The Quietest Night and Other Songs

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A Thesis submitted to the
Graduate School-Newark
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Rutgers University – Newark MFA Program
Written under the direction of
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Newark, New Jersey

May 2019
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ALL THOSE SLEEP SHAPES, crystalline,
that you assumed
in the language shadow,

to those
I lead my blood,

those image lines, them
I'm to harbor
in the slit-arteries
of my cognition—,

my grief, I can see,
is deserting to you.

-Paul Celan
A Tally on the Variations of Surnames

In Newark this Saturday, tufts of hail beat in my eyes.
The Jewish cemetery portioned by devotion.
Over there, in the cross-hatch of Orthodox shuls,
the tombs of the great-greats of mine. I huddle
with rock, quartz I suppose, and place it
on the grave halfway collapsed.
At rest, it reads, not in vine or stone.
We check synagogue to synagogue, memorizing
slick-silver the names. My father’s voice
arches, debating whether Jews divine the dead
with flowers. I split flower with stone,
stone with flower. The words repeated
only signal death. When I finally find the records
one in Dachau four in Flossenbürg,
Seventeen in ghetto two in forced labor camp
one in survivor. When I search again nineteen
in Dachau three in survivor.
I confront evil with the backwash in my throat.
I slice that word with the dullest instrument
to sequester rage. Somehow it always comes
to ill. My father can’t decide when he removed
the mezuzah, its armor hooked in crystal to his neck.
When the fleeing began, great-grandfather hid in
the cooler at the bakery. Not praying
for anyone to come. My father stopped trusting
the sublime, slashed its light like sharp-toothed
grass in shade. No one minds the un-mowed
lawn of the passed-on. The tombs over-inhabited.
We work on Saturdays now, eat pastrami and cheese
in the diner after visitation. A fever comes nesting in me.
Recitation: a pantoum

Here the man in the corroded baseball cap.
He turns toward the big bay windows and clawed screens.
A snow-light drains from marshes in a pit.
I sit and wait on his armchair for a tint of disclosure.

He turns away from me toward the clawed screen.
Here the man, not father but father’s father, cleans his mustache with his fingernail.
I sit on the armchair and wait for memory to enter winter.
He quips about suspecting God in a bar and he keeps calling me Rose but Rose is dead.

Here the man, grandfather, fingers the hair on his brow.
He remembers only to groom the manes of the horse figurines.
He quips about God in the night and yells for Rose but Rose is dead.
Here in the attic perched away from tracked snow and heavy boot, he cannot know.

He remembers only to groom the manes of the horses.
Here he can’t recall if his family had been murdered late in the winter.
In the attic perched away from smashing boot,
he recalls what Abraham said about rotating trenches and remains.

That his family had been murdered late in winter in sap of downed pine,
this he can’t recall until I hold his face between my palms.
He retells the secret goodbye in the rotating trench and the living remains of family.
The family collected prayer and bread, the stark yellow of every escapee.

Until I hold my face between his palms, he cannot speak.
The rust in his panting, a mine of silent chorus.
The family collected prayer and light trapped in a fog underground.
He pins portraits of Rose on the wall but praises my face in her eyes.

I open my mouth to take in his panting.
I refuse to eat at night as he refuses to eat at night.
He pins the photos of adolescent Rose before she died in the bathtub.
I store almonds in pill jars, so he will eat at night.

I refuse to eat at night, until he can remember again.
Here he writes on a slip of paper: *I fear the forgetting    the red cuff bands.*
I store his cold food, so he will eat at night and save the sounds of bodies in the train car sharing kisses escaping through the floors.

Here he writes on a slip of paper: *It is you who may forget and your father, don’t worry about me.*
I measure the snowmelt, now ephemeral pool. I wait to clean his ashes.
I wait to record photos of the families in the train car blotting kisses.
Here the man in the baseball cap who has nothing to recount at all.
There is no confusion Jew is a dirty word to you.
Not a compliment you gave.
But waxing and waning tedium.
My father is Jewish, thus a Jew.
To me a nebekh, to you a Jude.
In a confiscated tongue, you called us Juden.
Molded a yellow and black star of us.
Pink angles for other Juden.
Un-sunned yellow, immortal star and dust.
Inside this star, a black and angulated star.
A given name.
From its Latin, Judaean.
Once an origin in Hebrew, Yehudah.
High German. Also, therefore, Yiddish.
Mame losben, tongued to our mothers.
Only recently you call us Jews.
In the taxicab, you said Trump is better than Jews.
Only recently became of this word a bitter gorge.
Days after morning Shabbat services at Tree of Life.
You said Trump is better than Jewish blood.
Coursing Jew blood circling my face.
Coursing pink queer kin.
Jude in German, a stain to blot.
At the turn of the century, you called us Juden.
Translates to Jew.
In the middle of the century, when you used that word.
Used that word to spot-mark a stain in snow.
A friend once called my father: lawyer, Jew.
Or in this order: He’s a Jew, he’s a lawyer.
Or was it L.A. Jew.
Or lawyer with a Jewish name.
Other phrases include: Jew doctor, Jew banker, Jewboy.
He did not hesitate to call my father Jew.
Worse in Yiddish, a bare-handed Yid.
Yehudi, a Jewish man.
A Jewish man in Hebrew, an owner.
A kingdom of Judah.
A Jewish woman in Hebrew, a property.
Old English: lew, now a refuge in brush.
On the businesses: Jude, Yid, singled Star of David.
A raid.
Piles of broken glass.
Ethnic group.
Minor insult: trash.
Abe or Abie, my great-grandfather in America.
Signed our names with Os.
What does the American Jew speak?

What does the American Jew stutter?

What does the American Jew sing?

What does the American Jew recollect now?

What does the American Jew rationalize now?

Tell me the American Jew has nothing left to say.
[Me:] You were born ten years after the Holocaust ended.

What did your parents tell you about what happened?

[Father:] It was over there, away, in Europe.
And here, when we moved to Los Angeles, we couldn’t live in many neighborhoods.
We didn’t tell the landlords we were [Jewish].
It was over there, and no one knew.
No one knew how many had died.
No one knew.
But, I didn’t wear my mezuzah in the Soviet.
We walked to shul on the Sabbath.
We remembered all we could.
Plan for Pomegranate Season

I prepare for Kol Nidre, performing Hebrew in the mirror to notice where my tongue tips at the gutturals, where I flail hot and harpooned at my neck.

The ageless bagpiper puffs outside to no tune at all, while I repeat fortissimos and hollow ancient openings. The music, a hunger. The prayer requesting to be prayer, not sound.

As a child, my mother could not train me for such an elaborate display of sermonizing, and there is no practice for the practice of suffering in atonement, which my mother learned as sacrament.

A pomegranate at my bedside yearns: copper, sour. When my emptiness is full, I soak each of its seeds in my mouth that repeats promises, lies. To practice repentance, I am told stoop self like a trodden bird. Awaking with my mother one day I’ll watch her eyes looking away. One day I’ll tell the rabbi my mother isn’t Jewish, one day I’ll ask my father if his mother named him traitor. The plan to be more Jewish involves so many mirrors. The plan to be my mother involves erasing.

With the prayer’s rhythms, my voice clotheslines. The scent-hound whittles the cornices of my apartment. When my voice hisses, he cocks his head and sighs, a halted bus engine. We move as the other moves. We listen as the other listens.

At Kol Nidre, the rabbi tells us we mimic death, lining our bodies with oaths and blue air. I open the liturgy to a language I cannot read, in a language not yet my own. White burial robes. Dry mouth. A newly-loved woman holds my clammy palms. When my Hebrew grows foreign, I sing.
Quota
*After the SS St. Louis*

(I)

Dwelling in landlessness,
a ballooned head, a boy through the boat porthole

smiles burgundy as pressed cherries,
toggling his watch with his teeth. The boy holds the pinkie of a hand

squeezed around his pea coat. His eyes doll-
silent, visions of *Kristallnacht* in fire. For once he imagines

receiving name, not brand.

Nightmares clip the body of boy:

baby grands heaved through mirrors,
schoolhouses,

and in the wreckage of the Torah, he builds

another boat of thread and clay. This one for ready-to-go

passengers.
(II)

Between Hamburg and Havana,
her first steps and maybe first Hebrew words inked into
the stern of the boat. Here was baby

in a sun-chair, sunning herself

with the found-warmth of a new America.
The deep-blue merely defined waters. This side

of the Atlantic theirs and that side of the Atlantic
golden printed like a catwalk. What a breathless snapping

of the edict when the ship
crossed and flooded the sea with children

humming into free air. In veiny waters, anticipating
to be taken as one: mother father

sister

baby. But President Roosevelt never answered his phone,
cargo circling and beating with its masts at a greening look

of land without much in the market of heart.
(III)

Could have been bubbie with false teeth, the kind you’d like to costume your life.

And that crown around her nape shining for the island with its unspeakable knowing. Could have been aunt or cousin with hand firmed to the edge of window, one window looking out at the unspeakable months away from home.

What could it have been that they were looking for? That they were looking forward to: the yearning to leave steam of the past from the stacks bellowing into western air.

They were looking out the hole in the main deck for a sight so unremarkable and deviated from fire, fall of 1938. A sight so unremarkable, they treasure their names to learn who is left among them and count days like pennies falling out of pockets.
Epitaph
Translation of Anna Margolin’s Yiddish poem “Epitaf”

Tell him this+: she has no forgiveness
for her mournful+ moods,
so she went by+ life
with disappointed+ steps.

Say that until her death she protected,
faithfully, with plain+ hands
a fire that was delivered to her
and in that fire she burned.

And how in hours of rapture+,
she struggled stiffly+ with God,
how her blood sang deeply+,
how simple men+ destroyed her.

________________________________________

Stanza 1:
+ it (ə) or Tell this to him
+ sorrowful
+ through
+ regretful, remorseful, apologetic

Stanza 2:
+ barren, wasted

Stanza 3:
+ self-possession
+ difficult, hard, heavy
+ distantly (how her blood like a root sang deeply)
+ small men, petty men
Wait to Enter Underground

drains from a pit.

He suspects God. Rose is God for Rose is dead.

He remembers the winter,

rotating remains.

his face retells living prayer, the stark chorus.

in a fog of Rose his panting.

he refuses Rose died in pills at night.

at night, he sounds of bodies, kisses the floors.

he may father ephemeral pool. his ashes blot all.

the man who has all.
Scapegoat

[an English translation] from the Hebrew azazel [עזאזל] from root azel [to remove].

Cast out the goat from the desert to atone.
And to atone furrow sin in an escape route unplanned.
Cast out the [Jew] from the city and from the city to the shtetl.
Shtetl from the Yiddish [שטעטל] meaning [small town, village].
And from the shtetl to the camps.
Shtetl from the root *sta [to stand, make, or be firm].
And from the camps

the sinister useless distance
There were a good many faithful and virtuous and patriotic German [Jews].
There were a good many faithful and virtuous and fearless persons who protected [Jews].

There were a good many children of the Third Reich watching [Jews].
There were a good many children of the Third Reich punishing [Jews].

I promise you it all really happened.
Portrait
*Translation of Anna Margolin’s Yiddish poem “Portret”*

Because mockery and sorrow stormed+ through her life,
she carried her head proudly
as if her God secretly exalted her.

In the idle+ house, in the mirror, she saw herself as through a rain,
and as if knowing eyes looked down on her,
she approached herself soberly,
as one approaches an Infanta.

Settled, settled+. Sat straight and firm+.
She did not reveal her mask
to the solitude, when good evening hours
raved above her, above all.
And she only felt: wary, fleeting madness
click tenderly+, together+, against her throat.

Stanza 1:
+raged

Stanza 2:
+vacant

Stanza 3:
+Reposed
+tight
+gently
+*Tsnoyf*: together. Madness forms a union with the speaker’s body.
Abe or Abie, my great-grandfather in America.
Blood to one unit of blood, a stealthy red.
Clothes bathed in Abe’s scabbed hands, the cloths we once made.
Draining pit-pat in a green wind.
Elder in yeshiva is Jude to you.
Frightened by a hidden light of so few on watch.
Gift or speckled grain.
He fled and sent to free other family.
I’ll remember the yellow and pink star framed in some museum.
Judah, 81, survivor of Bergen-Belsen, four minutes late to morning services.
K announces another term of unknown origin, interchangeable with Jude.
Lew in Old English, refurbished as a synonym for refuge.
Minor insult: gum on your shoe.
Named as once the son of Jacob.
Of the 11 killed, five were alive when you strapped us with Jude.
Piles, pillages of broken glass or a business boarded.
Queer and Jew, a tussle of yawn, yellow and pink, pink and yellow.
Raid, incursion, stain of insistent winters, Rahel, Wife, a favorite of Jacob.
Signed our names in Os.
That one time a friend called my father: lawyer, Jew, or was it Jew lawyer?
Under this designation: Jew doctor, Jew banker, Jewboy.
Wandering Juden became a leprous brand.
Xs represent a cross.
Yid, bare-handed, a chuckle in a faraway friend.
Zoos and squares unswept, no beds, no bread, a double-starred-badge.
Song of Kabbalat Shabbat: I

*After the SS St. Louis*

We kept our heads
screwed on to song.

Air blew shofar.

Some last long, the psalm
came at last long, the parsha

at last speech...in the Sh'ma,
we shook out that mute breath.

All newborns davened in heads
besides mothers’ crisp hands. Mothers davened
in heads...wind chimes split

Madness gone in
heads, raged in the shakes.

Bitter whispering whippoorwill *sh la la la*...

*p'nei Shabbat n'kabelah*

A winded chant, bent to ancestor
tongue,
evolved to breathe that
mute
breath bound around past grief,
the grieving in the last song.

Believed we could suspect
stranger verse, melodized stone
air
...in the train car away went bodies...
nothing
but stone air...davened the way
to the window, to the passing field.
Come mother queen, we call her in
to stone
breath.

So long to us,
for winter

Given quickly to stammered facts,
we peered against soft windows...
endless ocean
spoke to the young. This we
we are,
a hole
universal arrival
story here at the island.

No babies birthed here, no
neighbors we are.
Through the empty vat
of boat and cargo, we are. Nativist hysteria shuttled
from Havana to Miami lights
across…
back round again to the continent

Two sisters stared through aperture,
one dipped
her chin
to waves.
Father outside on the deck
smiled at the frontier,
the rock the mind made
out
of land…
Was it all
the song to come in us
that held
the faces
still?

Nobody wanted on fairer shore,
nativists rallied for exits…passages.
What was
to come
would come
with bowed skin and broken
no’s
and in the quietest night of
song
Sweet waters unfurled, simple
sealed waters upon crested
return…
to the other underside.

No one, not we, would predict
the passages of
silence…
balanced head forgone.

Watched as the boat, as the train
car
faded. We watched as we were
next in line.
Welcomed what was left
of light
on Sabbath, holy meeting wound,
holy meeting silent song.

By the light, we kept
bread, wine, washed hands
by the light,
we kept
light.

Until the
dark
emptied

Studied stone scroll
in the barracks. We regarded
the passengers, chorused
Adonai
in the headless, pitched severity
in high and lows,
tones of almost
arrivals…

Of where, we knew not.
Passed hillsides,
not shtetl

where
the song came last,
sung in floorboards.

Danced
where railway and wave took us,
long danced
for fear, for insistence. Shared
a strip of meal.

We couldn’t get the tone
right or wrong because the throat
ran
through
Bitter gone, if we could be gone,
we went
at last to greet the sun
down.
This meeting, though arranged
runaways and wrongs, found
chimes were better made
for the dark
were better made for
the said, better-made.

Exhalation at last long
ploughed, made of little
breath
a child. Birthed a child
of the
departure
and of a child, the day went
again, gone
Song of Kabbalat Shabbat: II

After Bialystok

Hiding our hands with song,
we cover our face in song
and in the face of song, yearned for years
of a song without a face of fiends, spiders…
expelling fiends, spiders. Stretched
our faces to prayer but a net of skin
stuck in the
synthetic burned
area…
stuck in camps, in life,
camps of life…

A rind of sound
that we crack
our teeth on, gristle so firm it sticks
to the tongue…
For a point sound gives us to pinch
the point of destruction before
we knew destruction possible.

The song was noise and history stolen
in the sticks of home, shtetl…
circular sound confirmed to circular ghetto
confirmed to a circle on the map to a point
where a race must be erased.

Was there a time before the time
we knew destruction possible…waving to foe
in a wind so eaten and so vapor burned.
When objects were not bodies or tools
or land…no land to own or tool
around a tongue
or trap… After before there was land
in exchange for bodies in traps…the point
of the point in circled ghetto
where the bodies lay…

In our body on Sabbath, tendinous
singing firmed without opening mouth
or body…eating out song and its words,
soul-snatching
life from realm

○
What isn’t song isn’t sound but we lose
ourselves in the rim of betweens…
a singing without thresholds of sky…
   no sky for the body to strike,
breaking through other helpless
   windows…

When they drew a line, there was where we went…
a barrier in a town barring
the town from its town…
a point of all points…where the spiders
   began
to sing…

Where word in song moved faster in sound,
faster than sound leaks. We heavied
as heat leaks heart. Our heads cocked
even when still and our eyes grew bulbs
even when closed…

We never dreamt or terrored…elsewhere
   we were overtaken
as the bodies sped and sped toward
taken-in-life…

   Then a light-blood flooded, from where
   we weren’t sure…we held
temple and Torah together in heads,
    trapping ink that needed a trap
permanent in us…as a number
    when they erased a name…

We regulated texture, textile garnishing
    sound
until we labored to labor
    in textile to stay…
    in town….
Singing in the dark...in the medicine of uprising...in the medicinal hushes and pounds, we trimmed our voice around the song...the voice of clockmaker,

weaver, two sisters posing in a park...the ones left and the ones chosen not to flee, not to bring the family aboard...beyond.
Find us, cleaning our night and food in song...

When they drew the line, we went to work in winter...early daybreak Sabbath...When they drew the line, some made clocks, clothing, cakes, songs, bread, tested breath. When they drew the line, we knew the fleeing would cease as clear as a line drawn.
Sent for us, a telegram. Sent for us, 
a letter the length of song telling us 
someone comes for us in winter… 
beyond the line

Sung for us without us, sung for us a song 
without end…without lung…came whole 
from voice beyond body 
beyond the line

Sisters held for us, the hand inside the hand 
of family. Jolted and awake, made of family 
a search-less song, 
one woven stretch of note laid out 
across a handmade land 
we made to our movement…

Holier years tented to our robes…gathered 
script even in the raid of night, 
and in the night, sisters listened to their 
mothers, and we understood home.

Now it was night. We watched a sky huddled 
in cloud leave us to the trace of sound… 
migrant light vanished out across shtetl, 
shtetl…to town beyond ghetto…

the merely-crossed other line of a family 
arrived and asleep 
when light melted…

Misery waned and the night fenced 
only animal. An under-fed 
grey cat stirred…spoke 
tiredly 
to the eyes of family, 
kicked at the once closed 
door in a room 
of five….
Song of Kabbalat Shabbat: III

Coda

In one night, the willows wept
with familiar logic…
In one night, the willows miraged
light under
  familiar faraway song…

Two sisters, keepers of grief
  and dried marigolds
  sang beloved songs
  of Shekinah…

We pinched air stale
  in chants…
Two sisters believed their ancestors
  were one future, that the infant
  born was once ancestor…

The pretend festive of song…
  an ancient grieving…
The ancient grieving reconstructed…
  a wailing hum of song.

One night, the mourners ceased humming
  the Kaddish…
a silent arm rubbing the small
  of their backs.

  In our backs, a ruby rib touched,
      a hold held as the knob of tree.
  In our backs, a hunger slept.

Two sisters adorned an altar with stone…
  old garments…sweet borekas…
  one night’s candle.
The mourners spidered their bones,
  trapping song in their flesh
  and cloth….

The night simmered discretely.
The mourners melted a wild
  onion, fried
  dough in its grease.
Meager eating was mercy
  in filaments
  of ancestors spent…
If we cracked our hands to wood,  
we created noise…  
If we cracked our hands to string,  
we made tone…  
If we hollowed the mouth,  
we swallowed other hollows  
and began a harmony  
of sisters…

The restless prayer yielded  
to the heartening path of mortality.  
In designing the night,  
we decorated for a birth delayed.
Shekinah was dwelling…
   was settling…
   was presence.
Shekinah was priestess.
Shekinah was two sisters.

Shekinah was cave…
   queens, brides
   bellowing against walls…
   decadent  hum.

Shekinah was water
and moon skimming
   light….

Shekinah was a mother
   the mourners buried…
   Was a daughter daughtered of mothers…
   Was a bride not bridled….
   Was an infant girl born to Shekinah…
Fleshy night, the infant girl birthed
in wreckages of snow…
A future night rested
on mother’s belly,
on skin grown of imminence.

Elsewhere there were streams
screaming of skin…children,
women, men lined to night.
Was it wind
or fire we heard in the belly of our den?
Or needles falling from fragile
windows…a rock

against a face…

We prayed for wind…
we prayed for a rock to guard us.
Praying for night to rest
into a dream of infants,
Shekinah, a mother once

alive…

The day craved green
in a tireless winter…
The day was a swamp
where we bathed our skins.
The day was the infant wailing,
an old song
of mothers,
the steam-sound
of the train that took
her mother…

We clutched dear
for a godless breath
when last we were
solely of our skin…

Tell us our sisters were once flesh,
were once spring
cicadas drumming
in the purple of night….
(III)
Love in Six Sections

From the beginning, all wires crossed:
smoke from stone,
spruce out of belly fat,

the farm dog swallowing bunnies—
whole—before collapsing
back broke in a field of fleas.

--

You graze my breasts
with the backsides of your hands,
as you tie a half windsor
and frown, repeating the loop.
I kiss your chin. You pull away.

In the morning, you

put on a skirt that falls below your kneecaps,
a blouse below your elbows.

You ride the train to Midwood
and pray to HaShem—
or to the tugging
of my waist in the snow drift.

--

Those chemical eyes: you want
me in the bathtub below the water line
where my pussy splays apart on the drain (we did that once
never came up for air).

--

Inducing asphyxia,
I masturbate to the screens,
the nightgowns, the wicks of candles clipped.

This is the holding pattern,

where I pick

my layers till they slip out.

--
Gas rushes
underneath
the sidewalks

into the apartment building,

up the walls

    rising to our heads.
We can’t tongue its scent,
can’t straddle its chambers:

a room with no corners.

--

I tell you:    drape your wig on the manikin,
sleep without God on your shoulder.
Marriage Sonnet

Stone-footed I am now
to the hands of a clock. I have no
instance of sorrow with no.
My lover has her back
to my nose. I’ve been handed
too many IOUs, I keep a drawer full
next to baby photos and precious
metals. I sometimes wish a while
to break the spine of mother’s
marriage to see belly up
the seams, to see degrees
of contusion woven to my spun
spine left in the sticky lilac sun. I bake
at dawn and watch mother bicker till morning.
The Good Widow of Aurora, Nebraska

slimmed so thin the widow at the farm sink sits still coffee mug and pipe

in hand scoops slants of sun in all cardinal directions off there her sister

in the Black Hills the school bus she rode for college in New England

suburban track homes of Walnut she fled her son in the system in Georgia

cheek by jowl we slither through the chicken coop the claret rooster

he-he-haw-haw- haws as I eye the primal feed waddling in scat

the widow plucks each egg heaved from the foul box ten months

and I sell them FDA-approved I don’t want know just the slaughter

made clean and her husband’s terminal infection and the eight home-made

sourdoughs a day she crafts ten jams a week the cans lined up

as back-alley-cats I must not wish to age through any other hourglass

or showered sugar and wrinkled cerulean of day I must not

wish for any particular lover I wanted to build him a shed and he wanted

to build me a kitchen so we argued on barstools and made love till

our knees pummeled I must not hunt for a loneliness so yellowed
The Landing

*Get any bites, Johnny,* he asks flaying the fishing line with its parachuted whooshing. A woman beside me on the barrier in a skirt and tuffs fishes too, near heat of the motor-boat, giddy ballerina of coral.

*Bottom fish, rockfish* we catch, he tells me. The season for trailing king salmon now, but they aren’t nipping. Dolly fish sings on the tiptop of Johnny’s rod as we gab. Pouty and silver-lipped, such a little life affair. No mark of failure in sand-lines—or greed or any man-to-man warring. Underneath the basket of estuary, celebration tepid as a fog. *Two and a dog,* he observes of the skiff where the fisherwoman and dog sway,

sizing up the boat and scratching the tweed of his battered beard. *Hey, at least you caught something, Johnny,* scratching and scratching his matte, a menace lining up his line without eyeing the speed of breakwater. Noble tyranny. His icebox empty, though, of catch and beer, the day’s young medicine and pain. I feel so suddenly compelled, in the off-pink-light, to waltz with this man. To waltz with a man so unlike my father, who never waltzed with me.

But, oh, take its flesh home with you, Johnny, grimace at the supper you fought, stole. Cleanly bathed and worked, wear it proudly, a bib where you choke.
Marriage Sonnet

Mother screams as the clothes come off.
She is sure now what is there:
a corseted nightgown, congealed take-out, static radio.
She is sure now the landscape is unwell.
She pulls hair from inside this scream, counts
faint light outside: how many barking spaniels
since the first yowl? A rotary of spineless
noise, a rotary of white carpet around the room,
stockings enclosing light puddles in the room.
Mother taught me to close, stitch
my spine to my blouse, hold on to my knuckles
as the spinning stops. On the upper lip of her
screams, a puddle of sweat creases
as sorrow so small.
Spontaneous Loss Before the 20th Week

I.

Event, they will say.

They won’t say:

blood on the wheelchair,
blood on the beach
towels, on the bathroom
floor, on her college sweatpants,
in the fabric of the car
driving to the hospital.
Blood on the almost-
fathered-hands.

Maroon and clotted
in the toilet bowl—

   is that it?
she asks,
   is that
   all?—

The speckled ostrich
circling a silo
in shadowed procession.
A swollen fig fallen
too soon.

In spring,
what takes
& takes
earthward
she follows.
II.

That it couldn’t be.
That it won’t.
That she can’t find her body
beginning again.

She burns before she breathes.
Her faded mind collects
still lifes: fingernails,
defects, dead petals
her mother brought home
from the hospital. In the kitchen:
the first photograph.
She kisses each of its tissues.

Blood that dries
on the flesh.
How blue inside.
Bird Sermon: a crown of sonnets

I admit my ignorance of birdcalls,
both the mourning dove’s and the spot-breasted oriole’s that greet me
on the roof as I plow
to the heart of a haunted reverie. I admit my ignorance
of ghosts, lambent and oranged
I’ve heard, but I’m sure it’s just my mother
creeping, wanting me off this scaffolding and shelled from the very
middle-of-the-middle syndrome
I’ve grown. Like a zealot in slipshod uproar, she praises oblivion as decadence;

I design a mind courting lace.

I design a mind courting lace,

ripped at its best seam: black and pearl.
This seam traced back to days when
I couldn’t climb a tree but climbed
the fireplace near the bath sink, where
I was birthed. Stood atop the mantel te-he-heing
at my mother in her joggers. Can’t catch me without a cage. Stole the vodka before fifteen,
refilled innocence with water. The money from her wallet: trashy cash in my glove box.
Mother gave me shame: a pressed Oxford and plaid, the jiggle on my belly extra.
And I sprinted the desert wasted and wide,
free-hooked and ashamed as my own.
Ashamed and free-hooked, fucked
with seats like the plains in my lover’s
SUV, in front of the synagogue
where she attended kindergarten. We recited
dated poems, a 100-year blizzard burying what was left
of us. In the bath she kissed my toenails,
then sucked. Was this the visage of a couple
never meant for sun-up, wrapped so naked
to dawn? When my mother met her a year later
she said *pretty, pretty girl but will she marry you?* Will she
withstand the fissure of fishhook to mouth? I tried
to find myself another mother, my lover’s sacred
fingers lifting the ridge of my chin when I cry.
*Will she see you through death?* I plow, I plow.

*Will she? Before you sink, dear.*

Before you sink, dear, let me slurp the plug

*where you leak.* She asks me once for my pussy.
But I’m so spent of bathroom sinks at
restaurants and kitchen tables ramming. I’m so ill
at ease, gifted with party favors etched in my initials
that she gives me at holidays. Some promises
we wore on our letters and ring fingers. A fickle
dance. When she met my mother, she must’ve
called her: *big blue-eyes.* I don’t blame her. I blame myself
for tearing down the Celtic cross in the front hall
of my childhood home. In the enterprise of hiding
I stencil an ear for a mouthpiece, first.
Then, wrap a bow to its folds. Keep tying.
Tighter. Till I can’t tie my words to me.
I can’t tie my words any tighter.
As a toddler, I sleepwalk to the attic,
glassy and feverish, searching for birds
trapped in the gambrel. Burgling my tantrums,
scarlet light or voice in the headboard of my bed.
Hummed and rattled when I ate, feared I was just a music
box clown pecking in to say hello. That I was
of another variety. In my first memory of land,
ducks strut across the shore while my parents
spit and spat minor language: *fuck n’ fuck me
dead*. Something like that. Those voices always
carry across land. Today at another spring-fed pond,

*Maaaaa.* Flapping, kicking, a child pedals to shore.

○

A child pedals to shore in frantic flapping;

a mother hugs her daughter in a pull
away from her husband. I watch one silent
scream. Once, my parents almost divorced at the gully
of the Grand Canyon. Next the hotel in Santa Fe.
If questioned of their marriage, parents cite
their bright, audacious children as evidence.
But for the honeyed pink in the Canyon.
Once, I was a girl watching the gulf move
with sky. Once, I was solitary. I mistake sometimes
the memories, twisting transcendence and fracture.
When I’m all cried out, I walk to some buzzy field of firebugs,
and low-low down look for bark beetles,
if that’s what they are. In the night it’s just blue anyway.
In the night it’s just blue anyway. 
An aquarium of mice twitching in 
laundered sheets. In the house where 
my father was born, grape vines stalk 
overhead, and he slides a photograph 
between brick walls: grandmother 
in her wheelchair paralyzed with one smile. 
The only smile her face could make. To be 
immortalized in the domestic wild, better than 
the God-infested ground. When he returns, my father 
silently weeps on the balcony overlooking vines. 
To release the family in the edifice, he must admit 
the error of the family. The bitter root 

of family that dangles as weeping mulberry.

○

A family tree, bitter and rooted, dangles 
as weeping mulberry. Effortful I wake in this 
blue, the hound pawing and licking 
at my mitt. What could be so decadent 
but the chewing brindle? I’ve had a few too many 
the night before; the kitchen is so far. 
Against the closed window, another beaten 
wind runs through my body while the hound 
eats another brand-new shoe. My mother texts 
five times this morning to know if I’m fine. 
For once no one else to call to say 
I’m fine. I’m fine. I pluck dust with my fingers 
and blow. The mirror across the bed sways 
and seeing through, I swear I see in.
In seeing in, the translucent lineage leaks. 
Last night, the back room of the bar faded—
a single drop of neon from the air-
hockey table still whirring. Puffing up
my lungs I stand in the center of the game-
room and its shriveled cartoons, alone.
Once I was a girl with a hot wheels set and Toy
Story figurines, dented whiffle balls.
Once I was a girl, potted in my closet
talking to the toys, talking to no one
listening. When I leave the bar, the desert doesn’t
know. Uneasy strolling mid-road, I drive instead
the car alive, tilt the front seat to Orion flying by:

luminous boxed light. Tomorrow I go north.

Two whistles I recall from my study:
the artist in his studio drying the last
of his animal pieces, the hanging bird
hopping on a wire. The noises so
solid. Like unopened letter in the desk drawer,
I recall I have all my life to consume
these noises. I become nimble at the abrupt
halt of the grasses whistling and shaking
like a baby born yesterday, soundless
until the first taste of matter. And the baby
wailing: I got to get out, hold me,
hold me, play me like a big string.
Take me cooing in this very cool breeze.
Take me cooing in this very breeze.
I’m howling out the busted
mother in my body, wanting for
the real her to send me a photograph
of some butterfly napping, or the puddle
of a marsh on her morning walk.
In my first memory of water, brine
and my mother rubbing the tar between
my toes with dripping oil. I search for skins
so gentled. The slap from my lover
on my backside once we worked up
the courage. Nails running
along the backs of knees, that spot

it feels: a fly pecking from up the ground.

A fly pecks me from the ground.

The fly tastes with its feelers, with no task
at all, suckling pots of nectar
and taming the fur of a dog out to rest.
The flies’ minds are but a red
and green bulb brimming. This is
what I desire. When knowing my duties,
to set down anyplace and watch
the wringing wings of air. I become then
woman, noting the process of deletion
and consumption, letting go of the hoarded
toy. The hoarded body of the lover.
I chase the bruised peach coiled
by worm, too long teased by sun.
I devour the bruised peach coiled by worm.
Too long teased by sun, I miss
the truth of love: the simple magnet
of the seasons when my lover kissed
me hard. I’ve heard before love is all
violence, the taking and taking
and splitting of two. I’ve never known this.
Only the restless rotting; laying in bed
together all winter pruning from the shower.
The thirstless hunger for a snack after sex.
But in the final split of two, I plead, a nail
driven deep: We are supposed to do the growing
old, the growing thing my parents ravage.

Not with you, my dear, my gone.

Like a sag, I’m dear, I’m gone.

I help her pack home, then find
myself again in bed with the hound teething
on the cuff of my coat. My mother calls; this time
I answer. Another tendon in her right hand fused.
I never know what to say to her frailty;
my voice crushes her voice
as a ship berthed. If I learned tenderly
the body of my mother, I’d unclasp
the curse of the body netting
with the mind. I never tell her I think
daily of her impermanent design,
just a foot-bridge between our two lives.
I never tell her when I’m coming back.
Marriage Sonnet

The skin of the skin of the upper lip:
what is more than skin that can be touched?
My lover shadows my shadows awake in the night.
A comedy show plays out
the stereo and it is not us.
We beat inside against the insides
of us. I keep letting my lover
run away with the leash. Here I am
again: the same four blocks enclosing the span
of me. Happy and drunk we were never,
instead we eat whitefish salad in the playground
and skin each other with our palms. The swing-set
teeters, a dizzy-love we make rocking back
and in each other’s breasts like children overgrown.
Sonnet of Intimacy

Farm afternoon, there’s much too much
Of him on her and her on him, a miserable
Chewing on each other’s tongues,
While hay makes the body a barrel.

To the row of buckets she drifts, a dripping
from who knows where—wound or rain.
Without much thought, she buries him in her thickets.
There’s much too much of him on her.

The smell of fire-smoke, she grows overtired
Of its aching in the air. The smoke to measure where the girl
Was thrown once and of where her mother can find her laying still.

She records nettles in its pasture.
She rolls over in a lengthened sun.
She circles her eyes to a hovering shadow.
Sonnet of Intimacy

Farm afternoon,
there’s much
too much
decorated applause.
And yonder,
a farmhand-woman
I’ve never told
about the bloke,
ever told her
he was, in a hectare’s
distance, my brother.
Gracious we are to the hands
we wish to kill, a sudden slip
to feed them handsomely to the hogs.
Doubled Ekphrasis

Barber of Suez, 1876

I layer the barber
as sculptor / Man strokes the neck
of man like kneading rye / The barber’s spread
fingers cradle the man’s neck
between loin cloth and thigh /
The barber bends at his waist,
a steady bend to catch the curved
shave / This barbershop a bedroom
I’ve transgressed / The man adorned
in a silken blue robe diamonded
to his sternum hawk-eyes his gaze /
Not at me / I’ve tiptoed / I’ve jeweled
each stroke this glassy New England
afternoon / A cardinal wrestles
from the windows and into the chests of men.

Fire Island Moonrise, 2018

Two feel-goods in confessional, baked
in the forgotten spotlight of the moon /
I recognize a rapture / The boys select
flesh in this tête-à-tête/ One doubled-down
body of a boy in prayer of boy / A dappled
scene of tweed / And the beach, greened
and greyed, haloing the rainbow cape
the prayer dons / I recognize this is the face
he had before birth / This is the dream
he snatched from some other sleepy-eyed
he kissed before bed / Pistoled-fly-
nymps jump the blankets / A wolf
stares beyond where the boys can know what
lingers / And where what lingers watches
in the bush-wacked sedge.
Pretty Sonnet

I hated when you beat me
at ping-pong in the courtyard.

The sooner you won, the sooner you left,
and the less I could work you

side-to-side—brakes in a freight. The more
the third thing (this game) would erase

the morning's erasures of good mornings,
and the more the third thing would begin

to resemble a marriage, a grace of lavender
in the brush. But instead, I cry in the courtyard,

you watch; you hold me like twine, weaving a pretty
spin & yoke. Unashamed in my lightest hours,

sometimes I imagine, instead, drowning with you
oftener than I imagine stitching you to my suit forever.
Pretty Sonnet

Your voice from the kitchen,
a gramophone I’ve become
accustomed to muting
with the silent strumming

of my footsteps as I tap
like larva on top of you,
sing-song-struts. I shudder when you
ascend the stairs to the loft and find me

as a unit of myself: a tack
untacked or as mellow as bronze.
This is not a pretty day. This is just one hour
we won’t remember until you break

the news or disappear, as you do, to invent a task.
And softly, our neighbors pity the afternoons we purge.
Marriage Sonnet

I tell my lover that all her uncles are betting men
and cheating on their wives. I tell her to warn
her of robin-speckled doom. I plead to get us
through springtime. We fake an empty parade
of birthdays and balloons till we dry up in all
wetter parts. Flesh over-sexed. We are not ourselves,
the fleeing in the freeing. I set the table
for under-salted supper, but it cools. Mother comes
over in borrowed pearls and cries at this so-distance
chained to our union. I call to mother:

for this is how you made me love, for this is what you asked.

They try to hold me but I sink, stoned
in a quarry. Tipped slowly like bucked horses
we weep for this end of this end.
Six Months of Sunday Mornings

You dab your breath in a peach-hued napkin; a teardrop
of rosé dribbles from the crease
in your lips. The waitress, a little hungover
from last night’s magnificence,
yawns a yawn of jaws. I am still returning
to my mouth after sucking blue
from your neck and hardly returning because the smoked
salmon-toast points are making me liverish. Its pap
swivels in my throat. Do I look blush?
Do I bore you with each taste?

We haven’t talked for months
about babies or religion, or summer
at the shore, but we pretend to approach
the fate of the dying woman—your grandmother—
while we swirl sugared milk in our coffees. Kiss, kiss.

We make conversation of life-support,
feeding tubes, sealed envelopes, her wordless poker
games with the gals abruptly terminated.
An orange juice to share? you request, muttering
easily about death in Jewish law. A natural passing, unassisted.

I tell you my mother wishes to become dense
in the Pacific. A pre-arranged, grand
drowning, while my sister and I play her “What a Wonderful World.”
Does my mother want us to wear our sun-hats too?
To you, this joke falls flat. I grimace into folds, my neat wool.

The whites of the poached egg fly like a single lily. You stab the plate.

At the hospital bedside—gowned, veiny—I figure it will be ordinary
and relaxed. You, me. My mother, me. Your grandmother
and God’s cord. And when we are closest to its nearness—
a tender heat—won’t I know whether to preserve
or empty our organs?
In the Clearing, with One Light

I cut through broken branch, yellowed
Snow from a scent hound’s trickle
Of piss, acorns plump and cherubic.

And I come always to the deer
With open eyes,
A billowed nose.

And the animal is me,
Fixed on a nurse log
Cold and sulking.

And the animal is you,
Pecking at the arch
In your ribs.

I will make
My way out of truth.

There’s no sun today,
There’s no friend at the end of the wood,
There’s only the cemetery and I’ve been before—

Maggots and sedges,
Fading rush of maroon in the air.
There’s my mother
Waving in thirst.
And, still, the deer.
And I carry them
Pillared on my back.
Poem for Ezra

Ezra, every morning, I awake
with you & scribe your fledgling voice
in the book of law that carries your name.

Summertime husks: you twirl in the belly
of my sister, levity ascends in midnight suns where I fold
my newest life as pressed linens, trod defiantly as I do.

One child I witness, mouth agape flashing pin drop teeth,
fanning her toes in the dew-dripping sprinklers. Scanning
for my approval like I too am her worrywart mother,

she dips each knuckle in the spray & we cackle together
like pheasants. Southeast Alaska. Snowless. Infinite primal love:
swollen salmonberries, tip of Sitka spruce, & you, Ezra, feed

on the beating heart of your mother, the countertenor of your father.
That other child, when I eye him plainly while he topples a bubble-
gum cone on the sidewalk, licks his face clean of blue

dye no. 2. A grim reaper of sugar & pleasure. The kind of pleasure
reserved for simplicity, for daylight, for a childhood I cannot get back.
On the subway, back in New York, a child sits beside a sleeping weary man,

are you hungry, are you alone? she asks, leaning close to his face to check
if he’s awake, so close they could kiss & no one would notice, or care.
I care for you, napping every afternoon with your lips puckered, tasting the wisps

of dusty air. A microscopic dream passes through & leaves. When you rise,
we gallop in razor-cut grass, trying to catch a fancy—one of those purple-breasted pigeons. My midsummer mind: an island resting on a birth awakening.

You, Ezra, with the wingspan of a magnolia tree livening, draw yourself outside
the line life draws: a plume of pink horizon, miles & miles. Find me when you’ve
found this life & walk me along its ancient road, take one notch of my worn hand.
NOTES

( I )
In both Jude poems, I center the content on the historical significance of the yellow “Jude” Star of David badge that Nazis forced Jews to wear during the Holocaust. The poem also considers the pink triangle that individuals shamed as homosexual were forced to wear in concentration camps. For individuals who were both Jewish and homosexual, an upright yellow triangle was placed together with a downturned pink triangle to form a Star of David. The poems also reference the shooting at the Tree of Life (L'Simcha Congregation) synagogue in Pittsburgh, and specifically the congregant Judah Samet, a Holocaust survivor, who after arriving late to services, survived the shooting.

The Quota series is an ekphrastic project based on photographs of families aboard the ship liner, the SS St. Louis. In the spring of 1939, more than 900 Jews fled Hamburg on the St. Louis after violent persecutions against Jews erupted across Germany. The St. Louis attempted to enter ports in the United States and Cuba, but almost all of the 900 passengers were turned away and forced to return to Europe. Roughly one in four from that ship died in the Nazi regime.

Epitaph and Portrait are translations of Anna Margolin’s Yiddish language poems “Epitaf” and “Portret.” Margolin was a Jewish Russian-American. She first came to the United States (New York) in 1906, and she settled permanently in 1913. She published only a single volume of poems during her lifetime (Lider) in 1929.

( II )
The series Song of Kabbalat Shabbat receives its form from Nathaniel Mackey’s Splay Anthem and is intent on illuminating sounds for settings and movements—specifically weekly Shabbat during Holocaust-era events. The first poem in the series remarks, in part, on the initiation of the Sabbath through the song L’cha Dodi (“welcoming of the Sabbath bride”) and returns to thinking about the St. Louis’s doomed voyage to salvation. The second poem looks more intimately at Białystok (a town in what is now northeastern Poland) where the Nazis contained about 50,000 Jews in the Białystok Ghetto prior to deportations to concentration camps. Before the Holocaust, Białystok was a shtetl centered in the textile industry, where nearly two-thirds of the population was Jewish. Some of my family was originally from Białystok, and many of them fled just months before the Białystok pogrom killed almost 100 Jews in June 1906. The third poem intends to read more as a narrative of survival; the poem returns to the concept of the “Sabbath bride,” rendering the figure of Shekinah (the divine feminine) as central to the spiritual song built in the series.

( III )
The two poems Sonnet of Intimacy take their titles and first lines from an Elizabeth Bishop translation of Vinicius de Moraes.

Doubled Ekphrasis is a response to Leon Bonnat’s painting The Barber of Suez from 1876 (on view at the Clark Art Institute) and to TM Davy’s painting Fire Island Moonrise from 2018 (on view at MASS MoCA).
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all my teachers and mentors in the Rutgers – Newark MFA Program, thank you for your patient and thoughtful guidance. To the cohorts of poets and fiction writers I worked alongside these past two years, I feel such immense love for you all. None of this beauty would have been possible without you.

“A Tally on the Variations of Surnames” first appeared in *Arkana* in December 2018.