

My Heart is
Astir with
Gracious Words



Jewish Writers' Circle Anthology
Volume One | September 2026

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TRADITION & INNOVATION



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Gracious Words

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Introduction



רחש לבי דבר טוב אמר אני מעשי למלך לשוני עטן סופר מהיר:

**My heart is astir with gracious words;
I speak my poem to a king;
my tongue is the pen of an expert scribe.**

— *Psalm 45:2*

This anthology celebrates the first year of Jewish Writers' Circles, a growing network of grassroots, peer-led communities of writers who gather monthly to explore Jewish wisdom, deepen relationships, and strengthen their writing practice. The initial idea for the circles originated from Adva Chattler, former Managing Director of Engagement and Innovation for Reconstructing Judaism, who observed that many members from Ritualwell's online writing group Advot expressed the desire to be together in person.

Launched by Ritualwell in the fall of 2025, Jewish Writers' Circles bring together emerging and seasoned writers working in many genres, including poetry, prayer, memoir, fiction, and creative nonfiction. These writing circles have emerged as a meaningful and magical blend of creative, cultural, and spiritual exploration, inviting participants into both the writing process and a vibrant community of fellow Jewish writers.

At a time when many Jewish writers are seeking safe spaces where they can bring their full selves to their creative work, Jewish Writers' Circles provide connection, inspiration, and a supportive Jewish-centered home. Through shared learning, writing prompts, and thoughtful conversation, participants discover how ancient wisdom can illuminate contemporary questions and spark new creative possibilities.

This past year, our learning explored three Jewish teachings connected to creative writing tools: 1. Simcha (Happiness) and writing deeply felt emotions; 2. Elu v'Elu ("These and Those") and writing memorable characters; and 3. Lech Lecha ("Go Forward" or "Take Yourself and Go") and writing an engaging arc around life's big questions. The poems, reflections, stories, and prayers gathered here reflect the many ways writers engaged these ideas, bringing their own experiences, questions, and insights into conversation with Jewish tradition.

The launch of Jewish Writers' Circles is the result of a true team effort. We are grateful to Cyd Weissman, lead project and curriculum designer; Adva Chattler, who supported both content creation and administration throughout our inaugural year; and Rachel D. Kaplan, community weaver liaison. I've had the honor of editing our learning guides and this anthology. Each of our thirteen circles was led by a dynamic community weaver who brought a group of writers together and led them throughout the year. Ritualwell is a project of Reconstructing Judaism, and we deeply appreciate the organization's leadership and ongoing support.

Jewish Writers' Circles are supported by the Lippman Kanfer Foundation for Living Torah, whose commitment to deep Jewish learning and meaningful application of Jewish wisdom makes this work possible. We are honored to be part of a network of organizations creating opportunities for people to engage Jewish wisdom in small-group settings.

Most of all, we thank the writers whose work fills these pages. In the words of the Psalm 45, may their hearts astir with gracious words as they speak their poetry, prose and songs to all. May their tongues be the pens of expert scribes.

Gabrielle Kaplan-Mayer
Director, Ritualwell



Contents

Simcha | Happiness

Poem for my Seventieth Birthday <i>Lesléa Newman</i>	1
Building A Life: A Simcha Story <i>Erin Shafkind</i>	3
To David the Sweet Singer <i>James Stone Goodman</i>	4
Finding Simcha by the Sea <i>Jessica N. Levenson</i>	5
Where Does My Joy Come From? <i>Rabbi Jacob Staub</i>	6
Silence <i>Daniel Rosenblatt</i>	7
My Simcha <i>Maya Benattar</i>	8
A Not-Fiery Thing <i>Lisa Aronson Fontes</i>	9
Somewhere <i>Nora Licht</i>	10

Elu v' Elu | These and Those

Hagar I <i>Kohenet Ma'ayana Tishman</i>	11
Finding Our Rhythm <i>Gabrielle Ariella Kaplan-Mayer</i>	13
Another Conversation <i>Sheryl Shapiro</i>	15
Tree of Memory <i>Matt Sowell</i>	16
Blue and White Flag <i>Marcia R. Cohen</i>	17
Hacham HaRazim, The Knower of Secrets <i>Joanie Calem</i>	18
Never Really Knowing <i>Shelly Barnathan</i>	20
Wonder <i>Katy Z. Allen</i>	22
Every Time I Remember, I Forget <i>Jen Sonstein Maidenberg</i>	23
Things to Consider <i>Ben Schubert</i>	25
Is It Envy? <i>Deborah Swirsky-Sacchetti</i>	27
Three Reflections On my Mother <i>Sari N. Fogel</i>	28

Lech Lecha | Go Forward (Take Yourself and Go)

I Among You <i>Tzivia Gover</i>	31
Another's Eyes <i>Cathleen Cohen</i>	32
Time in a Bottle <i>Darcy Grabenstein</i>	33
Going Rogue <i>Marla Solomon</i>	35
Dream <i>Robert Renard</i>	36
It Was September Again <i>Cyd B. Weissman</i>	37
Radiant <i>Sharon Sorokin James</i>	39
Esther's Monologue <i>Rachel Dawn Kaplan</i>	41
Path to Freedom <i>Laura Lieber</i>	42
Where It All Began <i>Marc Jacobs</i>	43
Apocalypse Redux <i>Rosalind Kaplan</i>	44
Better Than Therapy <i>Kate Shaffar</i>	46
Number 2 or 3 <i>Michael Sklaroff</i>	49
Lech Lecha <i>A. Krauss</i>	51
Torateinu <i>Aaron DeBroeck</i>	53
Reflection on Lech Lecha <i>Gail Gensler</i>	56
A Legacy Letter to My Family <i>Mendel (Michael) Grossman</i>	57
HaShomeret/The Guardian <i>Shoshana Stombaugh</i>	58
Two Jewish Students and the March to the Charles River: A Love Story <i>Hank Kimmel</i>	59



Simcha - Happiness

Writing Deeply Felt Emotions

“When a person is happy, gloom and suffering stand aside”.

— *Rebbe Nachman of Braslov, 1772 -1810*





Poem for my Seventieth Birthday

Lesléa Newman

"How terribly strange to be seventy..."
— Simon and Garfunkel, from "Old Friends"

How terribly strange to watch
years fly by faster
than calendar pages
in black-and-white films,

How terribly strange to see
my mother in the mirror,
her wrinkled brow, her withered cheeks,
those I-told-you-so eyes,

How terribly strange to be offered
a seat on the bus, a hand to step
down, a senior citizen discount
without being asked,

How terribly strange to hear
"As we age...." from my doctor,
and my bank teller tell me
"You're like my great-aunt,"

How terribly strange to give up
fried food, fatty food,
noisy restaurants, crowded concerts
driving in snow, going out after dark,

How terribly strange to rejoice
at the wedding of a friend's daughter
at the Bar Mitzvah of a friend's grandson
at the birth of a friend's great-grandchild,



How terribly strange to visit
a friend's wife in the hospital,
a friend's husband in hospice,
a friend in her grave,

How terribly strange to stop
saying "If something happens
to me," and start saying, "When
something happens...." instead,

How terribly strange to reach
three score and ten
and no longer worry about dying
young,

How terribly strange to live
in this jalopy of a body bumping
down a one-way street
until it dead-ends,

How terribly strange to love
the world so, knowing sooner
than later I will let it all go: the glowing
gold moon hanging low in the sky,

the flying geese honking as they head
for home, the blooming gardenias
that smell close to Heaven,
the small square of chocolate, so bitter, so sweet.

How terribly strange.
How terribly lucky.
How terribly, wonderfully blessed.



Building a Life: A Simcha Story

Erin Shafkind

The figs are rotting on the counter. My sweetie was incredibly joyous about finding what he called, "the last figs of the season!" on his walk back from the library. I love that he walks to the library. I love when we walk together.

Our two cats circle and howl below me. It's a few minutes past 8am. "NOW, MEOW, NOW!" The kibble lives in a bin in a drawer of the kitchen island. Reaching into the drawer, all the figs sit above it. Each one is separated. Yesterday they clustered together in a ceramic bowl. One of them is sagging into itself, like the Wicked Witch melting into her dress. This poor little fig has a ring of white around it. Mold. The fig display frustrates me. I feed the MEOWlers and head back upstairs, climb into bed and say, "The figs are rotting."

Their skin is green, purple, and brown. Cutting into them reveals the red flesh and seeds of pure goodness. Glistening pinky red oozy sensual abundance. As a kid I only thought a fig had to do with a square cookie, and the filling was dark purple brown and sweet.

We married at the county courthouse. Each with our groomsmen, no bridesmaids. Or my bridesmaid was a man. Plus, my mother, his sister, and the judge. My soon-to-be sister-in-law gave me a bouquet. Small and large flowers, tiger lilies, roses, baby's breath and more tied with a ribbon. I wore a polka-dotted dress; we were older, each marrying for the first and only time. Him over fifty, me forty-nine. We'd already lifted and turned my little house and built a studio below. The Blue House, an 850-square-foot box built in 1910, sat on a low hill. Through hydraulics, a tractor, strong men moving what looked like giant Jenga blocks, they lifted and turned the little house made of fur with cedar shingles 90 degrees to the south. They turned the house rightward after it had sat in one spot for close to one hundred and ten years. Not before, tons of dirt were shoveled out from beneath it. After the lifting and turning, we poured a foundation, then began building the walls of what would someday be an art studio. We'd declared, "If we can build this together, we can build a life together." Moving dirt is the weirdly expensive part. Digging, like excavating what we feel for each other, is tiring work. Worth it still, almost six and a half years later.

I shared my vows smiling, then he, unfolding his paper, began to read. His hands shook. He looked at the paper and to me, tears in his eyes. This was maybe the third time I'd seen this in our eight years. I began to cry. The judge watered a little, too. The love seeped through us, into the mahogany office, beyond the marble of the courthouse and into the fall day.



To David the Sweet Singer

James Stone Goodman

To David a song
first the *Shekhinah* came and sat on his shoulder
then David sang the world played flat out on that axe of his too

A song to David
first David started to scat
THEN the *Shekhinah* came and smooched his face

So sweet he sang the secret bird
song to his son King Solomon
who knew the

Shekhinah would not descend
where there is laziness or sadness
silliness light talk but

When there is joy
the deep joy of the *mitzvah*
then WOW your mind Is BLOWN like

When the slow hand player came to play
the hand of G*d rested
UPON him --

I heard this when the northern wind
blew through David's singing harp
in the palace of the King



Note: The superscription in Psalms, leDavid mizmor, shows that the Shekhinah rested upon him and then he gave over the song, mizmor leDavid, shows he lifted up his voice in song first then the Shekhinah descended upon him afterwards (Pesachim 117a).



Finding Simcha by the Sea

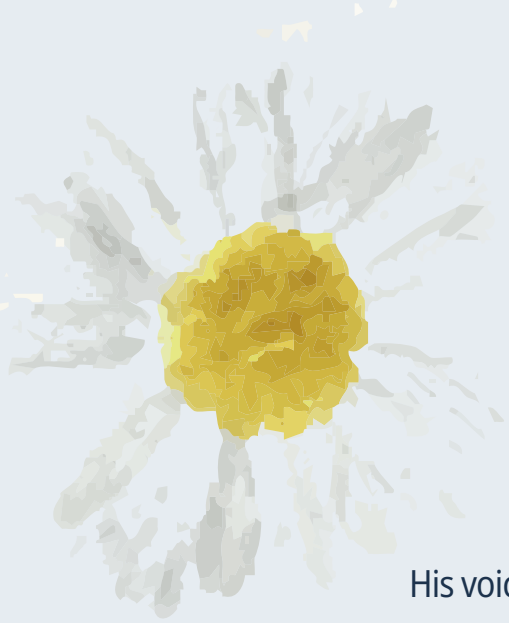
Jessica N. Levenson

Waves lap the shoreline
Rockweed undulates across and around
 deep green boulders
Slowly swirling and mopping
[Motif #1 in my periphery]
Back and forth...
Back and forth...
My breath slows; my heart rests
Dinghies gently crest
Up and down...
Up and down...
Halyard clangs mirror my breaths
Waves break; seagulls mew
The sun freckles my face
I am small again, chasing waves
Simcha by the sea



Where Does My Joy Come From?

Rabbi Jacob Staub



"I know that you've worked hard," Richard said, looking lovingly into my eyes as he had not done before on our first two dates, "and you have already lost a lot of weight. But you need to lose a lot more, because extra weight places extra stress on all of your organs. And..." He paused, hugged me tightly, and rested his cheek on my chest. "And I don't want to lose you."

His voice choked up, and when I leaned back, I could see the tears in his eyes.

Much has transpired in the following two years as our relationship has deepened delightfully, but I continue to believe that this was a pivotal event that launched us on our way, together.

He was undefended, vulnerable and unconcerned that I, a virtual stranger, might be threatened and walk away. We had enjoyed a first 90-minute WhatsApp video call that flew by. We were both thoroughly engrossed in each other's stories. That rapport continued through the two subsequent dates, but I was far from thinking long-term.

For me, it was a luminous moment. The gentle and earnest way that he spoke, and his concern about the future, made me feel held lovingly. He was declaring his feelings and his hopes for the two of us. He did not have me yet, but he was nevertheless fearful of losing me. And that encouraged me to discard my take-it-slow approach and jump in.

I left him that evening feeling as if I were floating. My joy was about having someone I could love who was open to loving me. Someone to whom I could show myself honestly who seemed inclined to embrace me unconditionally. He still knew very little about me, but he loved what he knew. I didn't know what the future would bring, but I was ready to let my guard down.

My late husband had passed two years before after a protracted, disabling illness. I was not afraid of living a single life. I had many close friends and engaging work to which I was devoted.

What I didn't have was the kind of loving connection with another person that I conjure daily when I pray, "You have loved us with a great love." For years, when I have said those words, I have tried to imagine being loved unconditionally. By my grandmothers. By my mother. By imagining myself floating in a lake, buoyed by the water, relaxing completely as I let go and trust that no wave will disturb my bliss.

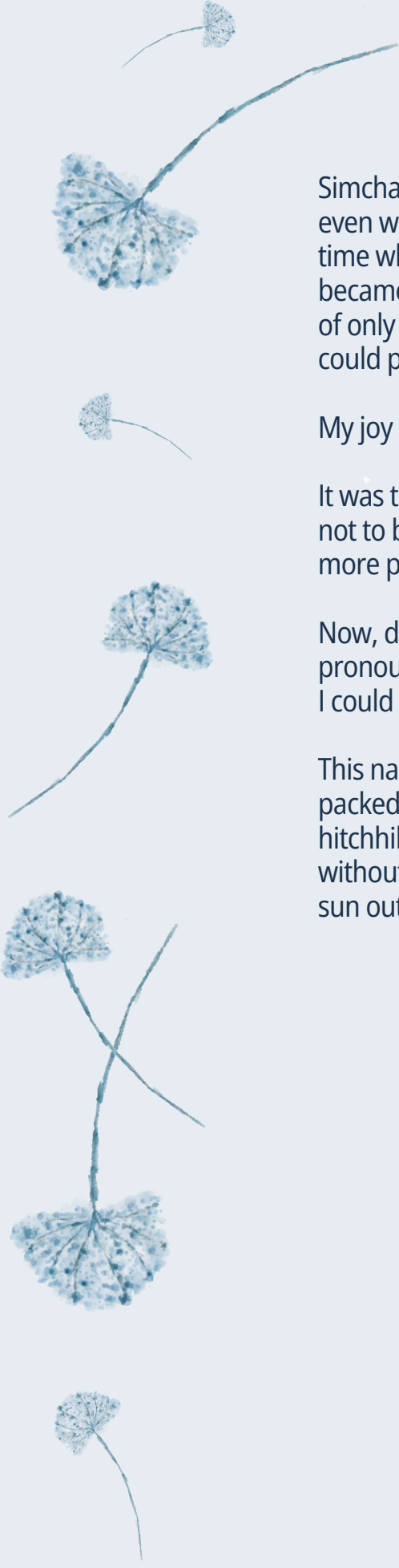
That is what I mean by "joy". No human can ever fulfill that promise completely, but we can move closer to it. Joyously.



Silence

Daniel Rosenblatt

I did not know what to say that starry night. No sight of land, space was forever. Clouds looked as pearls below us. We floated by in silence, in beauty. We were enveloped in an artistic kaleidoscope of black, of white, yet with such a luminescent glow no man could ever hope to create. We were for a moment part of creation as it unfolded beneath us. No sound, no sense, but that of floating, of being.



My simcha

Maya Benattar

Simcha is my middle name. But no one ever knew how to pronounce it, even when they tried. So a name given from pure joy, from a post-sorrow time when month after month ended in tears and pulling back good news, became almost tiresome for me as a kid in a large rural middle school, one of only a few Jewish kids and certainly one that had 3 names that no one could pronounce.

My joy became my embarrassment in those years.

It was too hard to hold the differences and though I don't think I ever longed not to be me, I had moments of pure longing to be less complex, less exotic, more palatable to "regular" American ears.

Now, decades later, I no longer care about being palatable and pronounceable. I could have changed my name when I married, but I didn't. I could pretend I don't have a middle name, but I don't pretend.

This name, this joy, carried through generations of exile and boxes still packed just in case and tiny kitchens in gritty Paris neighborhoods and hitchhiking in 1970s Israel and bucking tradition by marrying the survivor without a penny to his name and my grandmother tilting her face up to the sun outside the nursing home, this name is all mine.

A Not-Fiery Thing

Lisa Aronson Fontes

I believed in romantic love, back, back, back when—
clothes tossed in a heap meant fiery passion;
my belly flat, my hair full;

before marriage, kids, divorce, recoupling, decoupling, betrayal,
and swiping to find my beshert.

I believed in love in a sun-golden room
Flowers on a wood table and an orange section
passed from your mouth to mine,
our cheeks and chins dripping sticky as we laughed.
Playground voices breezing in,
the light fading towards evening.

I believed in love as my birthright.
My beloved would come and be mine, stay mine.

And then, icy winters.

I feel love now as a not-fiery thing.
A tickling of moments--
my granddaughter's head in the doughy bend of my
arm as she snores lightly,
Nina Simone vibrating my chest,
a drop of dew evaporating before me,
crying with a stranger as we Zoom.

And one day, so gently I barely heard it,
A door creaked open to my faith in love again.



Beshert is a Yiddish word that is usually translated as "soulmate."



Somewhere

Nora Licht

Somewhere the shooting continues.
Somewhere the bombs explode.
Somewhere, not here.
Here, we smell the lilacs,
Drink the strong coffee,
Brush away the pastry crumbs.

Today, the news is bad,
But so far away.
Let us praise distance
And not knowing.

Not knowing is a lullaby
That rocks us to sleep.
Comfort is a warm embrace.
Hold on, just hold on.

Elu v' Elu - These and Those

Writing Memorable Characters

"New day will rise
Life will go on
Everyone cries
Don't cry alone."

— *New Day Will Rise, by Keren Peles, 2025*



Hagar I

Kohenet Ma'ayana Tishman

"Rabbi Joshua ben Korchah said: Because of his love for her, (Pharaoh) wrote in her marriage document (giving her) all his wealth, whether in silver, or in gold, or in man-servants, or land, and he wrote (giving) her the land of Goshen for a possession. Therefore the children of Israel dwelt in the land of Goshen, in the land of their mother Sarah. He (also) wrote (giving) her Hagar, his daughter from a concubine, as her handmaid. And whence do we know that Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh? Because it is said, "Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children; and she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar" (Gen. 16:1)."

— *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 26

She ran to her favorite hiding place in the palace, Great Hall. Shielded by several large potted palms, she loved to watch the parade of individuals who appeared each day to see her father, to ask favors, curry his pleasure, or enact other business.

Today's business time ran long and, soon bored, she fell asleep and was soon sprawled out on the floor where she was spotted by one of the court attendants who gently nudged her awake.

"So, little one, spying on your father today?" He spoke sternly, but with a twinkle in his eyes. "Come, it is your turn to speak to the Pharaoh."

He lifted her to his shoulder and carried her to where her Papi sat on his great chair. "Sire," the man said, gently placing her on the reed mat before the throne. "It seems you have another applicant to hear."

Pharaoh looked down from his seat with a stern expression, his mouth set in a frown, and his brow knitted. "I see," he said authoritatively. "Hagar, what are you doing here? Do you not know that children are not allowed in the Great Hall?"

Hagar looked directly at her father, who seemed taller than ever from the height of his throne. "Papi, this is the most interesting place to be. It is not boring like my studies. I like to watch all the different people and hear their stories."

Pharaoh looked at his daughter, wavering between his love for her and his preference for strict adherence to the rules of court. "I see, so you hid from your tutor and came to the Great Hall to be entertained? Do you think this is the right thing for a princess to do?"



Seizing her chance to explain, Hagar responded with an outpouring of the observations made before she had fallen asleep. "Yes, Papi, I need to know things because I am a princess. I need to know about the beautiful woman you just sent to the women's quarters, and I need to know about her brother, the tall man with the deep voice who stood before you this morning. Where is he from? His accent was strange and he seemed very important."



Finding Our Rhythm

Gabrielle Ariella Kaplan-Mayer

At our wedding, my husband and I slow danced to Beth Orton's cover of "What a Wonderful World."

On our first anniversary, I was a month pregnant with our son George. We went to see Elvis Costello in concert and I bawled through "What's So Funny About Peace, Love and Understanding."

During my pregnancy, I played a Beatles Classical Lullabies CD to our growing baby. I sang him "Imagine", "Yellow Submarine" and "Here Comes the Sun."

When George was born during the depths of midwinter, I bundled him up in layers of cotton and fleece, wrapped him in a snowsuit, held him against my chest and walked for hours to stay awake. I sang whatever came into my head: show tunes, nursery rhymes, Blondie.

We went to see a speech therapist when George was two and a half and not speaking yet. She encouraged me to sing slowly with him. To leave a word open at the end of a phrase. "Row row row your..." I would pause and George would go, "b-b-b." I clapped and clapped. "Boat! Boat!"

A year later, when his speech did not progress, but his frustration grew by bounds, my son received an autism diagnosis. The Wiggles sang "Fruit Salad... Yummy Yummy" on repeat in the background of our lives because that song soothed him.

By kindergarten, George showed up as a music lover in his own right. The teacher told me about him smiling and rocking his body to The Judds' "Love Will Build A Bridge."

When he was about ten, we got George his first iPad, a game changer. He learned to communicate wants and needs through a special app. He could tell us what snack he preferred, whether he'd like to go to the park or to the store. He could also flip through iTunes and YouTube to find the music that he liked. His first loves were Katy Perry and Michael Jackson. But then things got really fun: he discovered Gogol Bordello, Vampire Weekend, Lil Nas X, Mattisyahu.

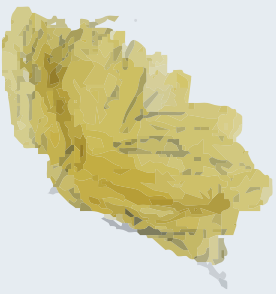
We didn't put parental controls on what music George could pick. One babysitter didn't like the Hip-hop songs he chose and told me that we should. I said thanks, bye. Music was and is George's expression, his freedom. I would never take that from him.



My son is 23 now. His musical tastes are wildly diverse. He's a great DJ and always surprises me with his choices when we're hanging out together.

On Sunday mornings, we go to a park to watch dogs running off-leash over green hills. We listen to birds.

What I didn't know before I was George's mother is that beyond speech and even music, there is a way that humans can know one another deeply, without any sound.



Another Conversation

Sheryl Shapiro

The relentless sounds of destruction
the waves of debris
push me out
of my house
My steps matching my pounding heart

At the end of the block
someone is standing at the guardrail
eyes and hands raised to the sky

*Reb Tevye, Reb Tevye
You, of all people
in my neighborhood, no less?*

He's having another conversation with G!d
On the one hand....and the other hand...
I quietly stand by his side

Now my voice is rising
Is there another hand?

My heart now pulsing with Tevye's
Earnestly seeking
pleading
flushed with disbelief
wrestling with painful understanding
Laboring
to find
the well
of faith and goodness

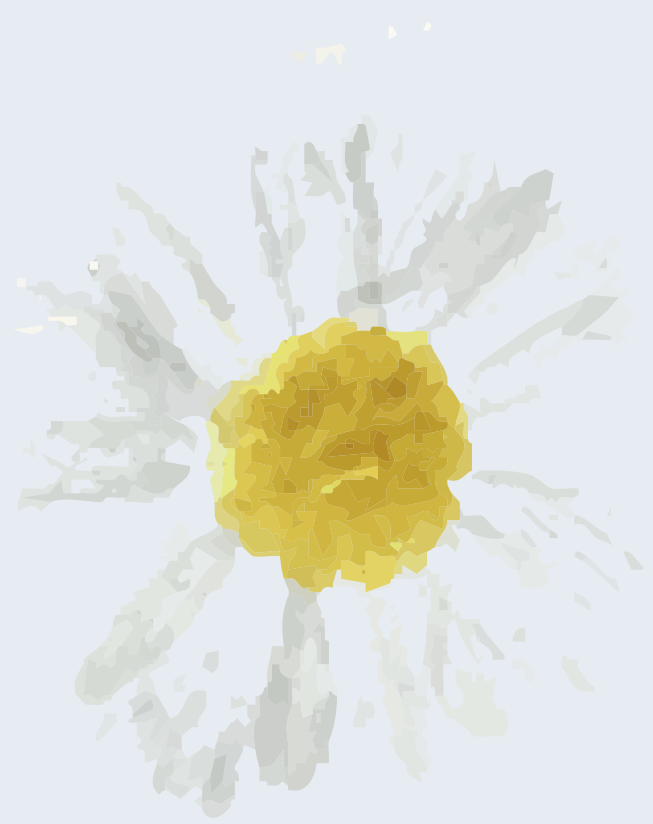
*O dear heart
wise rascal
raging bull
whimpering child
murmurer of comfort*

How many more conversations?



Tree of Memory

Matt Sowell



I didn't think much of the tree in the yard until it had died.

The tree had been planted long before me. It grew tall and wide, shading our home and bringing bird songs.

It weathered storms and heat and floods. A solid feature of my landscape.

The tree came crashing down one day, split in half under the weight of beautiful ice it had never known before.

The remains lingered. Slowly dying and rotting until the last of it became a threat to our home.

We cut it down as a family. Chopped it up into a large pile of tangled twigs and limbs until, to me, it appeared as a giant bird's nest.

I climbed it and sat in the highest branches, never brave enough to climb it in life.

It became my joy that summer. Sticks transformed into swords and each pile became a fortress. A magical friend of endless imagination.

The pieces were removed little by little until fall came and the last twig was taken away.

When I looked at the empty space where it once stood I couldn't help but wonder if I missed the tree or the pile it had become.

Now, when I think of my home, I can't picture it without the tree.



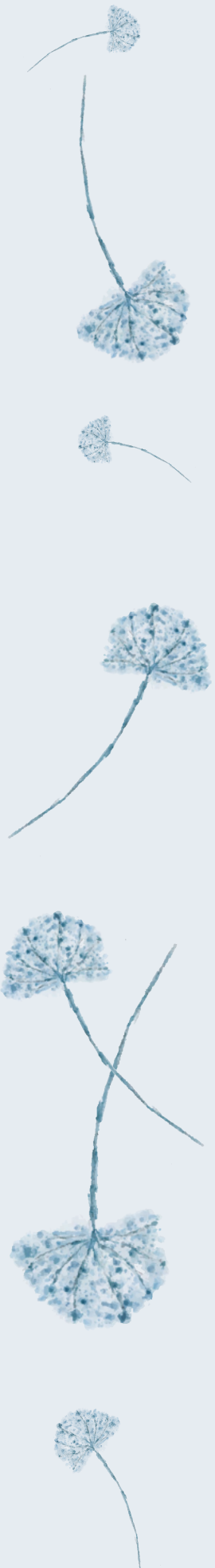
Blue and White Flag

Marcia R. Cohen

blue and white flag
the asymmetrical flutter
of sharp points



Marcia R. Cohen calls her haiku poetry work "JewKu"



Hacham HaRazim, The Knower of Secrets

Joanie Calem

This beautiful prayer, Hacham HaRazim, the knower of secrets, is found in both the *Talmud* and the *Shulchan Aruch*, and was traditionally a prayer said upon seeing a multitude of people and recognizing that just as no two people looked exactly alike, one can know that no two people will think exactly alike either. It is a prayer that has caused lots of controversy throughout the generations, with massive disagreements about when it is allowed to be said and who is allowed to say it. The prayer has continually had a variety of new limitations imposed upon it, with the *Babylonian Talmud* declaring that the prayer should only be said if one was seeing exactly 600,000 Jewish men, and the Rambam adding to that that it should only be said if one was seeing 600,000 Jewish men in Israel, and Rabbi Yosef Karo (the writer of the *Shulchan Aruch*) countering with a disagreement on both those accounts!

I have chosen here to remove those limitations and open the prayer back up to the wonder and humbling experience of observing the vast diversity in the human population, without the requirement that I be looking at exactly 600,000 Jewish men in Israel! While I can see with my eyes that people are different, I must also humbly acknowledge that I will never know how it is that I cross paths with the exact people that come into my life. Only Hacham HaRazim, the knower of secrets, can know that.

The song can be heard on YouTube.

Hacham HaRazim, The Knower of Secrets

Chorus:

*Baruch atah, brucha at, Adonai, shechinah, Hacham harazim, mevinah mystorin.**

We can never see another person's heart
We can never know another person's part
We can never hear another person's thoughts
We can never know why our paths have crossed

*Baruch atah, brucha at, Adonai, shechinah, Hacham harazim, mevinah mystorin.**

We can never feel another person's fears
We can never know just why we all are here
We can never see how the web is woven
We can never know the vastness of the ocean

*Baruch atah, brucha at, Adonai, shechinah, Hacham harazim, mevinah mystorin.**

We can never hear every whisper of the weather
We can never know how we all fit together
We can never feel another person's road
But we can always share the load

*Baruch atah, brucha at, Adonai, shechinah, Hacham harazim, mevinah mystorin.**

**Blessed are you (masculine and feminine)*

Lord, Spirit

Knower of secrets, understander of mystery

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם חכם הרזים.

Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech HaOlam Hacham HaRazim.



Never Really Knowing

Shelly Barnathan

Never really knowing.
If I'm doing enough

I enter my Mom's house
She's so small
She walks slowly
To the door to welcome
Me.
Each time a bit more frail
Than the last.

It always takes me time
To adjust.
I want to make things right,
Make things better.
I fuss with things I can fix.
But truly, there is so much
I just can't change.
Mom is 99 –
What do I really expect?

I am grateful, so very grateful
To have my Mom.
She was, she is
My best friend
But in a different way
Than before.

I remember the times, not even so long ago
When I could tell Mom everything
And she'd remember
Each detail
And provide comfort
Sometimes offering too much concern
But really – who loves you like your
Mother?



And in a moment
Of honesty with each other
Following a disagreement
And making up,
Mom tells me how much
She needs me.

And then she adds -
But you don't need me anymore, Shelly.

I hug Mom and tell her,
Mom, Mom – I love you so
I need you so.
I will be so sad when you are gone.
I need you, Mom, I need you so much.
You are my best friend.
You've always been my best friend.

I hug Mom's little frame, feel her bones.
I feel tall next to Mom
So rare a feeling for me.

I want to stop the hands of time.
I want to hold on to what we've had.
And I know we don't live forever.

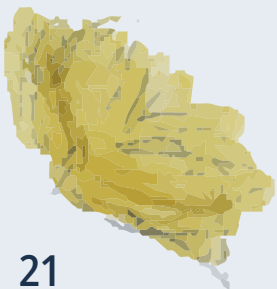
I see images of that book
"I'll love you forever" –
With Mom rocking her baby
And with the progression of time
The man rocking his aged Mom.

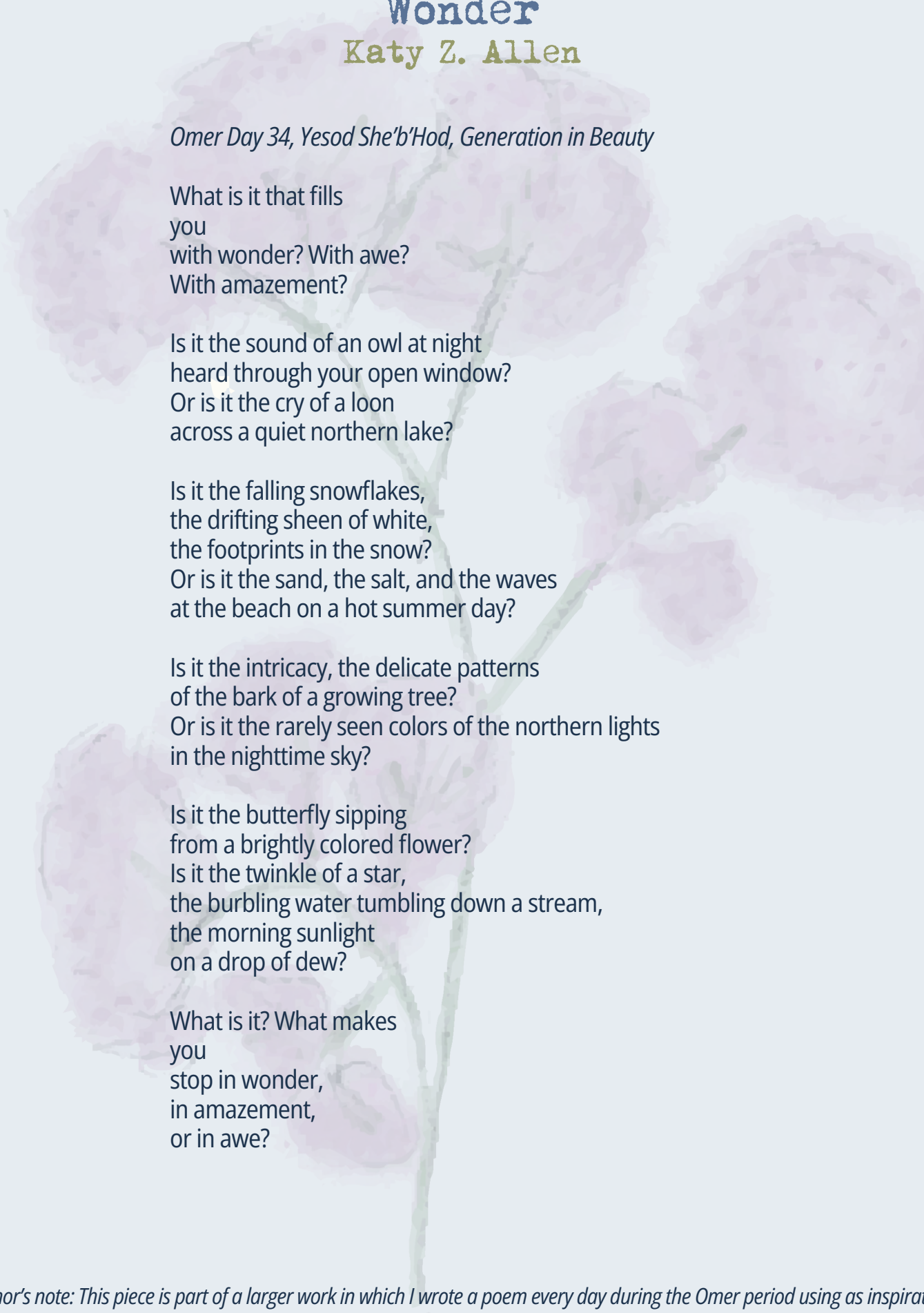
That's how I feel now.
Tears well up – I don't even know how to express
The blend of feelings –
Trying to be grateful for the moments.

Still Baking, playing Scrabble with Mom
Feels like the old days
When Mom could do everything.
And she really did do everything.

So, how do I hold the all of it?
The joy in helping her, the gratitude
In her appreciating my help.
Coupled with the sadness of
Her diminishing abilities.
The reality of me being the mother
To my Mom?
I have to hold it all –
I'm a grownup after all.
I sometimes want to be
The child that Mom took care of.
G-d – give me the strength
To hold it all – the happy, the sad
The losses.
Are we meant to hold the all of it, dear G-d?
Why wasn't I taught this better, dear G-d?
I feel so unprepared....
Others have done this holy work.
So can I.
So can I.

With love for my dear Mom, Irma –
From your Shelly-lein....





Wonder

Katy Z. Allen

Omer Day 34, Yesod She'b'Hod, Generation in Beauty

What is it that fills
you
with wonder? With awe?
With amazement?

Is it the sound of an owl at night
heard through your open window?
Or is it the cry of a loon
across a quiet northern lake?

Is it the falling snowflakes,
the drifting sheen of white,
the footprints in the snow?
Or is it the sand, the salt, and the waves
at the beach on a hot summer day?

Is it the intricacy, the delicate patterns
of the bark of a growing tree?
Or is it the rarely seen colors of the northern lights
in the nighttime sky?

Is it the butterfly sipping
from a brightly colored flower?
Is it the twinkle of a star,
the burbling water tumbling down a stream,
the morning sunlight
on a drop of dew?

What is it? What makes
you
stop in wonder,
in amazement,
or in awe?

*Author's note: This piece is part of a larger work in which I wrote a poem every day during the Omer period using as inspiration
Your Omer Journey: A Booklet of Learning, Practice and Discovery by Rabbi Robin Damsky of Limitless Judaism.*

Every Time I Remember, I Forget

Jen Sonstein Maidenberg

There is an old Hasidic tale about a king and his trusted star gazer, who once had to choose between remembering and forgetting. The king's country had been beset by a famine and there was nothing else to eat but a poisoned crop that caused everyone in the country to lose their minds when they ate from it.

The king and his star gazer deliberated between eating the small amount of untainted grain they had stored – which would allow them to maintain their ability to think reasonably and act with good judgment – or eating from the poisoned crop and going insane like all the others.

What do you think you would choose?

No matter how many times I ask myself this question, I can't seem to willfully choose the path that leads to forgetting.

The king and his star gazer, however, determined that if they ate from the tainted grain and indeed went crazy, at least they wouldn't seem crazy to the others who already were. The king, however, suggested that:

"To remind ourselves that we are not normal, we will make a mark on our foreheads. Even if we are insane, whenever we look at each other, we will remember that we are insane!"

I think about this story every morning when I wake up, after I pee and brush my teeth, when I stand up and walk to the mirror to encounter a face I don't recognize. I wonder, Is the crease that traverses the middle of my forehead down to the top of my nose such a mark? And if so, when will I remember?

* * *

"What the fuck is this?" she asked, gazing out the window. "What the fuck IS this?"

"I don't know," he replied, in a voice still gravelly from sleep.

She lit a cigarette. "I don't understand. I don't understand. I don't understand," she said, less to him than to herself, a repetitive chant to keep time to as she paced across the bedroom floor.

He sat up in bed and stretched.

How was he so calm? She wondered. She took another long drag from her cigarette.



"Can you open up a window, please?" he asked.

She unlocked the latch and lifted the window with her free hand. As she did so, she noticed the people outside: some weeping, some wandering around aimlessly, all of them...old...older than her parents.

What the fuck IS this? Where is this? How is this?

"Can you...could you...come here, please?" she whispered. "Closer? Can you see what I see? Can you please tell me if you see what I see?"

She shivered. How?



Author's note: This piece is part of a larger fictional work in progress.

Things to Consider

Ben Schubert

Guy twisted, repeatedly attempting and failing to look Carth in the eyes. "So, with that understood, I want to ask you a question I think would be important for—" he tilted his head, "—me to have an answer to."

"You can ask." Most of Carth's upper teeth remained visible. "I wouldn't know what will happen next."

Rubbing his lips – his typical anxious tic – Guy asked, "Am I a bad person?"

"Depends on who you ask, I guess. Why ask me?"

Guy's view slowly circled around Carth. "Talking with people from the rest of the school kind of makes it seem a lot of people view my behavior strange or unrealistic." His hands intermittently altered between touching lips and kneading in his shirt. "Apparently most people don't need the specificity or detail that I ask for. Also people are more often unhappy with the firm planning in approaches to problems that I prefer. Also most people apparently prefer eye contact while talking, while I..." Now shaking, he lost track of his words and went silent.

Carth exhaled. "I know. What I asked, I meant: why come to me specifically asking this?"

"Auugh." Moaning, Guy nearly pulled his lip enough to tear it. "I did it again." He needed to face away and catch his breath before resuming. "You understand these things better. When I'm bad at normal-person things, it would make me bad at being a person, which—" His shoulders pulled inward. "Wouldn't that make me a bad person?"

"It makes you retarded." Carth didn't hesitate or flinch. "Just like everyone else in your weird freaky family."

Muscles partially easing, Guy inquired, "What now?"

"Now be your best crazy self, like our parents and teachings tell us. Your mind works different, but as long as you're not hurting anyone you'll be who or what you need to be." Another thumbs-up. "Psychos that we are, that counts as being a person. You get to decide if that's good." Guy couldn't discern the message's intention. "You're my brother."

Guy faced down while his brow rose. "Doesn't being abnormal factor into goodness?"





Carth's hands waved slight chopping motions. "C'mon, bro. You've seen where normals' priorities are. People will go out of their way to dump on you just for the heck of it. You've met some at school already – to them you're 'bad' because they decided so. Ignore them." His tongue slid past the side of his mouth. "Or tell them to french-kiss the depths of your hairy anus."

Guy nodded. "Thanks for using appropriate terminology that time."

Is It Envy?

Deborah Swirsky-Sacchetti

Is it envy, this blood coursing through my heart,
this riled up voice of the unacknowledged?

Is it envy, this mind awash with revulsion,
tired of the stories of heroes,
biblical men caught up in their rivalries,
taking no note of the servitude of others,
of heroines who bore them offspring,
of mothers who shared husbands because their jealousy was of no matter.

Where is the light,
the miracle of oil burning unexpectedly in the darkness?

Rachel of the Well,
Did you know that miracle as mother to Joseph and Benjamin?

Leah,
Did you have energy to be jealous after giving birth to 6 sons?
And I wonder, did you see any light as mother to Dinah?

Zilpah and Bilhah, slaves and handmaidens,
yet mothers to Naphtali, Dan, Asher and Gad,
(sons who rose to head four tribes of Israel),
How shall we catalogue your envies?

Rachel, whose house knew the kindness you extended to your sister,
Heroine, Mother of Joseph, Jacob's favorite,
How did you feel to watch your boy,
so loved, so hated, so abused by his brothers' resentments?

Mighty Mothers,
Hide your idols.
Speak to us of stripes of different colors,
garments cut from sacred cloth.
Share with us your dreams,
Raise up the Goddess of the Hebrews,
the spirit of love, which, in its pureness
needs no more.





Three Reflections on my Mother

Sari N. Fogel

1. There Was a Time I Didn't Know Who My Mother Was

Today is my mother's Yahrzeit.

Born on August 31, 1918 on the Lower East Side of New York.

Ethel Arac was the youngest of seven. Her father Isaac was an umbrella maker with a beard, from Austria. He died of an appendectomy when my mother was 4 years old. Her mother, Rebecca, was Romanian and died of tuberculosis when my mother was 2.

My mother was raised by her older siblings, Sarah, Ben, and Kate. Brother Jacob died of the flu the year my mother was born. Extreme poverty and loss was the story of my mother's upbringing. But the story was also one of family loyalty and getting ahead. We now believe that the same flu that killed her brother also cursed my mother with early Parkinson's Disease. She was 41 years old. I was 7. But the woman who raised me in between poverty and Parkinson's also led another life.

She lived a life of laughter and moral strength that no one should ever forget.

She was just shy of 2 years old when women got the vote in the US.

She was known by her sisters as "the fun one."

She and her sisters Sarah, Kate, Helen, and Ruth, and brother, Ben, moved from the Lower East Side to the Bronx and then to the Upper East Side of Manhattan. All of the sisters earned their college and master's degrees at Hunter College. Ethel became an accountant and married her Belgian immigrant sweetheart, Freddy, before he went off to war.

My Mom had tremendous energy.

She raised 3 children and did the books for my father's business. She was a lifeguard at a summer camp and at the Harbor Isle Beach Club. At various points, she ran the PTA, the Sisterhood, the Harbor Isle Civic Association, the Oceanside High School scholarship fund, and the local blood drive.

We knew she would stand up for us in dicey situations.

She did and she told us that she would. Her sense of right and wrong was mature, nuanced, and unwavering when it came to defending and protecting us.

What made her so clear-eyed in these situations?

2. My Mother Collected Irons

My mother collected irons.

Heavy old ones

With bricks inside to heat in the fire.

We did not know why.
My mother did not iron.

Several times she tried to teach me this task,
With a modern electric one.
But I was not interested.

There were so many
Maybe 50 antique irons
Strewn around the house.
Aunt Rene, an interior designer, helped to create glass shelving
With brass brackets to hold them in one place.
Now we all ooh-ed and ah-ed.
Such a collection
On such elegant shelving.

When my parents were no longer
We had to decide where they would go.
Maybe a museum?

No one wanted them.

So my brothers and I divided them up.
We now each have a third of Mom's collection.
Obsolete irons are placed around our homes.
Reminding us of Mom.

Some days they become weights to glue my paintings to boards and to flatten out creases in crumpled paper.

3. Mom

Now I am bathed in your memory,
And it weighs me down.
So today,
I spiral the words into a different story.
I embellish
I edit
I rearrange.
Because to tell the tale of loss would frighten the children.

I recall for them instead
The sunshine's glint on the water
The white sand so soft
Too hot in summer for feet to linger.



You wrapped me in striped towels
To keep me warm.
Your hair jet black
Your humor sharp and irreverant
And a velvet black coat that
I buried my head in
on the long car rides back home.
Sweet perfume fading,
I dream of baked apples and kugels
with raisins tucked in deep
to keep them from burning.

Author's Note: These pieces are part of a memoir that I'm writing with my brothers on our family history.



Lech Lecha – Going Forward

Writing an Engaging Arc with Big Questions

“Abie, when will we have a child?
We’re both already old folks.
Everyone knows a woman old as I
could be due for the eighteenth time.”

— *Abraham and Sarah*, by Itzik Manger, 1901 - 1969



I Among You

Tzivvia Gover

"I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place,
that I may bury my dead out of my sight."

— Genesis 23:4

"I
am fallen
like a feather
from a wing,

I
am far from my
flock

I,
among you, homeborn
and flocked together

I
lonely as a reed, slipped
from the weave of the tent
that sheltered my queen

I
request this small plot
of land she called holy
for a sepulcher, so

I
can set Sarah
to rest; bury my fears and regrets,
return her to the ground

where one day
I
will join her."

*Author's Note: This poetic and restorative translation of Genesis 23:4, a verse from "The Life of Sarah," is an excerpt from a longer work, *The Life of H: Sarah, Reimagined*, in which I poetically restore the Divine Feminine to the traditional text by digging deep into the roots and meanings of the original Hebrew. You can learn more at <https://tziviagover.substack.com/>.*

Another's Eyes

Cathleen Cohen

For W and D

On the day before surgery,
she scans from the doorway,

hops out to the car, peers in
at her grandfather's face gazing out.

Touching her nose to the window,
she mirrors his gaze through glass.

One way to seek the divine
is through another's eyes.

She heaves open the heavy door,
launches into her seat

with a nod, but no words
needed. Last night he prepared,

rolled shirts, fold after fold,
grabbed a notebook and pens

to play hangman and dots on the train
and in admissions, later.

A worrier, I speed -- arriving
at the station too early,

then shrug and say,
Now you have time to buy candy.

Such chaos, this crowd, this rush.
I stare at my husband, a plea:

don't for a second lose sight
of this precious child.





Time in a Bottle

(with apologies to Jim Croce)

Darcy Grabenstein

The bottle looks out of place on the bar, surrounded by martini glasses, souvenir shot glasses, and kitschy items. Like the bar towel emblazoned with “It’s 5 o’clock somewhere.” Or the cocktail napkins announcing “Nice girls do.” Or the coaster claiming “It’s better in the Bahamas.”

This bottle wasn’t filled with an expensive aperitif or the cheapest moonshine. In fact, this bottle was empty.

My mother, a “housewife,” didn’t have many hobbies other than her weekly mah jongg game. I looked forward to the nights my mother hosted the “maj” game at our house. Despite the cloud of cigarette smoke that would hang over the den like Hiroshima, I eagerly awaited the noshes, managing to sneak a few before the click-clack of tiles took over our home.

One steamy summer in Pensacola, my mother launched a pet project. She took an empty bottle — it must’ve been Manischewitz — and went to work.

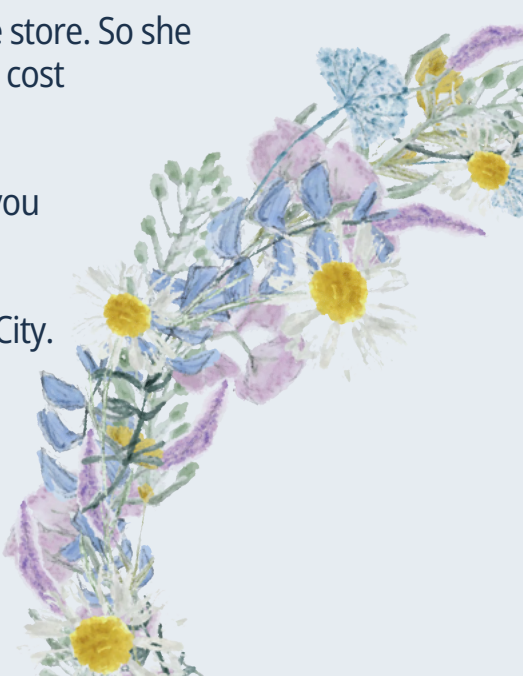
She set up a card table (the same table that hosted her “maj” game) smack in the middle of our den. Upon it was scattered an array of random objects.

My mother painstakingly applied each tiny treasure to the bottle with some sort of putty-like cement. I wonder if she got a little high from inhaling the fumes (in between inhaling puffs from her packs of Camel cigarettes). I think she just got high from designing her “masterpiece.” It was a collage. It was decoupage. It was hers.

She had spotted a similar piece, one with a hefty price tag, in an antique store. So she decided she’d create her own version, one that held more meaning and cost considerably less.

Fifty-some years later, the bottle sits in a place of honor in my home (if you can call a bar a place of honor). I chose the spot because the backsplash is mirrored, providing a panoramic 360-degree view. The bottle is next to a pair of oversized dice salt-and-pepper shakers, courtesy of Atlantic City.

And, fifty-some years later, there’s not one empty space on that bottle. Through numerous moves to numerous cities and states, not one piece has become dislodged. The only thing that’s become dislodged is my mother from this world, from my life, leaving an unfillable gap.



So what's on this conglomeration of collectibles? Well, there are my Brownie and Girl Scout pins. A coin from Korea, where my father served in the Army. Pieces of my grandfather's pocket watch. Pieces of my life. Of her life. Of our family's life. The top is crowned with a cluster of pearls (OK, they're fake pearls but the effect is not lost).

This bottle is like a genie's lamp, releasing long-lost memories.

One day, I'd like to hand down this bottle to one of my two sons. I only hope they'll see that it's more than just a mishmash of "stuff" — that it connects them to their past, to their own unique story.



Going Rogue

Marla Solomon



Bury the idea that journeys start when you're young.

Last year, at age 67, I went rogue. Came home one day and told my partner I'd rented an apartment nearly two hours' drive from the home we share together. I love journeys. They help me learn and grow. But I wasn't looking for this one. It came and caught me with a hook, sudden and deep.

This journey involved a lot of digging. What happened was stunning, overwhelming, agonizing, enlightening, delightful. It transformed me.

Or am I just sitting here now as if nothing at all happened? Today, I'm home again, a year later. My partner is still with me. I returned to the region where I have lived, studied, worked, and raised my children for many years. I'm now, inevitably, 68.

The difference between that year transforming my life and it being nothing is not made by what actually occurred in that time period. It's certainly not made by what I thought the journey would be about—living in a city again, venturing into new and long-lost communities, trodding beaches, sitting in the sun outside new cafés—nor even by the deeper turning the journey took: how I spent my days luxuriating in the solitude I craved, in creativity and spiritual study, expanding happily into a space really too big for one person. Although all of that, delightfully, happened.

It's not made by my first time immersing myself in the Days of Awe, plunging into a well of uncomfortable self-honesty in ways I had never quite experienced and climbing my way back up and out slowly, gradually, by the fingernails. Although that, disturbingly and revealingly, happened too.

It's not made by the struggle to explain to myself, to my partner, and to our blended family what in the world I was doing. Though that struggle was, annoyingly, there.

It is not even made by the joy I felt in learning how to be with myself, truly, including the beautiful queerness that had been surging in me for three years, after 64 years of living as a straight person but always knowing something was "different," and starting to come out, slowly, to those I love. Although that most jubilantly, turbulently, and uncontrollably happened.

Neither is it made by the crash that came when I got news of my sister's failing and rushed out to California to take care of her for a month. Shock and loss rattling bones, dredging up the past, foretelling future frailty, inescapable death. Though those things, sadly, happened too.

Bury the idea that journeys end. The difference will be made by what I do now with what I have unearthed, and how it shapes the next experiment. For isn't every year of our lives an experiment, every day a new journey? We just don't always realize it when we set off.

Dream

Robert Renard

For Gershon

"Ribono Shel Olam. **Master of the Universe**, Ani shelcha v'halomoti shelcha, **I am yours and my dreams are yours**. Halom halamti, I have dreamed a dream. V'ay-nehni yodea mah hu **and I don't know what it means...**"

— Berachot 55b [Talmud]

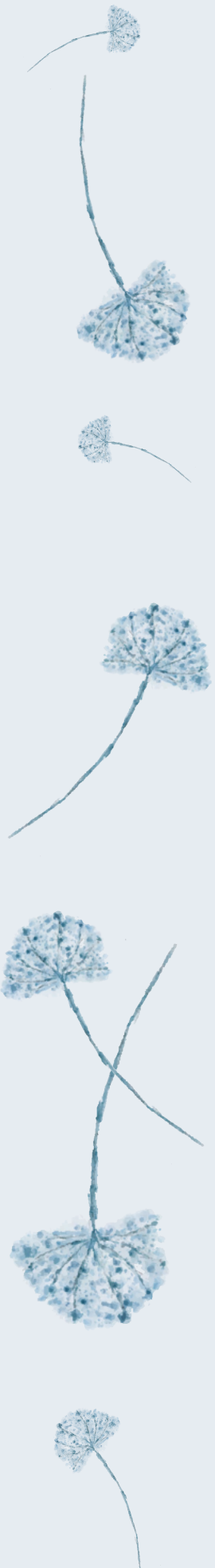
Last night's turmoil
started wide as a freeway
ideas fast and lanes well marked
then became a treacherous steep mountain trail
each step unsure dependent on the last
moving toward the next unknown

The *Zohar** teaches us
dreaming is like scripture
a glimpse of what is hidden
seeing it makes it conscious
a light discovered
made more real in the having
like entering a cave of possibility
to be explored

Awake, I wonder what the vision will become
finding it is no longer a dream
it has become something else
something that may drift away
soon forgotten
or stay with me guiding my lane changes
making my steps recognized and firm
it is the choosing that becomes my task.

**Zohar*: The chief text of the Jewish Kabbalah, presented as an allegorical or mystical interpretation of the Pentateuch.





It Was September Again

Cyd B. Weissman

After walking the boardwalk for more than an hour, we needed to sit to ease our aching joints, a hip for me, knees for him. We found our usual bench—the one with the dedication plaque across the back: “Remembering Bess and Herman’s favorite spot.”

“Names from another time,” my husband said, “Bess and Herman.”

“How about our names?” I laughed, tilting my head in the direction of two neon-clad runners plugged up with earbuds, oblivious to my snark and the crash of the surf.

“You see those joggers? I bet their names are Apple and Zellow. They’d say our names are from their history books.”

“Ha,” my husband said, “Books? You think they read books?”

He reached over to rest his hand in mine. It wasn’t hard to know he was feeling his own version of what was pumping through me, gratitude that we both read books printed on paper, both shop in grocery stores, and both write letters that require a stamp for delivery. Pleasure now: a full-bodied thankfulness for being able to look out on this green ocean kissing its eternal blue partner, the sky. No wonder this bench was Bess and Herman’s favorite spot. Not mine, though. I much preferred our living room’s stone fireplace for swapping end of day tidbits over a glass of cool rose, but this bench served its purpose.

For over a quarter of a century, right before the leaves ignited as if aflame, we’d come here to perform a ritual we had created to make sense of the day we had met. Mike and I’d drive from our home in New Hope, roam the boards, sit on this bench, and repeat to one another what we remembered from that day. We’d share an ice-cream sundae and a pack of M & M’s before heading home. Mike said it was healing. Maybe it was, but it was also painful. Still. And this time it would be the most torturous.

The continual motion of the clouds and waves was a reminder that our traveling together was going to end soon. Too soon. I’d tell him. It’s what you do. Like leaving his favorite, the pecans, on a shared ice-cream sundae; like listening with interest, again, about how he caught Von Hayes’ ball in his naked hand at that Phillies game; and like holding his head over the toilet while he throws up the halibut, he insisted smelled perfect. It’s what a wife does. Like telling Mike what I shouldn’t have seen but did.

I couldn’t help it. I was on his computer paying the electric bill. Up popped a red dot next to his MyChart Penn Medicine Portal. Results weren’t due for another seven to

ten days. My first thought: they changed his appointment. I clicked. I know, I shouldn't have. But I did. There it was. His biopsy came back bad. Dr. Google told me more than I needed: only a couple of excruciating months to live.

Overhead, the stout hooked beaked seagulls that never leave the shore, no matter the season, let out their piercing ha-ha-ha.

"Mike, Mike, I want to say, Mike...." He patted my hand with his usual comforting rhythm, tap, tap, rest, repeat.

"I'm thinking about that day," Mike said.

"Me too. But maybe this year, let's not talk about it. I don't want to argue."

"Oh, come on, we won't."

"Fine, but I don't even want to disagree."

Trying to make light of the inevitable, Mike started singing that old show tune duet like he was both Maurice Chevalier and Hermonie Gingold, "We met at nine/We met at eight/ I was on time/No, you were late. Ah, yes, I remember it well."

"We cheated death," I had said it before and was saying it again.

"We were in the right place at a bad time." He had said it before and was saying it again.

I remember it well.

Author's Note: This work is the opening section of a short story.





Radiant

Sharon Sorokin James

The wisteria that bloomed in my mother's courtyard had faded. The radiant heating system in the floors of her home failed. Mom retreated to her bedroom, a 1960's addition warmed by electric baseboards. Whenever I called to discuss repair options, relocation options, any options, she was sleeping, deep under the covers. I assumed her 84-year-old heart was weakening and would soon give out.

But it wasn't her heart.

Three decades earlier, a tiny tumor, tucked between her optic nerve and pituitary gland, had bloomed across her field of vision. It must have been terrifying.

Benign, the doctors said, but it will blind you and possibly kill you, unless removed.

A world-famous expert removed the tumor. He did not reveal that he went beyond the tumor, or what that meant.

Before the surgery, my mother, though not one to examine her own psyche, had the life she wanted. Unconventional for her era, a lawyer, equally career and family centric, cerebral, orderly. Friday nights, her parents and mother-in-law came to dinner. My father, who'd worked his way through law school as a cantor, sang kiddish. My mother recited the prayer over the candles in Hebrew, followed by her own humanist, ethical translation. Light is the symbol of knowledge, light is the symbol of peace, light is the symbol of human dignity. With these thoughts we kindle the Sabbath lights.

Who would she be after the surgery, if she awoke?

She was herself, but not exactly. It was difficult to pin down the difference. The floors were still heated, the wisteria still bloomed in summer, my father still sang kiddish, though with less vigor given his own health challenges, and my mother still blessed the Sabbath candles. The change was ineffable, barely a glimmer, an occasional odd light in her eyes that made me shiver.

Thirty-three years post-surgery, with my father long dead, my mother grew a new tumor. Bigger. Bolder. Totally different. Not bordering her brain. Directly planted within. Fertilized by the radiation that eradicated the roots of her original tumor. It grew, and grew, until as autumn set in, my mother began to wander, and to wonder what she was doing and where she was doing it, though never why.

She must have been very frightened.

And yet, there were moments of clarity, some enormously sad, as she realized, again, that her husband was dead; some joyous, as her last words, The sun is shining and you are all here.

A week after she died, my husband had a wondrous dream. Young again, my parents were in their convertible, Dad driving, Mom beside him, a colorful scarf wrapped around her hair. As they drove off into the sunset, she turned back, smiled and waved. Radiant.

Now, when we visit their graves, we mark our presence with small stones, balanced above the inscription Light is the symbol of knowledge.

Author's note: This piece is part of a memoir in essays and other forms tentatively titled FLY AWAY.



Esther's Monologue

Rachel Dawn Kaplan

What lies ahead?
The answer is only partially in my hands

All I can do is put myself out there
All I can do is be all of me

Hone my voice
Stand tall
Taller than I ever thought I could
Taller than I ever thought necessary
And speak from my heart
For all of theirs
For all of our hearts

All I can do is walk forward with pride in my heart
For who I am, for who we are
For where we have come from
With faith in the journey ahead

These lessons we've learned passed down from mouth to heart cannot be unlearned.
They must impart their impact on the next ones of us
The future is theirs.

It only lies ahead if I can do all I can do.

Author's Note: This monologue is an excerpt from "The Star of Planet Shushan: An Intergalactic Purim Story"

Path to Freedom

Laura Lieber

"Go for yourself or go to yourself..."

— Rashi, on Genesis 12:1

I have only faded, blurry memories of my childhood. However, some memories never fade. I see my four-year-old self standing in the corner of my bedroom. I am standing with my nose in the corner waiting three or four hours for my dad to arrive home from work. The hours I spent in that corner were a prelude to my punishment. So many hours passed, I cannot count them all. All that standing and waiting led me to dissociate. I was too young and too intimidated to resist. But my mind could not be bound or caged. Learning to dissociate at such a young age both saved me and scarred me. Sadly, it taught me that life was better when I was not present. I didn't invent fantasies or alternate realities. I simply gathered my thoughts and left the physical realm.

My favorite weekly outings were to the library and the Bookmobile. The shelves neatly stacked with hundreds of books called to me like old friends. Attempting to keep pace with my mother as we strode back to our station wagon, four or five books weighed heavy in my arms. I sat with them clutched to my chest, eager to dive into their tales. I retreated to my bedroom where I felt safe between their worn bindings.

My mother would often tell me I was her best friend. She mostly used these moments to lament to me about the lost opportunities in her life. How could a child understand the inner turmoil of an adult? I kept still and alert, knowing she could turn on me in an instant. And inevitably she did. Her anger would flare and she seemed to find sadistic pleasure in demeaning and humiliating me. She morphed into an insane and cruel tyrant. Once, she decided that I should move all of my furniture out of my bedroom since "I didn't deserve it." Crammed awkwardly into the hallway, I was able to move it back late that night when her tantrum subsided. Our house felt more like a prison.

At age twenty, weary of the cycle of abuse, I spent \$100 on a futon and moved out on a weekend when my parents were gone. My new home was a flea-infested apartment. The fleas were so embedded in the carpet that I went to work with my ankles covered in their itchy bites.

The drama carried on. By age 42, I had no more to give and so I disengaged. I was needed in my own home where I was trying to manage three growing boys. Day by day, I built a new life. I stumbled forward, taking on life lessons as they came to me. At 48, I looked into the mirror and saw the image before me. I met my wounded but beautiful self. I felt ignited, propelled forward. I focused diligently on living in the present.





Where It All Began

Marc Jacobs

Irene felt unloved as the middle child. Her mother, Rose, immigrated from Russia at the tender age of two. Her father left her mother when she was young. Rose never recovered her sense of safety or ability to love.

Milton lived the rough and tumble young man's life. Playing sports, dating girls both good and bad. He worked hard as was his parents' way. But he was only able to achieve a very basic degree of worldly success.

They met, two unhappy young people from unhappy homes. The sexual tension was real. Their siblings and friends were marrying and starting families. So they did the same.

Irene was told she was physically unable to have children. The two accepted the disappointment. Same as they accepted so many other failures in this difficult world in which they lived.

Then came the war. Milton went off to serve in the unpleasant and unremarkable Aleutian Islands of Alaska. Irene found work in a factory, monotonously hand twisting wire apertures, for an unknown defense use.

Peace followed. Milton returned home. They were reunited. Milton went to work in the family grocery store.

Then to their shock and surprise, Irene became pregnant. Overwhelmed by financial and emotional pressures, they moved in with Rose, the vitriolic head of the household.

Relatives and friends surrounded the couple with excitement regarding the promise of new life. Milton dutifully but dourly continued to work the long hours demanded by the business. Irene hid quietly in their home, knowing that she did not feel ready or prepared to be a parent.

Through this lens, Marc gestated in sadness and uncertainty.





Apocalypse Redux

Rosalind Kaplan

Sometime in 1971, around my 11th birthday, I stood outside Whitehorne Middle School in Verona, New Jersey, at lunchtime, waiting for the world to end. Jean Dixon, astrologer to the rich and famous, had made one of her several apocalyptic predictions, and my sixth-grade class had been talking about it all morning. I felt quite sure that the appointed time of destruction would come and go without incident. My parents had assured me that astrology was nonsense. I knew that my parents were right; they were highly educated people, both with Ph.D.'s, and they believed in scientific evidence. Yet they also believed in Judaism.

My father had been raised an Orthodox Jew. My mother's upbringing was less religious, but still Jewish, and so my brother and I were raised as Conservative Jews. We attended services on Sabbath and holidays, learned to read and speak Hebrew.

The memories of Jewish rites and holidays from my childhood are rich and warm. Lighting Shabbat candles, the yeasty, sweet smell of Challah, my father leading the Passover Seder, all of us trying to keep up as he sang each verse of Chad Gadya faster and faster, the way his father had done before him.

As a child and teen, I never questioned my Jewish cultural identity. But I did question my belief in God. The idea of someone, or something, that we prayed to and constantly blessed but couldn't see or hear, made little sense to me. If this God was so great, why did bad things happen, like the Jews being enslaved in Egypt and the Holocaust?

There was no proof of God anywhere, but my smart, logical, educated parents prayed to God anyway. I didn't bring this up with my father, who appeared to take his faith for granted. My mother's relationship to religion seemed less black-and-white, and at some point I asked her why God would let bad things happen. Her reply to this was, 'God helps he who helps himself.' Though somewhat obtuse, it was enough at the time. It made sense that we must do our part.

As an adult, I continued to participate in Jewish rituals, but after medical school, which gave me the logical, scientific views without any spiritual underpinnings, I stopped praying. But I thought about prayer, especially as collective tragedies have come up: school shootings, climate change, Covid, slaughter in the Middle East, antisemitic violence. Every time that nothing was done to prevent more trauma, but leaders offered 'thoughts and prayers.' I've wondered many times if the world was ending, if the Apocalypse had arrived. Maybe Jean Dixon was right in substance but had the timing wrong.

Still, science and logic tell me that we, human beings, create our own heaven and our own hell. We do it every day, with every action. We cause climate change. We create guns, and we shoot them. We, human beings, are destroying our world, regardless of how it was created, and we are the only ones who can save our world. The Apocalypse is not coming, but a benevolent God is also not coming to save us.

I still belong to a Jewish community and celebrate Jewish holidays. The traditions and connection bring a sense of safety and familiarity that I don't want to lose. But for me, it is action that has become a sort of prayer--volunteering in a free clinic for immigrants, donating to charity, recycling, protesting. I think my mother was right all along. If I believed in God, I'd tell you that God helps (s)he who helps him(er)self.



Better Than Therapy

Kate Shaffar

Ma, is that you?

It's about time. You kept me waiting long enough.

You're dead. I'm not sure you still have the right to complain.

I retain that right as your mother. It's a universal truth.

I miss you.

Yeah. You miss everyone.

You're all dead.

Katchkula, my duckling. Let us go.

I'm writing about you.

Enough already.

I write about birds too.

I hate pigeons.

And New Jersey drivers.

Exactly.

You're dead. You don't deserve an opinion.

Your room is still a mess and your pictures are hung too high on the wall.

My kids are lovely. Marriage is solid. Life is good. Thanks for noticing.

I missed all that. What about a career?

I can't please you.

Never could.

I wanted to.

If you wanted to, you would have. I wanted to be a pinup girl. I wanted your father to love me. Failed on both counts.

You worked on computers three blocks long in the before times. You were a pioneer, Mommy.

I was tall with buck teeth. Your father didn't like my hair. Speaking of which, you should really comb yours. It's a mess.

Mom, I just learned, here in my fifties, that I never should have tortured my frizzy curl with your fine-toothed comb. Did you know not all grooming ends in tears?

You couldn't have figured that out sooner? Shit, Kate, don't be sensitive.

Maybe you're insensitive?

Have you stopped waxing?

Shaving even.

Katchkula, did you summon me to keep blaming me for your inadequacy?

Yes and no. I miss you. You always cared. No one looks out for me like that anymore. They haven't for years.

Love surrounds you. It's well earned, not even complicated. When you were 100 pounds heavier, wanting you, love. From our mess, you made that.

It isn't always like that. I don't feel it sometimes.

Birth is always, death and disappointment are always. Love is a passing storm. I didn't feel it my whole life.

But you were surrounded.

Not enough.

Who, us or you?

Yes.



I liked to think you were actually happy. Anxiety and demanding became your shield and sword, but I didn't know weariness, life, love, disappointment, menopause sculpt someone into a different artifact. I'm sorry.

Maybe my essence was aggrieved.

It wasn't. I saw you smile at the end, when Alzheimer's stripped your artifice. I watched a light come on in your face. I don't want to wait for oblivion to smile.

You might not be as lucky. You could die in a car accident.

It's nice to have you in my head. How else would I know right from wrong? You were right about the kids. They helped me when you were gone...

Ma? Ma, say something. Ma, now that I finally found you again! Don't go.
I want to tell you. I forgive you. You were a wonderful mother no matter what I say.

You weren't half bad yourself, Katchkula. Keep going. You might be getting somewhere.

Author's Note: This is an excerpt from my current memoir in progress.



Number 2 or 3

Michael Sklaroff

I'm in Brooklyn on a Saturday night, sometime in the 1970s, and I left a party in order to head back home to Manhattan. I'm looking to catch the number 2 or number 3 train, but when I get to the station, those trains aren't stopping at this station, and I have to get on the train heading to New Lots Avenue, somewhere in the depths of Brooklyn.

I get on board and surprise - no surprise, really, as I figured this would be the case - I'm the only white person in the car. Everyone is Black, including the conductor, whose car I had purposely taken.

The people are a mixture of men and women, of different ages,, and my sense is that they're pretty much returning home from their jobs. Some, I'm sure, were also out for the evening. A night on the town.

I recall a sense of menace that existed in the city back then, when you never knew what you were going to encounter on the street and more especially on the subway.

What am I thinking? Was I scared? I think it more accurate to say I was extremely alert. Hyper-aware. I grew up in an all-white suburban area of Long Island, but I'd also had intense experiences in multi-ethnic Manhattan when I was the assistant manager of a movie theater on W. 42nd Street in 1974.

I'm thinking, "What are they thinking about me?" A big presumption, I know, because many if not most probably weren't thinking about me at all. But it was unusual to be in that position, for me certainly, and I wouldn't be surprised if that were the case for most white people in the city and for sure most white people from the vast area of white America.

I was probably hoping for protection not from HaShem, but from the conductor. He wouldn't let anything happen to me. Of course not. But what's the source of my fear? Fear of Black people as a group? I'm thinking, now, no. But I remember several young men in the car, and while they weren't rowdy or acting out, there they were.

My jaw was set, held tight, my face expressionless. I didn't look at the conductor, wasn't interested in making eye contact. I just wanted to be in that car with him there.

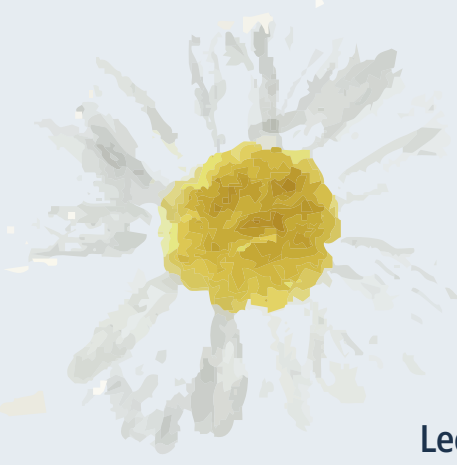
And I'm thinking now that there's a Jewish connection. Possibly. I maybe had some awareness or some belief that New Lots Avenue was out in East New York or



Brownsville (was it? Help me here you native New Yorkers), somewhere that had been a Jewish neighborhood in the 20s and 30s and 40s, before it started to flip - or was flipped - and became all Black.

What happened? Nothing. I'm here. I obviously survived. All that thinking and fear was in my head.





Lech Lecha

A. Krauss

Born into Twilight Sleep; modern science's marvel
No pain, no memory;
the inheritance of slumber and a drive to awaken

Lech Lecha—go forth, go to yourself and take refuge in the unknown

She is on a journey and the dream is asking for something she's yet to understand. No words, just a vague sense of potentiality. She's being asked to feel something, to bear witness to a skinless being which, at first, she resists. Later she reconsiders; Perhaps it's okay to remain skinless for a while, she reflects (and) bear witness to a body exposed.

Dreams arrive in clusters
A kind of resurrection light
Everything and nothing; try to grasp and it disappears

"How does one summon the divine?" she wonders while building a shrine. Found objects, candles, a photograph of the Venus of Willendorf bear witness to her invocations and distress. Weary of pain and suffering she asks (although part of her knows) why she becomes ill after each extended family visit.

Singing, chanting, she'd been praying in earnest for weeks now, conjuring her great grandmother... How did YOU do it Sarah? Life, that is. Leaving your homeland to begin again, raising all those children alone after leaving everything behind?

Two generations later tradition discarded, life unmoored and groundless, she found herself unhinged around her tribe.

The altar offered a place to rest, to pray, to plea.
Desperation led her here and a kind of faith
"How does one pray?", she called out to no one in particular

Focus on the body, the belly, the womb.

"How does this suffering serve me?" she then asked, aware enough to surmise her own culpability. Then suddenly.... the voice.... so loud it startled
"You don't have to be sick to be safe anymore." So clear she understood immediately its truth.

Her body shaking, heart pounding.

If this was what she wanted, had waited for, then why so alarmed?
Later she imagined Moses on Mt Sinai primed to receive instruction
Had he too heard the same thunderous voice? Experienced the same ecstatic urgency?

Truth as revelation
Fragments assembled to resemble a whole
What mysterious source carries us along this river of unfolding
What divine presence accompanies us while we dream, walks alongside us in our waking lives

Put down your burdens, your grief
Rest, sit a while and relinquish the struggle
Remember to breathe slowly and fully, grateful for the small moments, the birdsong and the wind
Allow love to soften and enter your hardened heart



Torateinu

Aaron DeBroeck

1. *B'midbar* (Numbers)

We walk toward the mountains, my beloved, b'midbar.
Our feet are worn by the sand, our heads scorched by the Sun.
I miss Egypt and you miss the Sea.
Our manna is running on empty,
But we put our faith on stories of blossoming almond flowers, sweet and bitter.

We will walk and wander
And hold each others' hands like we mean it.
Brazen serpents will heal the stings we pick up along the way,
And at night we will lay our heads on rocks for pillows,
And the next day wonder who was in this place.

And in the end, we will arrive
You, on Mt. Horeb,
Me, on Mt. Nebo,
Shouting blessings and curses at each other.

2. *B'reishit* (Genesis)

Begin again,
Begin again,
When all is wet and dark again.
Was it light or darkness You made?
Did You form the light or the dark?

It's day five and I'm doubting
It's day six and I regret

Then it's Shabbat, and I try to rest,
I try to choke down the doubt and regret and fear and shame
With mouthfuls of *lechem min ha-aretz*
And wash it down with the sticky sweet juice of *pri ha-gafen*.

This palace in time is an eternity,
And the walls are closing in on me.
When I finally see three stars in the sky,
I long to throw myself into the Havdalah flames,
Pass my ashes around like *b'samim*,
Inhale the sweet scent of what I could have been

Please, let me begin again.



3. *Shemot* (Exodus)

And God hardened my heart against you,
I drag my heels into the sand
as you take me by the hand and lead me forward.

I light a bush on fire to hear Your Voice,
I need to talk to You, why are things like this?
But the bush just burns to ash.

How many plagues before you go?
I'm running out of ways to say it without saying it.

The sea begins to split
And the breath catches in my throat.
Why harden just my heart? Why fill his with love?
Don't make me leave Egypt.

Let the water close around me instead,
Let me breathe the water in
Rather than having to step onto the other side
And look him in the eyes
And say it

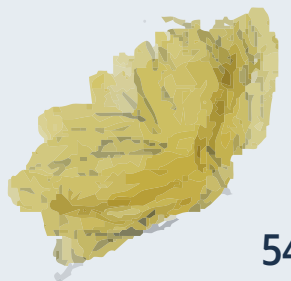
4. *Vayikra* (Leviticus)

I forget who wrote these laws,
And my mother and father forget.

Sometimes I am lifted up in holiness and trembling,
The ecstasy of exaltation,
Your Light fills me in gasping, burning breaths,
Your Radiance washes away my form.

Other times I don't know
Why I have all this blood and fat on my hands,
I forget who to stone or kill or slay.

Yet other times,
I will put Your Name as a sign on my forehead,
I will go to the altar of the night,
I will look into the flame
And sacrifice my most precious,
Tearing it asunder, opening it, unwinding it,
Undoing it.



As the smoke rises, may it be pleasing to Your Face;
May the umim thunder and the thumim whisper an answer,
May the light of the fire reflect and reverberate in all my twelve gems
Until I remember my Name.

5. *D'varim* (Deuteronomy)

I raise my arms like a bird in flight, ascend to the heavens!
We dance around each other in intertwining circles;
I learned my dance in Egypt,
And you learned yours in Canaan.
They work so well together, until they don't.

I want to spin faster and harder, until I am a pillar of fire
Leading you in the right directions of my choosing.
The crowd claps and claps, louder and louder,
Urging us on.
Let's tear the Temple down,
It's only cloth, after all.

You to my right, you to my left,
I long to move forwards and backwards,
But all I see is you, you, you.
The rising din of the crowd pushes me higher and higher,
I wheel into the stars,
Among the *ophanim*.

I spin past Saturn, who put this heaviness in my heart,
Then finally I unwind in a burning spiral back to Earth,
Praying to return to a different scene.

But it's the same crowd and the same you and the same me,
And all the emotions, the joys and disappointments spin away,
And all I'm left with are these *d'varim*.

B'midbar | in the wilderness

Lechem min ha-artez | bread from the earth

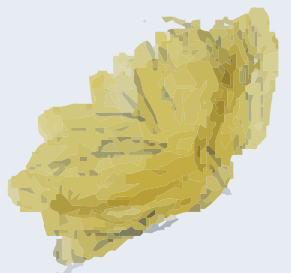
Pri ha-gafen | fruit of the vine

B'samim | spices, specifically those smelled during the Havdalah ritual

Uvim and *thumim* | mysterious divinatory devices connected to the High Priest; named in the Torah but not explained

Ophanim | "wheels", a type of angelic creature described in Ezekiel as having wheel-like form

D'varim | words, or things; this word can mean both and thus is inherently ambiguous



Reflections on Lech Lecha

Gail Gensler



"You don't strike me as scared at all," said my new friend Renee last week....

Personal growth workshop, 1992

"Jill Gordon, what are you afraid of?" boomed the disembodied voice from the loudspeaker. What? How did they know who I was? And how did they know my Achilles heel was fear? And did they have to call it out so bluntly and publicly? And make me answer in front of everybody?

High Holidays, 2003

"I invite anyone who would like, to come sit up on the bima, and to do so at any time during any service, however many of you would like, for as long as you like," offered the rabbi. Really? That sounded SO cool. I wanted to do it so badly, to experience the service from a different perspective. Yikes, though, I'd be SEEN by all my fellow congregants. Scary. Or...I could escape to the camping tent set up in the back of the sanctuary, always available as a personal *mishkan*. Hiding. Safe. Alone. I went up on the *bima*.

Vacation in Mexico, winter 2026

The outside beach café band was excellent, the crowd was dancing, and my feet started pulling me in. I hesitated... I knew nobody. I was, once again, a single woman among couples. I didn't drink. And I don't go for nightlife. I started to walk by... but I just... couldn't. I dropped my purse on a chair, walked out into the dance floor crowd, and let go.

60's Singalong up north, spring 2026

All of us old people sitting on bleachers, politely listening to the band, reading the song lyrics projected on the wall, singing. And the beat pulled at my feet, again. A guy jumped down to the stage level below and started dancing. "OK," I thought, "I can do this," and followed suit. But he was in his own world, so I danced, alone, in front of a hundred people.

Bodywork session late spring 2026

"I think dancing would help you release some of the tight areas I worked on today. You game?" asked the bodyworker. So, we danced, and I let it all out. "Wow, you are and amazing dancer!" he said.

PrideFest yesterday

"What the? Where is everyone?" I asked myself as I walked into the advertised room for the dance. A DJ was spinning disks (real records, with excellent music), but nobody was dancing, and there were only a few people in the room. "Darn, I want to dance. I came up here especially for this." So, I did, crazy and free. "Wow, you're an amazing dancer," said the young woman staffing the event table. "You should dance more. We have to find you more opportunities!"

To be fiercely and joyously continued....

A Legacy Letter to My Family

Mendel (Michael) Grossman

I'm a writer, not because I set out to be one, wanted a title, or because I thought the world needed another book. I'm a writer because stories are how I make sense of my life and the lives that shaped me. If you're holding this book, it means something important: you are part of the story that shaped the person I became. I didn't write this to impress the world or to chase success. I wrote it because every family carries a history spoken and unspoken and I wanted ours to be documented. Not the secrets, but the meaning behind them. I come from a family that keeps secrets, not just of the pain, but of the journey. Life's not just about the wounds, but of the ways we learned to heal. Healing is a gift; it makes us who we are, it may be the meaning of life, at least I think so.

When I left home at eighteen, I wasn't running away from something as much as I was running toward someone, the person I eventually became. I didn't know then that the path would twist, repeat, challenge, and teach me in ways I couldn't imagine. But every step, every lesson, every person who crossed my path helped me grow into the version of myself I hoped existed somewhere down the line even though I didn't really know who or what that person was.

This book is part memoir, part roadmap, an offering of a story of how cycles can be broken, patterns can be understood, and how the past doesn't have to dictate the future. It's also a reminder that the universe has a way of sending us the same lesson until we're ready to learn it, and that learning is never a sign of weakness, but of courage. I wrote this book not as a burden, but as a gift. It's part of my 3-part Ethical Will, to tell future generations what I valued, what motivated me, the stories that are important to carry forward, and what I hope you all will carry forward in my honor as well as to honor our past: *dor va dor*, from generation to generation. So, I'm leaving three books: the historical narrative of the Szklarkiewicz family, a book of my 100 best stories, and this novel that captures the essence of a most influential part of my life where the values of who I am were set.

I never understood why my parents were the way they were, why they kept so many secrets and didn't tell the stories I really wanted to hear. I just wanted to understand where we come from and why. I say WE because it's a way to understand me and maybe, in some small way, a way to understand yourself.

Read this book with curiosity, but don't try to figure out what's real and what's fiction, it doesn't matter, because the stories are all the same, they're about themes, archetypes, and they're the same over-and-over again, generation after generation, *dor va dor* as we say in Hebrew. The themes remained the same; why I left home, became a nurse, craved learning, cared about helping others, and why I'm so proud of my family and hope that legacy will continue into future generations I won't even know. If you see yourself in some of the characters, read with compassion, and if you take anything from it, let it be this: we are not defined by what we inherit, we are defined by what we choose to become. Thank you for being part of my life, my growth, and my story.





HaShomeret/The Guardian

Shoshana Stombaugh

Chesed v'emet nifgashu. Tzedek v'shalom nashaku.
When Love and Truth meet then Justice and Peace will kiss.

— Psalm 85:11

Growing up in my comfortable, safe, and loving Reform Jewish home, we did not do a lot of “death talk.” Some of our truths about death included our complete disassociation with, (even our possible disdain?) for the common mantra of the Christian majority that “in death” the loved one “goes to a better place.” The unstated message that sat with me was that the survivors are the leftover-left-behind-living who are assured and reassured that when they finally die, they will “see their loved ones again, be one with Christ” and in that moment Life will certainly be fulfilled.

In our home the only true Certainty about Death was that if I came home from school and my mother was making a matzo meal cake and it wasn't the week of Passover... someone, ANYONE, had died. It was also Truth that the grieving family, Jewish or not, would welcome my mom's cake... because it was the lightest-sweet-but-not-too-sweet, only confection-that could actually be stomached at such a difficult time. Walking into the well-lit, efficiently laid-out kitchen, seeing her gently spooning the airy batter into the scrubbed angel food cake pan- scrubbed and dried so that God forbid- big breath- the lighter-than-air batter would not slip out of the pan due to an invisible drop of grease or grime upon turning said pan upside down to cool, I would ask, “Who died?”

That was Certainty. That was Truth. No issue of unanswered questions of faith in a matzo meal cake lightly sprinkled with powdered sugar, served with ample sliced strawberries.

Now, sitting at my husband's deathbed, I know the better question is not, “Is there life after death?” but rather, “What do I expect from Life? What did he expect from Life?”

I hear, as I often have during our Long Goodbye, what the first of many social workers had said to me. “What is your biggest fear?” she had asked gently, making sure I breathed through my flowing tears. I paused.

“I'm afraid of the day he will not know me...when he won't remember me... when he won't remember our life together. Our love.” She held my hands softly and looked deeply into my eyes. “Love will always remember,” she said.

And today, as I stare Death down, eye to eye, here at the end, I know that this is my Certainty.

Love is Truth and we will not forget. I will be our *Shomeret*. I will be the Guardian.

Two Jewish Students and the March to the Charles River: a Love Story

Hank Kimmel

Synopsis

Brought together at a political rally, Steve and Randi discover a common cause that goes beyond the event.

Characters

STEVE – male, 18

RANDI – female, 19

Setting

The quad of a mid-sized college in Boston.

At rise

Randi and Steve stand toward the back of a sizable and loud rally. They consider saying something to each other but don't. Finally....

STEVE

Did you know...?

RANDI

I didn't know.

STEVE

That this was going to be so...

RANDI

Loud?

STEVE

....Aggressive.

RANDI

The chants?

STEVE

Specific.

Beat.

RANDI

Do we know each other?



STEVE
Poli Sci.

RANDI
Front row?

STEVE
Yeah.

RANDI
I sit in the back.

STEVE
Yeah, I kinda recognize you.

RANDI
Are you...?

STEVE
Feeling my way through things. You?

RANDI
I'm a great believer in lifting people up. All people. Including me...and you.

STEVE
I'm Steve.

RANDI
Hey, Steve.

STEVE
You're....

RANDI
Randi....with an "i".

STEVE
Hello, Randi with an "i".

RANDI
Thank you for talking with me.

STEVE
You seemed....



RANDI
Approachable?

STEVE
I don't recognize a lot of people, but I'm a freshman who keeps mostly to himself.

RANDI
I'm into community building, but I'm still looking for a community to build.

STEVE
Is that why you're here?

RANDI
Partly for extra credit.

STEVE
Yeah, if we weren't getting extra credit for this, I'd probably be picking up trash along the Charles River.

RANDI
I didn't realize so many people would be here.

STEVE
Yeah, I thought....

RANDI
What did you think?

STEVE
That this was going to be more like a parade.

RANDI
A parade for peace?

STEVE
That's how it was billed by the Professor. Wasn't it?

RANDI
Did you see him toward the front?

STEVE
Yes, he was quite....

RANDI
Animated?



STEVE

I was going to say hello to him, but it's such a big class, and I ask so many annoying questions that I thought it'd be better for me to stay in the back.

RANDI

Did you see the sign he was carrying?

STEVE

Do you think it means what I think it means?

RANDI

I'd like to say I hope not, but I'm not as hopeful as I think I am.

STEVE

Are you...?

RANDI

....Am I?

STEVE

You know.

RANDI

I consider myself more of an observer. I mean, not observant, but someone who tries to listen and learn.

STEVE

I'm the same way. I mean, I process things with an open mind.

RANDI

So...?

STEVE

Yeah. Culturally.

RANDI

I thought so.

STEVE

You?

RANDI

By birth.





RECONSTRUCTING JUDAISM

Deeply rooted. Boldly relevant.

Artwork and Design

by Robin Fradkin Matthews