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High Holy Days

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High Holy Days · *Jane Shore*

It was hot. A size too large,
my wool winter suit scratched.
Indian summer flaring up through fall.
The shul's broken window
bled sunlight on the congregation; the Red Sea
of the center aisle parting the women from the men.
Mother next to daughter, father next to son,
flipped through prayerbooks in unison
trying to keep the place. Across the aisle,
my father wore a borrowed prayershawl.
A black yarmulke covered his baldspot.

The rabbi unlocked the ark
and slid the curtain open. Propped inside,
two scrolls of the Torah dressed like matching dolls,
each a king and a queen. Ribbons hung down
from their alabaster satin jackets,
each one wore two silver crowns.
I wondered, could the ancient kings
have been so small? So small,
and still have vanquished our enemies?
Didn't little David knock out a giant
with a rock?

The cantor's voice rose like smoke
over a sacrificial altar,
and lambs, we rose to echo the refrain.
Each time we sat down,
my mother rearranged her skirt.
Each time we stood up,
my head hurt from the heat, dizzy
from tripping over the alphabet's
black spikes and lyres, battalions
of stick figures marching to defend
the Second Temple of Jerusalem.

Rocking on their heels,
boats anchored in the harbor of devotion,
the elders davenned Kaddish,
mourning the dead, that, one by one,
they'd follow.

The man who owns the laundry down the street
still covers his right arm out of habit.
Like the indelible inkmarks
on my father's shirt collar,
five thousand years of washing
can't wash the numbers off our neighbor's arm.

Once I saw that whole arm disappear
into a tubful of soapy shirts,
rainbowed, buoyant as the pastel clouds
in *The Illustrated Children's Bible*,
where God's enormous hand reached down
and stopped a heathen army in its tracks.
But on the white-hot desert of the page
I was holding, it was noon,
the marching letters swam,
the spiked regiments wavered in the heat,
a red rain falling on their ranks.
I watched it fall one drop at a time.
I felt faint. I breathed out sharply—
my nose spattering blood across the page.

I watched it fall, and thought,
you are a Chosen One,
the child to lead your tribe.
I looked around the swaying room.
That the Messiah was overdue
was what they'd taught us in Hebrew School,
but who, here, would believe
this child sitting in their shul
could lead anyone, let alone herself,
to safety, to fresh air? Trying hard not to call
attention to myself, I tilted my head back
as my mother stanch'd the blood.

Why would God choose me to lead
this congregation of mostly strangers—
defend them against the broken windows,
the spray-painted writing on the walls?

As if God held me in His fist,
we stepped out into the dazed traffic
of another business day—
past shoppers, past school
in session as usual—
spat like Jonah from the whale
back into the Jew-hating world.