

What the Salt Meant

“That night when the angels came to Lot, [his wife was] going to all her neighbors and saying to them, give me salt, because we have guests...Therefore ‘she became a pillar of salt.’ ”--Bereishit Rabbah.51:5

Her sin, after all, was not
that her rheumy eyes travelled back,
swollen with hope that her daughters’
singed shadows might rise from the blaze
of collapsing skyline. It was that Lot’s wife
warned her neighbors. She would become

the woman who watched the whip burn
across another’s back, then spread
the word one dark night to slip
inside the barn, hide breathless
beneath the hay while the slave catchers
followed a false scent. The woman

who witnessed yellow stars
sewn on neighbors’ jackets,
and went to borrow a cup of sugar,
perhaps a bit of salt, whispering
what she had heard in town about
the coming cattle cars. The woman

who typed government reports
no one imagined
she understood, then waited
near the factory gate at closing time,
la migra viene, don’t go
to work tomorrow. It wasn’t

what she chose to face
that raised the angels’ outrage,
fearing the flames would heat
her mind and melt
her heart. What the salt meant
to silence was her voice.

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Synagogue 1962

Sanctuary of green linoleum floors, clang of gray metal folding chairs stacked away after every service. Drab brick building, no stained glass to softly scatter light, only a purple velvet Torah cover, heavy silver pointer. A rabbi chants ancient prayers I can't translate but power I understand. No voices touch the present, but numbers burned into arms of men in yarmulkes, women in shawls, sear unspoken. In public school the teacher casually commands, *All the Jewish children and all the Negro children raise your hands*, and we do, the four of us and one of him, at least once a week the whole year. Never question the pretense for her attention, no resentment registers, wrapped so tightly in expectations gathered from otherness, not in velvet like the Torah but in a kind of scratchy burlap that nonetheless keeps me from speaking of it for decades, through Friday nights and Yom Kippurs and Succahs in the muddy grass, long after I busily collected brightly colored Bible story stickers in a little book that looked like a passport.

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Sunrise Sonnet for My Son

My son unloads the dishwasher first thing
each morning. I think of him, four hundred
miles away, as I stand on tiptoe to shelve
last night's wine glasses, stack my mother's
dessert plates, open the drawer beneath
the oven just deep enough for all the pots
and pans. He says for him, too, it's a kind
of meditation, this routine he and his wife
have shaped into the contours of a shared
life, fluted and spacious as the overflowing
fruit bowl. This is what he possesses, not
Lenox or Waterford, which neither of us owns,
this man I raised, who hums as he sorts
the silverware, noticing how each spoon shines.

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You Can't Put the Red Sea in a Poem

a famous poet warned. If you let it in, your poem is crammed
with two million Israelites clutching babies in arms,
with satchels of clothes and unleavened bread,
and you've invited in the enormous weight of a God
who punishes evil by slaying slave owners' children,
so here come the Egyptians as God splits open
that unmentionable sea just in time
for the migrants to cross and closes it right up
on the pursuers, and your poem is choking on all those
drowning men, flailing horses and wrecked chariots,
and next thing you know you have races and nations and power
and poverty all spilled in the red ink of misery
and your poem is overwhelmed—
it's baffled that He (because it's always he) never sat them all down
and explained this wasn't what He had in mind
those intense seven days he created a world so magnificent
poets can't stop trying to describe it, which is what happened
to me when it snowed at the beach at high tide, not just a dusting
but a full-on onslaught of snow we hadn't seen in these parts in years,
downing telephone wires and snapping tree branches and power out.
When the snow finally stopped and the tide receded,
it left a wide strip of sand along the shore, snow mounds piled
like crystal dunes on one side and the ocean's perpetual roar
on the other, and in between the tiny miracle of a parting
I passed through, kicking scattered seashells like nothing strange
and beautiful had happened, nothing that needs to mention the Red Sea.

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