

In times of Emergency, Emergency
can be declared by anyone with influence.

In times of Emergency, don't read
destroy. Rather, read save.

The house burnt down the moment
you canonized it. The house burnt up
each canonized moment of its construction.
Therefore, don't subtract or addict from it.

Outside Echoes

The best way to satisfy your baby
is surely
not by junking it.

Start again with smoke
on the face
of distinction.

Start with the neutral-
ized myth of
necessary ancestors.

I knew it was a lie
to use signs
you would take

As colonial, but nu?
We were playing
it out, each

Turn a negation
split to accord
what no time can

Afford. Let the page
dictate you
for a change.

Let meno-pause
be literal, hot
as an archetype.

Let the typography
of state violence
not be charmed

Through proximity.
Notice the Guatemalan
figure placing onions

And peppers
back in their proper
stall.

Will you prefer the hedge
fund manager

with the blind daughter

Over the night-shift golem?
Will you point out
the false logic

Of this binary
and not see that you also
use it? Today's thieves

Are tomorrow's resisters.
Today's desecrators
are yesterday's

Sanctifiers. So,
your anthropologist friend
waxes syntax

Avoidance as the new
"farting silently."
A still small voice

Is smelt. Whoever
dealt us tradition
dealt us our hands.

None of this stops
occupation or hypocrisy,
the prophet's excrescence

From the foam of nihilism.
None of it brings back
the Baghdadi mule-driver

Who knew himself to be the whole
as he penetrated his trusted
friend, the one he had named

Ohad. We stand at
a gas station, waiting
for a transport to spirit

Possession. Or
we stand at the peak
of knowing

Good and evil:
pacemakers produced

by Congolese children.

What's mine
is mined. What's yours
is mined.

And the mind is quality
as sky. Is money.
Is the difference

Between yes and no
I and why,
fall and fly.

Offer it:
Offer your failure
to contain yourself.

Offer the strings
which hold you
down

And the scissors
which cause you
to arise

Like an army of angels
in search of their general,
a story that can direct

Them back
towards identity,
cast their movement

Into mission, color into
shape, urge into
freedom.

"You've been reading too
much Hegel,"
she says,

And I say,
"The line between speculation
and truth is like the line

Between creature and Creator."
We had been drinking

coffee, and eating

Lox—she abstained
from the Lox,
but joined me

In the act of having them
as referents
on our table.

You want me
to treat your grandmother
to her fantasies,

But what about the man
holding up the sign, saying,
“Jews Control Everything

Google It”? What
about the masturbator
whose only wish is to be

Witnessed
for who he is,
a sex magician?

Can we have fairy-tales
without monsters?
Can we have feminism

Without the added trauma
of failing to have
it all?

“Reason without spirit
is bureaucracy.
Spirit without

Reason is absurdity,”
says the philosopher
pretending to be a rhetorician.

“We need more dogs
in leopard-skin dresses
in strollers,”

Jests the winter
in and around us.

More life surpassing questions.

Déjà Vu

Tell me the absence of helicopters, there
In winter blue, above the bridge, isn't

Significant—that the upside-down sign
Advertising a world at No Additional Fees

Isn't meant to draw us into it.
And poems, tell me the years don't spread,

Vainly forming a notion
Of self-worth and haggling over the boundary

Between voice and desire. Tell me this need
To hibernate is language's way of teasing

Forth from refusal. Tell me this staff, this rock
This comma, projected into bread and blessing

Doesn't tell us everything we need to know to morph
To ward to throw unknowable music: Fire, child of snow

And snow, child of gaze. Whose? Yes. That's the point,
O chaos. So may the target of our senses and the backlog

Of our failures be constitutive of our lives that we may live
Beyond allure. Let those orange suede boots traipsing across

Your poem not dissolve your knowledge that you manifested
From a rat's periphery. She wants to be a co-author with you,

As if you were the same as you. As if the you deciding which
Words deserve to arrive—here—were not an effect of the words

They only seem to chaperone. Tell me a truth that doesn't
Reference Heidegger, a love whose knowledge exceeds all scope.

Seeker's Psalm

And Dinah, daughter of Leah,
little girl of Jacob, went out to look
upon the daughters of the land.
(Gen. 38:4)

Our God and God of our ancestors,
have we not also gone out to find ourselves
amongst the peoples of the world?

Have we not also left our parents' homes
in search of old questions and new light?

What was Dinah seeking when she was seen
by Shechem ben Hamor?

What image of you formed in her eyes
before she was taken by him—
taken first by force and then by love?

God who lifts mountains
over us
so we may accept your shadow

God who mines order from chaos
music from noise
struggle from conformity

God who leads us
astray
to a place we will show you

Keep us as you kept Dinah—
in the palace of Shechem

so even here
far from our origins
we may stay
Yisrael

Descent

And Joseph saw his brothers, and knew them
And made himself strange to them
And spoke roughly to them.
(Genesis 42:7)

He made himself strange to them.
We might think this means he hid himself

But commentaries, rescued by chance
From the offal of Fallujah, and sold

On the Black Market to Collectors
From Hebrew U, tell otherwise.

At Tel Aviv, they say this is a fiction,
That the site of rescue was Leipzig, 1939.

There are wonders not even the human heart can save.
Can you imagine the entire Talmud

Burnt forever? Can you imagine not having heard
Of anything you assume makes a world?

Tree, stone, earth? "It was his very strangeness
That he hoped would out him," says Rashbam.

As if Joseph still needs us to see he's truly Joseph,
And not Pharaoh's double,

The guy Pharaoh will forget.
Joseph remembers who he is.

He is the only character in the Bible who weeps seven times,
Once for each day of Creation.

We thought we'd traded Joseph in for a life free of disturbance.
Now he sells us corn, but won't take our money.

Like the kid who keeps the Monopoly game going after he's won
By doling out handouts from the bank so his mom can keep paying him.

Meanwhile, the socialists picket, "Where is Zebulun's chapter, and Naftali's
And Issachar's and Gad's?" If only Benjamin could have lived a year longer,

Just to have written an essay redeeming the hanged baker.
We might have read theories suggesting

Dream interpretation was then what consulting is now.
Joseph was just looking at the numbers.

Song of Myself (Apocryphal)

I am my own list-serve,
advertising job and fellowship opportunities
for myself by myself to myself.

I sing of unpaid internships to my soul, O soul,
and of passing controversies on which to take side
is to take the side of the self.

I re-post myself and forward myself
and respond to myself with emojis
for I am the screen and its anticipation,

the pleasure of being liked
and of commanding myself to like others.
For all pages are contained in my potential

for sharing, scrolling, even viewing
incognito. I sign in on myself
and log out of myself and yet remain

more than my usernames
and forgotten passwords.
For I am the great web itself

and every parody known to it
is known to me, and every troll
who devastates its comments section

is of myself. I am celebrity culture,
conspiracy theory culture & the common
denominator of parenting blogs

& cat videos. What you
shall click, I shall click,
and where you shall cut and paste

I shall be cut and paste.
Do I make myself redundant?
Very well then, I make myself

redundant. I am a paywall
(disambiguation)
I contain meta-data.

The Oy of the Poyem: 28 Exercises in non-Mastery

Click here for 29 reasons
you are not *not* Mark Ruffalo.

Click here for 6 proofs
Buzzfeed is a distraction from the Buzzfeed as such.

Click Next to receive yourself as a coupon.
Click Play Now to become forever.

Click Incognito Mode to avoid the paywall,
discover 10 myths you thought were facts.

If the font ain't Calypso, switch to Reality.
If Reality ain't high definition,

petition your senator here.
Each day, thousands of innocents

lack yoghurt, political will,
and courage to wear bright clothing.

Coincidence? Each second
you give to thinking

will be matched by thirty minutes
of callousness, regret, and avoidance.

Click here to short your cynicism,
make millions in emerging emotional markets.

In the long-run, even mavericks fall
on one side of the fence, wondering

why they didn't learn Esperanto.
In the short-run we are all unborn.

"That wasn't 28."

"Nu? So it wasn't 28."

Poetry TedTalk Notes

Most poetry has the same shelf life as the technology of its time.

Therefore, poetry is less about the individual poem, than about the brand, the update, the plan, the package, the network, the merger, the deal.

The question isn't "Is this a good poem?" but, "Is it scaleable?"

A poem, like a business, should always have an exit strategy.

A poem is a platform.

You can't solve all of poetry's problems in one poem, but you can use it to build your profile, make connections, plant seeds.

The poverty of poetry is an asset.

The meaning of poetry isn't liquid.

Carried interest in poetry is essentially tax-free.

Reading is a better return on investment than writing.

Poetry Is Failure By Other Means

Rift becomes drift.
Drift becomes draft,
and riven,
we drive on.

A rift is a raft, rife with drivel
and rivaling our aptitude
for rapture.
Daft is the new deft.

Defy trying, deify vying.
Faff.
So we roved,
draughts over the farthest ear,

here, where there is nothing
feared that is not heard. And nothing
heard that is not weird
or nothing weird that is not fed further off.

Soundbytes

We exist by virtue of God's masochism,
a self-inflicted otherness,
a sailing shipwreck,
tweeted the pope.

That is why we must meditate
on marble as if it were flesh,
cajole ourselves for wanting
one final cannoli

or be nonplussed.
It is why words are vultures,
and myth will forever be myth,
according to the latest numbers.

It is why genius is destiny,
and I could have been anywhere
and anyone,
but I am here and me.

Or how your hand cream augurs
augury itself
as hand cream,
flashing truth as an emoticon.

Pastoral

Lure us to the place where outside is an allegory
for perfection and youngsters sing your name
in whatever costumes suit them.

Lure us to the place where there's no need
to pose questions to an answerless void
or wave the banner of our cults.

Lure us to the clearing where plum trees are
imagination, and gentle rivers pass as in a story.
Lure us, because our purpose escapes

measurement—so long as Chase and Sachs and Stanley
insist on calling God any man with zeros to his name.
So long as we restrict the name of star

to those whose lives are airbrushed
whose words come recommended
only in quotation marks.

Lure us, because we are not so sophisticated
as to be happy with our cleverness,
and because the pleasures of a text can only go so far

beyond the printed page.
Lure us, through repetition and bafflement.
Lure us with constancy and game-changers, charades,

broken off as if they were reality's own
stutter, and ideas made to seem out of place
even for this nightclub.

Lure us to the place where we place ourselves
in song, the songplace, without all that highfalutin mystical shit.
Without the need for protest or hashtag politics.

A place in the eye of the contemporary,
in the singular, in the cornea shadow of an eternal now.
In the out.

A place whose unreadability proves our mortal need for art,
and disproves it. A place we can dream of
because we have been there already.

Tosefta

Rav Kahana told the story that

Rav Hisda said

In all my days, I was considered a master of planting and collecting,
Yet when I went out to trim the vineyards,
I cut too close to the vine.
Now, people will say, it would be better if I hadn't trimmed at all.

To which Abaye said

The branches shall return,
the leaves shall return,
and the fruit shall return.
The only thing you have truly shorn is yourself.

Said Rav Hisda:
But what harvest can there be in the meantime?

Said Abaye:
If one goes out as a harvester, one shall return a harvester.

Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak gave a different account:

He said that Rav Hisda was concerned about an imperfection
around his genitals
that he had revealed while grooming himself.

Rav Hisda said to himself:

The shears that would have been my exaltation
have become the shears of my demise.
What will my wife say when she sees me like this?

Abaye sought to console him:

First, your imperfection will soon be covered,
second, it is not an imperfection,
and third, if it is an imperfection, your wife will not see it as such.

Rav Pappa recounted it differently:

Rav Hisda was depressed,
because all the days of his life he had been meticulous in his prayers,
yet when it came time for him to lead *Hallel* on *Rosh Chodesh*,
he forgot all of the words, except for the opening blessing.

He said to himself:
On what will my blessing carry?

Abaye said: On your silence.

Rav Hisda objected that one cannot praise in silence.

Abaye said:
First, your silence shall soon turn to song,
Second, it already is a kind of song,
And third, even if you never sing again,
your students shall respond "Amen" to you all the same.

Rav Hisda retorted:
I am not worried about my students,
but about the One Who Speaks and Worlds Come To Presence.

Said Abaye:
If one approaches God with the hope that he will listen,
he will listen.

Jerusalem

It is Friday afternoon and the Jews are preparing
For check-out. They place their egg salad and babka
And memories of life before Zion on the counter.
Outside, in prodigal sunlight, an old man is levitating
A charred violin under the strain of his entire life.
His neck is cocked towards his grandfather, buried
In Ukraine, and his ear, descending Jacob's ladder
Is trying to eavesdrop on the world he's already left.
A young man in tztzis, passing by, halts his stroller,
Hoping for some instruction. One of his daughters
Stares at the violin, wondering where the sound is
Coming from, why this man is contorting his whole
Body around a piece of wood.
The other is rapt in the modest glimmer of agurot
Calling out to her from the open case. It is green and felt
And will always seem to her, looking back, like a small casket.

Say

After Peter Gizzi after Wallace Stevens

Say life is the jetlag of angels
flying red-eye from redemption
to the now.

Say every measured thing is a pixel
of some divine heartbreak.

Say that Sabbath is a hammer.
Is a hammer?
That Sabbath comes too soon.

Say the empty hands of strangers
are full of their potential—
for stabbing. Or typing.

Say the world's already cast
in the rift where seeking fails,
in the distorted light of psalm-

catastrophe. Say again, say better.
Say that the wrath of the hermit
and the fright of the gatekeeper

are one, must be one. Are alluded
to in the projected Scripture
grasped and missed by tradition.

Say the animals, too, are preparing, frantically,
to greet their Sabbath Queen,
that the bark and squawk of mingled beings

thumping over the last sighs of traffic
compose a poem no author could write
without being changed.

Say the created world is nothing but a promise
of commentary, that soon, everything will be
recorded in the Book of Next Time.

Say this form is borrowed and you know
the reference. Do you really know it?
Say say. Googletranslate the inarticulate,

the hoarded wonder lodged forgotten
in your side. Where is your body
in all of this? Where is the body

in relation to the concept of “you”?
Say “I” and “you” are nicknames
given to us by the Magnificent.

Is it cheating to break rules that don’t exist?
And what will you do for the refugees
that pour through the borders of Mind?

But come, my Beloved.
It is nearly time for the perceived world
to be accompanied by what is missing from it.

Say peace. Say bless. Say nothing.

Dear Guru

Dear Guru,
source of ideation and aesthetically tested angst,
maker of all things your consumers pronounce
enlightened,
you who are beyond subject
and, let's not kid ourselves, object,
you who are the whoopy cushion of all metaphors,
and for whom it is a sin to even say you are,
forgive me for calling on you for such a small favor,
I know you are very busy, holding on the line
with Verizon customer service. But
I do not know how to write poetry, guru.
Teach me your ways that my words
may one day ally themselves with words
that are not mine, so the language will not mock me
or bamboozle me or take me for a ride or what
have you, so I will not be the butt of language's
cigarette anthropologists stomp on during their
lunch break. Dear guru, rescue me from the belly
of truth, in whose mouth I threw myself to hide
from you. Send me back to the Nineveh of ordinary
language, where sandwich wrappers are just
sandwich wrappers and eulogies consist entirely
of emojis. Guru, give me the wisdom you told me
I already have, if only I would lose five pounds,
or my obsession with losing weight, or my thought
or my hunger for knowledge and metaphor
and footnotes. The wisdom to stop calling
on you at such late hours. Or the wisdom to
stop calling you by your title or your middle name
(Kony? Ted? Usurpulus?) and start calling
you by your last name, which is guru
spelled backwards: urug, if only
I could pronounce it.

Child Who Doesn't Know How To Ask

If I ask how many trees there are in Poland
you will think my interest is insincere,
or, if sincere, then distorted, some kind of syndrome.

What if I told you I'm the kind of person
who goes into landscape architecture
or eco-engineering to impress myself

upon the earth?
That I am four foot eight and made of sticks?
Or that I am seven feet and have napkins for ears?

What if I told you, my family calls me *kapo*
because eco-engineering was invented by Nazis?
What if I told you it's because

I'm more attracted to Polish pine than Israeli cedar?
Or that I write poems instead of petitions?
And then told you I was lying, because I wanted

you to distrust me. Or to like me for my honesty,
my neurotic performance of vulnerability?
Or because, a mean word is short-hand

for a chronic history?
If I ask how many trees there are in Poland,
I hope you will answer

that there are two,
one which is visible,
and one which weeps for the visible.

Or that you will say, "I don't know
which Poland it is that you're asking for
but if I did, I'd still say, I don't know."

What if I told you I don't know how to ask
a question that isn't about the beauty
of the question itself?

Because I want you to find me romantic?
Thoughtful? Mischievous? Self-aware?
When the reality is far more simple and tragic:

I'm just trying to connect.

Dementia

Jacob wakes and sees the woman of his dreams is not the person lying next to him, massaging his neck. Can he love her anyways? Can he love Rachel by loving Leah? He reaches for the nearest commentary, seeking comfort: "The voice was the voice of Rachel, but the body was the body of Leah."

It's not Rachel's fault she's demented. But without a conniving Lavan or a wily Rebecca, who can Jacob blame but himself? The love is there, but it's almost like the love of an old man for his heirloom watch. And what does Leah know? She is like a Rachel who wants Jacob to know she's Rachel, but is stuck in the body of Leah. Whenever Jacob asks her "How are you?" Leah says, "Fine," but under the bed of Leah's body, Rachel is crying out for Jacob to look harder.

Home

Charybdis is now a water bottle company is no proof
of climate turpitude, says my client's husband,
his glassy eyes consuming the light of his homeland
in a room he will never leave.

His wife apologizes for his nonsense,
his condition.
We have trouble communicating—isn't that right?
No answer.
She picks at her fingers.
I can't stand Obama. That Black. I'm for Cruz.

When Moses saw over the border,
some say he saw himself
sitting in a rehab unit with a broken hip
waiting for his son, Gershom, to feed him
cranberry juice.
No more manna.
His mashed potatoes would be covered
by the State. No more longing
to be minister and judge.
No more teaching and drought.
He could see himself there, making sure
his wife received the best pain treatment plan,
wrapped in holy Canaanite air.
Never mind his deafness.
The shofar would penetrate the brokenness
of his hearing aid
and sound in through his memory of floating
into his mother's arms.
How she wore the most beautiful fabrics oppression can buy
and cast them in the mud to become an archetype of life.

Moshe saw himself so troubled by breath and speech
he could no longer be heartbroken.

Dorsal-Whipped

Dorsal-whipped, god is the retro-needed
crack, the injured motion of a cleft-threaded
confusion you commanded to love.

The miracle is how we can sustain
from the sparest shapes,
how the longer you stare
at the *dalet* contained in the *hay*
the *yud* in the *aleph*,
the harder it is to disbelieve
in a world whose beauty (can be)
severed from paranoia.

Tell it to the garbage cans, Modernity's hidden wells.
Tell it to the story of grass, praying, egoless,
in the notebook of an auratic lunatic.

As abuse turns to holiness.
As loss vocalized becomes *election*
the sociologist wins their alienation from the subject.
And the field is omnipotent enough to be a chariot
on Tuesday nights for 20 dollars cash.

Grant me numbness, Lord.
Grant me the window this window fails.

Psalm

Why does the word *vasectomy* need to appear
in this dumb exercise?
I am powerless to reach you.

Why, O Lord, do you hide
beneath the floorboards of language
wearing a make-believe robe and crown?

Why is your world a world
of halogen and plastic?
And why won't battery leakage qualify as a cry?

The filing cabinets are mute.
But they also want to know
"Is every question a false promise?"

What crimson cords and theology podcasts
can save me
from this numb infertility?

If I had tears to give, I'd give you the choicest.
But since I have only letters,
I'm regifting you the wheel in which I spin.

Thank you, Lord, for blessing this idiocy.
You are the one for whom there is no such thing
as bad poetry.

To Know And To Win Are As Different As Wine and Election

"To know and to win are as different as wine and election."
My broker quoted me from his weekly wisdom brochure.
I understood the words, but not the need for this reflection.

He carried on babbling, as if my being there were some protection.
Enticed by his intensity, I shook my head, "Sure."
To know and to win are as different as wine and election."

"Knowledge intoxicates," he says, "but only winning proves affection."
"How much will the new roof cost?" I interjected, premature.
I understood the words, but not the need for this reflection.

Absorbed by his thoughts, he missed my try at redirection.
He continued speaking, like a child fondling a baseball hero miniature.
"To know and to win are as different as wine and election."

I looked at my phone. Six missed calls. It was time for self-protection.
"I'm sorry, sir, but I've got a family to secure."
I understood the words, but not the need for this reflection.

He stared into my eyes like an angel, or a man in search of a projection.
He answered me in silence. "Two hundred." "I didn't mean to be obscure."
"To know and to win are as different as wine and election."
I understood the words, but not the need for this reflection.

Letting Nothing Wait

Numb to the fascism of ordinary things
the reported chaos of listicles

the ambient panic of winter sky
pretending everything is fine

your hands perform their necessary
crunching while your mind runs

critical calculations. I talk to myself
about writing a poem

and the uselessness of being
clear in an age of segregated tears.

I am already aware this poem,
like perhaps every poem right now,

has
become bad—

too much tell, too political,
not enough misdirection

or else, not enough tell, too apolitical,
too much direction.

The language is coarse
like celebrity hair implants

and the private misery of fish.
Coarse and hungry, like a full belly

is full of regret, the need to shit,
and a sharper apprehension of cosmic emptiness.

I am already aware of what a pushover I am
to be writing poems while people are out

clamoring in the televised streets
and perhaps you will love me

since you, if you are reading this,
are also likely a pushover.

Perhaps this covenant between us will serve to reinforce
our feelings of moral safety, which, we hope, are our best chance of payback

for a lifetime of getting kicked around by meanie-butts,
who drown out our cries with History's laugh track and claim it's live.

Offering

I.

An offering is a sacrifice that knows the inevitability of rejection
and so protects itself by saying I want you to ignore me.
As if now, heaven's muteness were intentional.

II.

In *The Death of Picasso*, Guy Davenport says
our attachment to something is proportional
to our mistaking it for something else.

Perhaps God's love for Israel is the same.
When the angels pointed out God's error
it was too late for him to say anything but
I am the Lord Your God.

Captivated by their pastiche of in-fighting,
like a good rabbi, he called it *Torah*.

III.

Construction sounds remind us of a world
whose majesty is indifferent to this offering.

Ezra Pound will not save us.
Wittgenstein will *not*.
Heidegger will unsave us.

And so this private language,
which some say is cruel,
and others, simply disorganized,
must give comfort to the non-alive.

For if everything exists for a reason, then
nonsense is a herald of those who must be born
to find it meaningful.

And so, Kafka might have said,
each rejected thing is proof
of a rejection yet to come.

Villanelle

Every villanelle man writes inclines towards vanity.
For God's help is no help to measure line by line.
And every thought man hypes elides insanity.

Like the rhetorician's speech, whose rose becomes profanity,
a peeling trophy of the shelled-out mind.
Every villanelle man writes inclines towards vanity.

And who can spare the poor imagination its reality?
Unveil the self-consuming subject as a sign?
For every thought man hypes elides insanity.

"Only nothing is," the mystic player howls, portending actuality,
knowing, as he speaks, the contradiction of his wisdom, too perennial for time.
Every villanelle man writes inclines towards vanity.

Yet Abraham—we read—discovered God in hospitality,
And at the borders of his tent refused to utter "mine."
But caution: Every thought man hypes elides insanity.

Might each relic make the world a jar for its humanity?
Each body needing soul its life divine?
Every villanelle man writes inclines towards vanity.
And every thought man hypes elides insanity.

Hermeneutics

I ask the giant
If he wants my seat.

Either he doesn't hear me
Or he doesn't want to.

What Did The Heavenly Ministers Do?

What did the heavenly ministers do
when they found God eating
on a fast day?

One said, "We don't paskan from the Holy
One, May His Name Be Blessed."
One said, "There is no day

and night in Heaven."

One said, "The Lord needs us to teach him
in the ways of his World."

One said, "God eats, but he makes his food taste like ash."
And One said, "For God, fasting has no meaning,
since the Lord has no appetite."

From this it can be derived
that to be m'kayem the mitzvah of fasting,
God watches Schindler's List instead.

"What did God do before the Holocaust?"
One angel asked.
Another asked, "What did God do before film?"

They answered in unison: "There is no before
and after in the Torah."

Dusk

How to name
The noise
I cannot hear

How to name
The self-fulfilling mood

Of decline.

The buildings hide
Their barriers

Like a poem,
Too clever for comprehension.

Now, the orange sky imposes itself
On the poem and the people who
Live without it. It pinkens into grey.

Shall I let the mosquito enter?
This decision is not mine or its.
Then whose?

A king is looking for his page.
A writer for his subject.
A world is. We do not hear it.
We do not recognize the noise is its spelling.

Pirkei Avot

My father used to say:

*Reader and writer are like two fugitives
Examining the shade of an egg.*

But my mother would always counter, *an olive*.

Now, my children taunt me:

For what did they examine?
A place to rest? A secret measure?

The ward in which they question me
Becomes a palace I can almost see.

I strain towards the meager light
In search of something to say.

Look! The light is the size of an egg!
No, they reply. An olive!

System Baby

I was six when I first filed for moral bankruptcy
I was ten when they told me language is inherently classist.
At thirteen, I started defining kindness
as “making nice to those who like your favorite teams.”
At twenty, I hired a ghost to write my LinkedIn profile.
At thirty, I started radiosuctive parole therapy.
At forty-one, I began to look sideways and call it inward.
At eighty-six, I’m a work in progress.
Today, at 120, I’m a proud piece of gum,
who’s almost forgotten the countless nights it took me,
locked in the shoe of the human mind,
to get here to tell you: don’t let others humanize you.
Don’t let them take away your objectivity
no matter how much they brutalize you.

Teraphim

Our precise meaning unknown
(say the dictionaries)
we rest in the shade of the familiar.

Some call us household gods,
others simply hide us under

the body's floorboards
or leave us out, forged,
on the mantel over the Mind.

I am used to serving as a decoy
for things more powerful than myself:

kings and witches and poverty.
I am the wanted and the unwanted.

Illicit, yet banal, harmless.
Like an over-the-counter drug.
Commonly accepted, yet taboo.

Scholars say I am powerless, except
when accompanied by incantation,
astral know-how, ornaments and cloaks.

It's true that alone, I am nothing.
But I am easily activated, even by the smallest,
most apprenticed touch.

Whoever touches me will, indeed, know
the future.

Know the future as intimately as a household god
knows its place
will soon be erased

just as it has erased others
leaving only the shape
of a mouth that clings to my name, because it has nothing else.

Prayer

Dear Lord
Let me delete Uber

Without gloating about it
On social media

Let it be one of our many secrets
Like the time you caught me

Wishing I knew Yiddish
As I watched your two servants

Touch each other in the bathhouse
Or the time I saw the tops of houses

Poking through an open field
And thought it was the set

Of a film by Tarkovsky, or Eisenstein
Because I couldn't fathom that a people had lived

There.
Forgive me

For not saying
"Who made miracles in this place"

When I read Bialik or pass
Over a tree where you hung

Three innocents instead of five
And forgive me

For letting my imagination swallow me
Like Korach

Mistakenly swallowed chewing tobacco
And Moses swallowed his words

And Aaron swallowed his silence
And Miriam swallowed her song

Let me enter your plexiglass
Covered cathedral

Swim through your cellophane ears
And return not to tell the tale

But to become it
Lord, ripen my neurosis

Let each sinful thought keeping me
From you

Find its place
Kneaded in your montage

Rahab

Scholars imagine my body as a kind of manna.
My reception history is pregnant with evidence
supporting the idea that the meaning of my flesh
and the flesh of my meaning are one, that I embody
a perfect correspondence of world and fantasy,
am as capacious as my name says I am.

My devotees know me as a sea-goddess.
My critics identify me by my occupation—"whore."
They're not wrong—I've been turning
tricks since I was ten.
But they're focused on the wrong details.

The point of my story is not what I have done
but what I have undone.
I'm the only virgin who became so by sleeping with whoever asked.
Like the Jews, I, too, spent forty years
cruising for false gods in the wilderness.
And like the Jews, my turn to faith also came
through disappointment.
"Monotheism," I'm told, "is not about belief but reticence."

The Orange Tree

I.

It is taught:

Rav looked out the window of the Beit Midrash
And watched the Gentiles pass through the marketplace.

A man was bartering for oranges.
Rav began to weep.

Some say, "Because he had not eaten an orange
Since his wife had died."
Some, "Because the sight of fruit reminded him
Of the sensuous world he had given up for Torah study."
Some, "Because he felt the vanity of all things."
Some, "Because he felt exiled from God,"
Some, "For no reason."
And some, that these are one.

Rav could not stop weeping, and after some time,
The text he had been studying—some say it was the Mysteries of the Chariot,
Others, the laws of Shabbat—was so drenched,
The letters formed tiny pools of ink and dissolved the parchment.

Rav went.

When he returned, the sun had melted his tears.
The pools of ink had hardened, and formed letters
On the floor where he used to sit (lit. "dwell").
Where his desk once stood, an orange tree had grown.
At times, it seemed the letters were its roots.
At other times, that the tree was merely an illusion
Caused by the way the light reflected off the letters.

Whenever the sages faced a difficulty,
They consulted the letters, pondering
Their shapes, until they understood
The meaning of brokenness
And were comforted.

Some say, they would pluck an orange from the tree,
Recite a blessing on it, and eat it,
And what they sought would become clear.

Others added,
"The only thing that would become clear was their desire,
The sweetness of the confusion from which it arose and, in circular fashion, continued to

enlarge.”

Some say, “The sages’ inability to read what the letters said
Allowed them to apprehend their concealed meanings.”
Some say, “The letters were really fragments of whole letters.”
Some say, “Even so-called normal letters, which we believe to be whole,
Are fragments of one, single letter, from which all things are tragic dislocations.”
Within this group, some say, “God is this solitary letter,”
Others, that “God is only a part of the one letter,”
And still others, that “God is simply the name for the dislocation
Between the one and the many, the whole and the parts.”
Within this latter opinion, some say, “The disjuncture between whole and parts
Is like a bridge of reliable measure,”
While others say, “The disjuncture expands and contracts according to no measure
But the faltering of measure.”

II.

Rav Sheshet told a different story.
Rav was in the marketplace buying oranges
When a philosopher shamed him.
He brought a thousand objections to the laws forbidding carrying outside a gated
Community on Shabbat
And Rav could not respond (lit. “was given no words”).
Rav handed the philosopher his oranges
And never returned to the marketplace.

One day, while studying the laws of carrying,
He looked out the window of the Beit Midrash,
And saw the philosopher buying oranges.
He went and told him that moving and transferring between communities (lit. “worlds”)
Is a form of creation, and is therefore, forbidden on Shabbat.
The philosopher returned his oranges.

III.

Rav Yannai explained it differently.
Rav was studying the laws of commerce
When he came to the passage concerning
Buying fruit from a gentile. He closed the book
And went to the marketplace.

A sorcerer was expounding on the laws of Shabbat
And Rav was perplexed, because the man was wiser than him.
He said to himself, “How can a man who does not keep Shabbat
Know more about it than someone who observes it?”
The Sorcerer was eating oranges.
Rav became enraged and tried to kill the sorcerer,

But the sorcerer turned into Eliyahu HaNavi
And Rav became confused.

Was the sorcerer disguised as Eliyahu
Or was Eliyahu disguised as a sorcerer?
Or was Eliyahu simply a sorcerer?

Rav was humbled and returned to the Beit Midrash.

IV.

Reish Lakish taught:
Rav was studying the Mysteries of the Chariot
When he fell asleep.

In his dream, he found himself in a marketplace.
He was the only Jew there and every stand was an orange stand.
He asked for a bag of oranges, but the vendor said,
"Only if you answer my question."
He agreed.
The man asked: "What is as long as it is short,
As far as it is near, as endless as it is traversable,
As terrifying as it is inviting, as intimate as it is indifferent,
As awing as it is familiar, as obvious as it is subtle,
As metaphorical as it is real, and as absolute as it is relational?"
He said: "Distance."
The man handed him the oranges.

Rav awoke and realized all the names of God
Are names for distance.
He shouted, "Torah is the word of distance."

Some say, he shouted, "The word of God is the desire for a name
That is not a synonym for distance, but which always is."

V.

Abaye taught: "Rav never ate an orange in his life. They were apples!"
Rabbi Akiva taught: "Rav could derive thousands of laws by biting into a single orange."
Ravina lamented: "Of Rav, we know nothing, but our ignorance is of Rav."

The sages came together to try to reach an agreement concerning the story of Rav.
While they were offering their accounts, an orange tree grew.
They each recited their own blessings and ate.
The majority declared that if they could not agree on the story of Rav,
They could at least agree, "Sometimes, the taste of an orange is enough."

In subsequent generations, it was unclear what the earlier sages had meant by “enough,”
If, indeed, they had meant one thing by it.
Some felt the sages’ statement was itself hardly enough, but of these ones it is said,
“Because they tasted not, they were embittered.”

Without Without Title

A poem that admits there is no meaning
besides the gathering of syllables
into little bouquets of desire,
placed, somewhere, between light and dust,
is said to need, as winter needs,
the beauty of visible breath. If
wisdom is not to be had, it is to be sung.
A poem is nothing but the sound of emptiness
enfleshed, or else the sound
of a half-naked emptiness
caught between an urge to strip,
a want to decorate,
and a lingering contentment
to stay here