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Waiting

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Waiting · Shirley Kaufman

After the fervor
of fists on the breast and fasting,
after the last plea slips through the heavenly gates
as they close and we've run out of things
to atone for, I want to start over.
The way my grandmother purified her heart
in the woman's section.
But the rains are late, we're not forgiven,
and autumn won't come.
A few gentle showers in the north,
not in Jerusalem. No loosening.
No green rinsing of the trees.

We can't do anything
but wait. Fear sticks to our minds
like the black lice of newsprint.

The dead are so light, they don't wait,
don't have to consider what might happen.
The wind simply lifts them over.
Michael was edging off all summer,
week by week he grew lighter
until he left hardly anything behind.
A man grows small in the distance
as he unwillingly walks away, walks backwards
so we can see the little twist
of his smile. His face already taut as a mask
from which his breath trickled out.

Last week clouds came, a dark insensible mass
above the hills, but nothing fell. We wait
in front of an empty screen
when the movie is over and the next one hasn't begun.
Too dull or dazed to get out of our seats.
Someone is sweeping the refuse
in the aisles. Someone is torching
a car in the next block. Someone
is shooting into a gang of boys.
Someone is slashing open a woman with a knife.

Students at the vocational high school are printing
a book of poems. In celebration, they tell me.
Will you give us a poem?

We walked to his grave on the mountain
in a dry wind, our backs to the sun,
crossing an endless grid, hundreds
of empty plots evenly bordered with cement,
mingy homes for the homeless
waiting to be assigned.
"He will make peace . . . for us . . ."
When they finished the *Kaddish*
the men took turns and shoveled the soil back.

Autumn won't come, but the days are shorter
leaving us suddenly.
The heat never closes its eyes.
Staying up with the moths
and the souls of the lost ones
we're not really stranded. We just have to
lie here in the dark, soothed after love,
getting used to how it is.

There are black rubber masks in our closet.
When you tighten the buckles
and smooth the rubber snugly over your face
and attach the filter according to the printed instructions,
you can breathe fresh air
for about six hours. That's what they tell us.

Celebration. A poem. One of the birds
that woke me up today sang three notes
over and over. We stood on the balcony
watching them fly from the roof
and the eaves next door
in and out of the pines with their flawless wings.
It has to be one of the common birds,
you said, a bulbul or green finch.
It can't be a jay. They mostly screech.
Maybe a blackbird. Quick, on the branch.
Flicking its yellow beak,
it took off. One sunbird
dangled below us giving off sparks.
There were high-pitched calls
and a steady twitter. Most likely
it was a crested lark, you said,
but I can't tell you how any of them sing.

November, 1990
Jerusalem