

The INVISIBLE Poet

A Selection from the I-Opening Poems of Sorah Rosenblatt

The first *yahrtzeit* of the poet Sorah Rosenblatt, *a"b*, on 8 Nisan, finds those who were shocked by her unexpected death still trying, until now, to take in the counterintuitive reality of her absence.

Many of her readers never knew her name. They knew her as the author Rivka Glick, or Ruth Lewis, or read her stories in various magazines and anthologies under a variety of other pennames—stories which are now proving exceedingly hard to trace.

As a breed, writers are generally not known for our modest self-erasure and retreat from fame; we want to be heard, we want to be read, and we do what we can to get the audience's attention without appearing too much like the glory-seeking creatures we in fact are. (I can already hear my fellow scribes protesting that if there's something about myself to say along these lines, I shouldn't assume the same on their behalf, and I agree.)

But Sorah Rosenblatt was, in truth, qualitatively different from the majority on this score. She didn't object at all to having her work published. On the contrary. But she genuinely shrank from public recognition, as if seeking honor from our fellow man were really the poisonous drug that *Chazal* describe. She cast so faint a shadow in public that most people didn't know she was there.

Focused on earning the real thing, the eternity of Torah and *mitzvos*, rather than society's elusive imitation liqueur, she used pennames to protect

her from ego's deceptive rule. Getting credit was a prize she didn't mind sacrificing for the sake of her inner kingdom; her imaginary aliases could lay claim to that worldly pleasure while she, at home with her family, typing at her computer or with pen in hand, practiced the art of invisibility.

To hear her voice, so alive on the page—plain-spoken and frank, curious, surprising and insightful and funny—is to mistakenly imagine that maybe she's still "down here," along with the rest of us, "where there are no answers," on the grand and thrilling quest for *emes*. How could it be that she who serves as a spokeswoman for the wonder and mystery of living in this world, making our individual journeys through the maze, has herself moved on "up there, where there are no questions," with all the other graduates.

Finding something to say about Sorah Rosenblatt that's not superfluous, something that she herself wouldn't have objected to (her friends and colleagues say they can't recall Sorah ever talking *about* people in their absence) was probably an intrinsically misbegotten goal in any case. As an introduction to the tiny selection that follows from the huge body of work she left behind, the only thing that would ring less false than true would be to emulate her modest silence, and let her poems speak for themselves.

So now, if you wish, you can turn the page.

Sarah Shapiro, Jerusalem

THANKS FOR THIS DAY

Thanks for this day, in which nothing out-of-the-ordinary happened at all: Shloimy couldn't find his sandal. Aidey couldn't find her math book. My baby kissed me. I made hotdogs and French fries for lunch.

The kids did homework, played a game of cutting and pasting—filled the floor with scraps. Some neighbors' kids were helping. They sang a silly song. Feigy made egg salad sandwiches and they went to the park. Meanwhile, I got some ironing done.

A breeze blew in, birds sang, the sky was blue, the clouds were white. And oh, I know that nothing I could ever do or say or write would ever, ever be enough to thank You for one second's sweeten of this ordinary day.

COTTON CANDY

Cotton candy.

Its pale pink dream cloud whispers, "Life is soft and easy... sweet and pretty... fun!"

But try to sink your teeth into the stuff.

It melts red, lifeblood trickling sticky

down the stick.

You're left with a mouthful of nothing — nothing really there but air

HAIKU

Every moment is
a turning point—a turning
towards or away

CONDITIONS

Don't tell me about
"the full half of the glass,"
"the fragrant rose among the thorns,"
"the dawn that always follows the darkest night,"
"the silver lining around the clouds, so bright."

Don't bother pointing out "the sweet May flowers"
that bloom and blossom "only after April showers."

It won't wash.

I want a glass all full with good. Half-full need not apply.

I want it all good, through and through, Sorry, Charlie, only the best will do.

Fortunately, because it is all good, that's what I have.

So do you.

THE INTROVERT

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ENCOUNTERS

They wait for me, each morning, lined in their proper sequence, faces shining, mint-new, fresh-created. They wait for me: all the moments that I'm to encounter through the day. All the people—most of all, the people, the impressions, the lessons I'm to learn, the tests for me to pass or fail—or anyhow, to deal with, or somehow, to get through. Each moment talks to me, though some are made to be ignored; that's their correction and my own. Let me give each its due focus. Let me be present for them all, responding as needed, then to move on. I used to turn from them, from all the moments. I used to hide from them under my eiderdown, there in the dark. Often, I still do, barely peeking out, wincing at the light. But now I try to meet them, greet them, even if they're fearsome, even if they hurt. With Your help, I'm getting better at meeting moments, moment by moment, day by day.

IN MEMORY OF SORAH ROSENBLATT A”H

a.k.a. Ruth Lewis, a.k.a Rivka Glick

SEE

See the house. It has four floors.
It has four cellphones. See Mother. See Father.
See the boy. See the girl. See Spot. See the 42 very expensive tropical fish.
Hear several thousand words spoken in this house each day.
Are they spoken by Mother? No.
Are they spoken by Father? No.
By the boy or girl? No, no.
By Spot
or the 42 very expensive tropical fish?
Well, hardly. They are spoken by the four cellphones.
See?

DEPRIVED

When they play Jewish
Geography, it's got nothing to do with me.
“Oh, you're from Detroit? You must know my Tante Perel!”
“You're from Netanya? I knew your Zeide Berel!”
“I know who you are! I know your mother!”
Her second cousin married my uncle's brother!”
“Your sister taught me in Sem!”
Such a great game for them!
Poor them!
They have *frum* parents, relatives,
Teachers, friends tried and true,
while I have no one
but You!

EARTHQUAKE

I was quite pleased,
am still quietly pleased,
with my reaction, during our minor earthquake.
Sitting at the computer, in my bedroom,
I felt my comfy, cushioned office chair shift under me.
I thought: Oh! I think this is an earthquake—
either that or some neurological disturbance within me.
Then I saw my desk, my computer moving, too, dancing a little jig.
I heard my daughter's exclamations from our kitchen.
I thought: It's not just me, then. It is an earthquake.
Is there something special that we should do?
Hide under the dining table? Leave the building?
Which is best? If we survive, we must remember to find out.
Another shift or two, then seeming stability. Maybe a twenty-second quake, in all.
No screams, no loud thumps; nothing fell. Is that it? Is it all over? Will there be aftershocks?
I went into the kitchen.
Husband, daughter, were pushing our ancient fridge back into place.
(It makes strange noises in the night, but never shifted ground before.)
“It was an earthquake!” my husband explained.
I was unfazed.
Maybe there wasn't time enough for fear.
Or maybe, we live without assumptions in this Land.
We don't assume (expect, need, or even desire?) stability.

So it seems that I do rather well with earthquakes.
(It's only cooking, cleaning,
and relationships that shake me up.)

WEIRD MOTHER

When my first son was born
I thought,
When's his mother coming
to take care of him?

When my first daughter's
first was born
and they left my house after
a week's rest,
I thought, Hey! Where's she going with
my baby?!

MATCHMAKER, MATCHMAKER

Imperfection meets imperfection,
producing yet more imperfection.
If you see that as depressing, you'll be sad.
If you think it's all right, you'll be okay.
If you think it's wonderful, miraculous,
You'll dance for joy

SNAPSHOT

Her four-year-old stands still, as
she throws the cape
of faded sky-blue,
about his shoulders.
It's very wrinkled, she is thinking.
But if I iron it, and add a big gold bow...

Meanwhile, his eyes are shining, wide;
his face shining with joy.
“I'm Mordechai haTzaddik!”
he proclaims.
“I'm Mordechai haTzaddik!”

THE WRITER SUSAN RUTH GLASER

(aka Ruth Lewis, Rivkah Glick, and Ruth Glick) was born December 16, 1945 in Washington DC.

Her mother, Rose Lewis, was a teacher in the public schools, and her father, Fred, worked for a division of the CIA. Her father suffered a major heart attack in 1967, retired, and died in 1977. Her mother died in 2012. Both parents are buried in DC, as are her grandparents and great-grandparents.

In 1957 she was *bas mitzvahed* at Agudath Achim in DC, and graduated from high school in DC in 1963, where she had been active in the marching band and started to become an accomplished pianist. She enrolled in George Washington University in DC, transferring after her first year to the University of Maryland. There she became active in Hillel, and began her journey towards Orthodox Judaism.

She graduated from University in 1967, made immediate *aliyah* to Jerusalem, and was married soon thereafter to Joseph Benjamin Rosenblatt, a Yiddish-speaking, non-English-speaking *talmid* at the Breslaver Yeshiva in Bnai Brak. This was a surprise and source of bafflement to her parents, to whom Sorah nonetheless remained very close throughout their lives.

Sorah became proficient in both Hebrew and Yiddish.

Her children are Nachman, born in 1969, Freida, born 1978, Basha Bayla, born 1981, Udel, born 1982, Chava, born 1985, and Shmuel Yehuda, born 1988.

In 1992, she joined my first women's writing workshop in Jerusalem, held at the Orthodox Union Israel Center. From the very first day she began producing poetry in a totally original writing voice, a natural profusion of unforgettable words and ideas and images that needed neither encouragement nor admiration from others to keep flowering and flowering through the years. The poems virtually never failed to light up our minds, startling and regaling with their humor and insight into her own—and thus our own—human nature.

Her husband, children, brother and other relatives, however, were kept almost entirely in the dark in regard to her life and work as a writer and poet. Most of them were well-aware that there was an early book of her poetry, *Memo to Myself*, published by Targum Press in the mid-1990s, but the book was in English, not their language, and Sorah apparently didn't particularly try to bring the book to anyone's attention or urge her relatives to take it seriously. Some people breathe; Sorah Rosenblatt wrote. It was only upon the shockingly unexpected loss of her last year, in 2017, that her family first began hearing of the place she occupied in the minds and lives of so many of her fellow Orthodox readers and writers.

To borrow the title of another posthumously published volume—a book of essays by Rav Aryeh Kaplan, *zt"l*, aptly entitled *The Gift He Left Behind*—may Sorah Rosenblatt's words continue enlightening us, in a new life of their own.

Sarah Shapiro.

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 LIVING IN UNITY

IN MEMORY OF SORAH ROSENBLATT A"H

a.k.a. Ruth Lewis, a.k.a. Rivka Glick

THE REASON

Here's why

I find it hard to ask my husband for anything—especially money:

I don't want to be a nag, a shrew, yelling like a fishmonger's wife,
as so many women do.

Am I not supposed to be a helpmeet, an *eizer k'negdo*, an auxiliary

I want to be, as Rav Dessler says, one of the Givers of the world—not one of the
Takers.

And I feel sorry for him—I really do.

He looks so tense, so worried, all the while.

I just want to see my husband smile.

One hears so much about “dependency.”

Am I, then, a little girl, a doll in a Doll's House,
floundering helplessly? Or am I a woman, capably pulling my own weight?

Am I a [wo]man or a mouse? Isn't it only fair that I should do my share?

The kids are nagging at him, all day long, nonstop:

“Buy me a bike ... a lollipop ...”

Shouldn't I, at least, show some maturity? (Even if I don't feel older than about age
three?)

I myself prize freedom. hate pressure; love fun. So I don't want him to feel caged,
to feel that by marrying me — he's traded freedom
for a life of dreary duty and responsibility.

Besides, I don't want to rock the boat, after over three decades —

to change the (unwritten and unspoken) “rules of the game” (what Israelis call *ha-status*
quuo)

Shalom bayis is so fragile, so delicate, you know. (But maybe he's always been so nice
because so have I? What if I got demanding, suddenly?)

Would he become unrecognizable?)

Asking for anything is so “uncool,”

so un-laidback, so married, middle-aged, boring, conventional —all the things I swore,
in my teens, I'd never be.

As I was thinking this over,

a friend phoned to say she was desperate for help
to clean the house. “But it costs so much!

How can I even ask him?”

“What's the matter?” I lashed back.

“Don't you think you're worth it?

And that's

how I saw

the truth.

I don't think I'm worth it.

HER EYES

When I first met

My *Yerushalmi* mother-in-law-to-be,
I was startled by her eyes.

They are of the palest of pale blues,

Pure as pure,

Pure as Heaven.

“*Himmelblau*,” we say, in Yiddish.

Which means, “heavenly blue,”

Or maybe, just “sky blue.”

“Come now,” I told myself,

“You're reading things in.

Stop romanticizing.

It's just a certain shade of blue

That has that effect on you,

Nothing more than that.”

So how come I never met

Anyone in America with that shade
Of blue?

MOTHERS

“Did you rest?” he asks, expectantly.

(Here's what I answer me): True, it was
quieter with them out of the house.

But mothers never really rest.

From the second you're a mother, you're
changed forever.

Sounds you never noticed—a sudden
screch,

a cry, a call—“Mommy!” a thump

now make you jump. (Silence is the
scariest of all.)

Still, only another Mom

could understand in any way.

So: “Yes! Thank you so much!

It was just wonderful!” I say.

MOMMY, AM I PRETTY?

“Mommy, am I pretty?”

Pretty? One silken eyelash,
tinged with gold,
soft lying on your rose-flushed cheek
in slumber
is no more lovely than
the world's first sunrise—
no more beautiful than that,
child of my heart...

“Mommy, you're not answering!
Am I pretty?”

“Mmm... ‘Handsome is as handsome
does.’”

“But...am I pretty?”

“Pretty? Why you're just
the prettiest, most precious little princess
in the whole wide world!”
“Oh, Mommy...don't be silly!”
(So much for an honest answer.)

NONE OF THE ABOVE

“Mommy?”
Out of the dark,
a tiny, tinny voice squeaks up.

“Yes? What is it, Aryeh Leib?
Did your quilt fall off the bed?
Do you want another drink?
Should I turn the night light on?
Are you too warm?
Too cold?
Or...?”
“Hug me!” squeaks the tiny, tinny voice.

I pick him up; I hug him tight.
I say, “It's time to say good night!
You are the very best little boy
in the whole, wide...”
But he's already slipped beneath his quilt
into sweet dreams.

ON THE COMPARATIVE EFFICACY

Of various fly-entrapment
methodologies, they say,
“You can catch more flies with honey
than with vinegar.”

Meaning: More's accomplished
with praise, encouragement,
than with sharp critique.

I say:
It's not just better—
it's the only way.

HAIKU

How can we walk
That narrow bridge
Between contrition
And depression?

UPSHEREN

A poem must be pruned,
Like a tree.
Carefully.
Some lovely, graceful phrases,
Twists of thought,
Sawn away,
(Not without pain),
To leave the main thought free,
Uncluttered, unobscured.
As a verdant sapling,
Chopped down to bare sticks,
In the spring will cast its leafy shade,
Once more.
Or as a little boy
Whose shining, golden curls are shorn,
And fall away,
The shearing brings a pang
To his mother's heart.
But sapling grows to tree,
Boy to man.
Pruning lets a poem be
All it can.


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IN MEMORY OF SORAH ROSENBLATT A"H

a.k.a. Ruth Lewis, a.k.a Rivka Glick

THE DIFFERENCE

I'm sorry if I come across as chauvinistic, and very possibly there are some exceptions to the rule, but still it seems to me that the difference between mothers and fathers is that if a mother is reading a book in the living room, and she imagines that she might have heard a teensy-weensy cough from her baby who is sleeping peacefully in his pretty yellow nursery down the hall—why, down the hall that mother will dash in a flash, arriving in virtually no time at all! Just on the off-chance that an invading swarm of bumblebees has been hiding there, stealthily concealed behind a sweet, ruffly yellow curtain—which may not be very likely, but isn't it just as well to make absolutely certain? Or that a masked burglar has not somehow unobtrusively sawn through the iron bars of the nursery window (on the seventh floor). Or that a panther, escaped from the zoo of a nearby city, does not even now lie crouched behind the nursery door. Or that Baby hasn't suddenly taken it into his head to swallow his Giant Panda pink-and-blue teddy bear. Or any number of things that could be going on in there.

Whereas a father probably wouldn't even hear that teensy-weensy cough (unless maybe it was part of a nonstop twenty-minute coughing spell).

But, with blithe oblivion, would continue calmly perusing his Sports Illustrated or watching the Sunday football match on his color television. Because, no matter how sincerely he may subscribe to such noble-sounding concepts as Equal Rights for Women and all that, deep down inside, he really feels it's not his job to take care of their "little darling" (or their "little brat").

And while one or both of them may believe that this isn't how things should be ideally, well, it's still the way things are.

So why pretend our lives, society, or natures are otherwise, or that we're existing on some other plane, some other planet, some other, distant star?

As to whether this difference is genetic, instinctive, or culturally conditioned, I must confess

that—fascinating as that ongoing debate may be—I really cannot hazard a guess.

In any case, my point is clear: No one's as well-equipped to care for kids as Mom is, so that her place still remains in the home.

Still, only actual parenthood can ever persuade anyone of that—not some silly pome.

FOUR WEEKS MARRIED

Four weeks married, and I don't know her anymore!
Where's my funny-faced baby,
with the turned-up nose?
Where's the awkward schoolgirl,
chattering of teachers, friends, and tests?
Who is this young woman,
elegant, assured,
no longer seeing me?

Birth pangs again.
Again, that she may be.
Again the pain,
the joy.

HAIKU

What's the most important mitzvah?
Someone said:
The one you're doing now

THE FROGS

The frogs in Egypt jumped even into the ovens,
so eager were those frogs to do His Will.
Moses had to shout to make them stop.
The wild animals also did His Will,
but not with so much eagerness, self-sacrifice.

I thought of why:

If you're a lion—mighty, maned,
a tiger — muscled, powerful,
you know you're really something.
But what are frogs ever, in their lifetimes?
Slimy, warty, lowly, squat, hideous,
croaky-voiced.

The only power granted them's to jump.
And so they jumped and jumped to do
His Will —

the one and only chance they had
of doing, being, anything.
And if you ask me how I know...
I know.

THE SANDWICH

“Mommy?”
“Yes, Mindy? Why do you look so sad?”
“Shloimy said that I’m a sandwich.”
“A what?”
“A sandwich. I’m not the oldest son not the oldest daughter not the youngest son not the youngest daughter. I’m just in between—a sandwich!”

“Mindy, have you seen a drawing of the *heilige* Menorah, in the *Beis Hamikdash*? Did you see the middle flame? It rises straight up. The other flames bow towards it. Mindy, you’re the middle flame of our Menorah!”

Her face lit up. She smiled. She shone.

IMAGINE

Imagine *banim* without *tzaar gidul banim*, without the diaper changing, bottle warming, sleepless nights, without the colic, teething, coughs and colds.

That’s what grandchildren are made of.

IRONING

Ironing my daughter’s new white, frilly blouse.
She runs in, hand outstretched. “Look, Mommy! It’s Aryeh Leiby’s red balloon!
It got all limp and wrinkled!”
“Yes, dear.” (I know the feeling).
“So iron it!”
“Wh...what? Oh no! Balloons aren’t made for ironing, dear! They get all gooey.”
“I want to see it get all gooey!”
She throws it in the moving iron’s path.
I snatch away the white blouse, just in time.
“No, dear! The goo sticks to the iron, and it’s hard to clean!”
She shrugs and dashes off again.

Progress. She used to think I iron clothes to make them nice and warm. How very much there is to teach her, though!
Would that all lessons were so trivial! Would that all lessons were so easily conveyed!



How Can I Want What I Already Have?

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IN MEMORY OF SORAH ROSENBLATT A"H

a.k.a. Ruth Lewis, a.k.a. Rivka Glick

THE FOREST, FOR THE TREES

"Your children shall be like olive saplings,
'round about your table..."

(*Tebillim* 128:2)

Friday night.

Our oldest "sapling" argues

loud as he is able

with Sapling Two, across the Shabbos
table.

Sapling Three is fooling with her hair.

Sapling Four keeps tipping back her
chair.

Darling little Sapling Five

is being too obnoxious to describe.

Sapling Six (again) needs his laces tied.

As the youngest tender sap-
ling climbs upon his mother's lap,
and she rocks him on her knees,
she thinks, One day, they'll be tall trees—

proud and fruitful, strong and able,
with many saplings 'round their table.

At times with all those sapling-trees

crowding 'round about her knees,

she loses

sight of what will be.

But at other times, she sees:

Majestic forests destined to spring forth
from these...

and these...

and these...

BATYA

I cannot help this child.

Unreachable, he's not within my power
to save.

But shall I then become deaf to his cries
or turn my woman's heart to stone?

Perhaps, somehow on some vast cosmic
plane,

my reaching out will help to save
someone, somewhere.

And so I'll reach... I'll reach... I'll
reach...

MY FAVORITE PHOTO

My favorite photo of our daughter's
wedding?

She must have gone to every studio in
town,

seeking the best photographer.

Four albums she has, to show for it—
white-bound, inscribed in gold.

Full-color photographs, from *badeken* to
mitzvah tantz.

And my favorite?

Well, actually—none of those.

They're all lovely, but my mind's so full of
photos that no other camera caught:

Reflection of candles flickering in my
husband's eyes,

while leading in the *chasan*; our younger
children dashing

importantly about; the *chasan's* mother,
gazing on her son...

Yes, but my favorite?

Well, just for a moment,

after the *badeken*,

before rising from

her white, her flower-covered chair

to be led to her *chupab*—

just for a moment,

my daughter's *deck-tichel*

slipped a bit.

I glimpsed her face,

tear-stained, her tight-shut eyes,

lips murmuring in earnest prayer.

Then snap—I caught that photograph!

I captured it!

It's locked now, here, forever

in the album of my heart!

HAIKU

The worst punishment

That there could be,

Is Your removal, far from me.

LOOK

"Look! She's started crawling!" her
mother says,

placing our first grandchild on the floor,
putting a shiny toy just out of reach.

Sure enough, eyes focused on the toy,
she rises on one dimpled knee, inches
forward carefully.

Around her, a circle of giants—

grandparents, uncles, aunts, —

ooh and aah. We startle her.

Toy forgotten, she sits back, shifts her
gaze

to this strange ring of relatives.

"Oh, dear!" her mother says,

apologetically.

"At home, she crawls so beautifully!"

Never mind. May she always care, and be
more aware

of people than of toys.

REMEMBERING

Cutting cakes for my first grandson's bris,

I remember the birth of his father—my
own firstborn—

by C-section. My in-laws, visiting the
hospital, were so upset.

"Cutting is for cakes!" my husband's
father said.

"You should cut cakes at *simchahs!*" his
mother said.

The guests are starting to arrive. "*Mazal
Tov! Mazal Tov!*"

I finish placing the cake trays on the
tables,

still remembering.

PHOME CALL

My daughter phoned. Something about
a check
But I heard (whether or not she knew),
“Oh, Mommy, I’m so scared.
This baby’s so long overdue!”

I answered something back, by which I
meant to say,
“I know, sweetheart. *Daven* and trust
Hashem.
You’ll be okay.”

We finished talking. We said good-bye.
I took up my *Tebillim*
and began to cry.

BREATHLESS

Shmei, drei
Whirl, twirl
and she was sixty-two
Most of her life already gone
(in but a breath)
The mere watching of it,
living of it,
had left her breathless
Yet — would you believe? —
some said that she should try
actually to do
something, too!

SLIPPING AWAY

Mommy is slipping away
For ninety-six, she’s, thank G-d, fine
But how fine can that be?

My husband falls asleep at the table,
like his late father used to do all those
years ago.
Where is that smooth-cheeked boy I
married?

I, too
move carefully
these days
or I get dizzy

A dear friend once described a dangerous
birth:

“The doctors told me I had one foot in
the Next World
and the other on a banana peel”
Alas, that dear friend, too, is gone

From birth, we teeter-totter, each, on that
banana peel
Ever slipping away
and towards

ON THE PATH

On the sun-spattered path
Before me,
One large, dry yellow leaf
Drifts down.

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IN MEMORY OF SORAH ROSENBLATT A"H

a.k.a. Ruth Lewis, a.k.a Rivka Glick

DISCONNECTED

We're luckier than most
She's who she always was, just
doing everything more slowly
Talking more slowly, too
with long
disjointed
pauses
that she doesn't seem to notice
You wonder if she's fallen
asleep
Repeating things already repeated
many times, in a pattern so predictable,
going off
on tangents and
tangents of tangents ...
rambling down
Memory Lane
"So my mother's father ...he was a
storeowner ...
But meanwhile, my mother sat there ...
at the union meetings! ...
'How can you go against me?' ...
he asked her. She said ... 'But Poppa ...
they have popcorn! ...'
She must have been ...let's see ...about
eight ...

"So that was that story, but ...I want to
see ...if I can join ...
the history museum ...Have to see ...
how much it costs ...
Her sister was named ... Milka ...Of
course you know ...
that my sister ... your Aunt Millie ...is
named after her ...
Born on Halloween ...but I know you
don't hold from that ...
and you have Purim there in Israel ..."

And so on for
an hour or more
Disjointed
Disconnected

The phone here rings at four a.m. "Oh,
I'm glad ... I caught you ...
before you left ... for work ..."

PASSING

Here in Yerushalayim, death is blared out
from loudspeakers,
plastered on buildings, everywhere..
From a bus window,
I glimpse in passing, a death notice
slapped
just now upon the wall, yet-wet and
wrinkled, creased as a newborn.
Someone, it seems, is dead, fresh dead,
slabbed, shrouded,
covered in prayer shawl of yellowed
white, worn, tattered.
Soon to be hurriedly escorted from the
scene.
Somewhere, fresh earth lies moist,
mounded
beside a hole fresh dug, ground gouged,
scarred, wounded,
screaming open-mouthed, waiting to
receive.
Somewhere there are wails, sobbing fresh
pain.
Black letters, glossy bold as a newborn's
eyes.
Paper shining white. I can almost smell
the ink,
almost see the printer — a rush job.
I picture the poster-plasterer leaping
from his motorbike,
unfurling the notice with quick shakes,
whacking his broad brush,
paste wet dripping, leaping back aboard,
motor revving, roaring, zooming off to
the next scene,
even as, in passing, people gather to read
what's new.
Next week, the notice will be old, paste
hardened, dried.
Paper waxen yellow, tattered, peeling,
torn. letters faded.
Plastered over, by new notices of sales,
events.
Unread, unseen in passing. Old news.
Hole filled, covered, earth dried,
pain dulled as sobs subside.
But now, the wet paste oozes. Someone,
it seems, is dead.

NOW, FLOWERS

Now, flowers,
they don't ask any questions.
They don't ask, as seeds,
Why am I locked from light,
destined, doomed to darkness?
Why do I rot here, mired deep in mud?
Why am I so small, so nothing, so alone?
Why must I keep pushing ever upwards?
Why are there so many worms and bugs?

Breaking through the soil,
into light, into warm sunshine and fresh
air,
they don't ask,
Why am I yet so lowly?
Is this the reason for my struggle, for my
pain?
Is this all there is?

Budding, blooming, as their leaves
unfold,
They don't ask,
Why must this take so long?
Tiny petal by tiny petal, tiny leaf by leaf?

In full bloom, they don't ask,
Why are other flowers taller, stronger,
more fragrant, more richly, brightly
hued?

When bees buzz round, flowers do not
ask,
Who are you to drain me of my
sweetness?
Where are you taking everything that's
mine?

When winter comes, they don't ask,
Why must my lovely colors fade?
Why must my pretty petals fall away?
Why must I wilt and droop?
Why was my time so fleeting?
Why must all things, and I, too, die?

No, flowers—
they don't ask questions.
They just grow.

ALL RIGHT

She caught me as I fell
as my face crumpled
my life crumbled
as my knees buckled
as I folded, bent, bowed, doubled over
jack-knifed by shock, by grief
She caught me precisely in that moment.
“I know...” she said. “I know...”
And “It’s all right...” she said.
“All right... It’s all right...”
It’s all right to cry, to crumple, crumble,
Alright to fold, to fall...And all that
happened,
that happens, or will happen...
It’s all right...
All right...
Her voice, her hands, her heart were
there to catch me.
And even through the haze, daze, maze
of pain, confusion, tears,
I had a thought to cling to:
It’s her, but it’s You.

AT THE DOCTOR’S

“He was so polite!” our friend tells us, her
face enflamed.
“He was ... such a ‘gentleman’:

‘No, Madam. The children go this way.
And you go there.’
‘But I want to go with them!’ my mother
begged.
‘No, Madam. You go over there.
They will be taken care of.’
So polite!”

We nod, sharing her horror. But we can’t
share her grief, her rage —
In that moment, years before her birth,
she lost twin sisters.
In that moment, really,
she lost her mother, too.

THE PHOTO

A photograph she showed me—my
aunt-by-marriage—
taking it from a bureau drawer of
polished mahogany
holding it so carefully
A photograph, black and white
A family at their Seder table before the
holiday
before they sent her off to distant
relatives
in distant lands
A family at a Seder table,
stout matrons smiling, men unsmiling
girls with thick braids, boys with round
cheeks ...

You would think, wouldn’t you, that
between the two —
I mean, between that solid, stolid, that
so-sturdy family in the photograph,
and between the photograph itself —
you would think, wouldn’t you,
that it would have been the photo that
was less likely to survive?
You would think that, wouldn’t you?
Wouldn’t you? I’m asking you
(I mean, what’s a photograph? A scrap
of paper?
One match would turn it into ashes.)

For half a century and more,
my aunt has kept that photo
in her bureau drawer —
that scrap of paper
that isn’t ashes.

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