

ABSTRACT

TITLE OF THESIS: DE FIDELIS

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DE FIDELIS is a collection of poems that examines domestic life and the ways that domestic life comes undone by the challenges of contemporary culture. The content of the poems is drawn from a wide range of personal experiences—a kind of travel in which the customs and ideology of “home” are explored and challenged, the home where domesticity is embedded with fidelity and the specter of infidelity, death, and the world that remains when the dead continue to engage with the living. What unites the poems are the close observations of relevant objects and memory.

DE FIDELIS

by Julie Ruth Enszer

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Advisory Committee:
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For Kim, with love and thanks

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I.

IRIDESCENT BLUE SATIN BOWER BIRD

1.

First he builds a bower
on the forest floor
gathering and grouping
parallel walls of twigs
he adorns the environs
of the amorous arbor
with everything blue
blue the color of his eyes
picked and placed
he decorates blue
seduces with his lure

2.

You have done it too
you have gathered
small beautiful things—
a piece of cut sandstone
a large round brown marble
a pear, hand-hewn,
from Australian hard wood—
you have gathered them
placed them beside your bed
leading to your pillow
admit it—
you have built your own bower

3.

Down the path outside
the fence beneath heavy
wet eucalyptus trees
follow the Australian woman
talking about cleaning
the land in winter burning
the bush there it is
plastic doodads enshrine
the ovoid breeding boudoir
a blue key chain a blue ink Bic
bits and bits of broken plastic

4.

Imagine the Iridescent Blue
Satin Bower Bird before
the planet was polluted
with blue plastic:
building a bower with
blue flowers blue feathers
blue pebbles berries and shells
searching then swooping
for bits of blue
either way—plastic or
organic—I am enamored
by bird by bower by blue.

DURIO ZIBETHINUS

You smell it first. It is unlike anything you have ever smelled. Your hosts tell you: this is an acquired taste— if you were in Europe, it would be bleu cheese. You are not in Europe. You are in Kuala Lumpur pronounced LUMP-er. It is your first time in Asia. It is your first time in a Muslim country. You've always known the importance of a Palestinian homeland but you understand, for the first time, the urgency of Palestine. You talk to a bookseller; you try to get a copy of Nadia Anjuman's book, *Gule Dudi*, which means Dark Flower. The bookseller wants to read your palm. He wants to read the indentations in your skull. He holds your hands and your head and asks you, *Are you married? Are you married? Are you married?* He suggests he could be a good husband for you. He confirms from the lines on the soft side of your hand that one person is destined for you. He questions more and more, *Are you married?* You finally tell him that you actually do have a husband but she is your wife, a woman, you are a lesbian. He goes slightly crazy. He tells you, *Your body is a temple*, which you already know. He says, *It takes 4.5 million years to get a human form*, which you did not know and you are not sure you believe. He says, *Why do you waste yourself, your human form, your body, your temple on this gay mess*. For the first time, here in Malaysia, you realize Muslims are angry. About Palestine. The West. The war. You despair. You know you are not going to get your book. Your hosts give you a white piece of fruit. It smells strong and pungent like sweaty socks that have sat too long. It feels like phlegm on your fingers. You eat it. It warms your throat. It is not like anything you have ever eaten. You bite, then suck its flesh off the pit with your lips. It is the king of all fruits. It is Durian. You are a Jew.

ABSOLUTELY NO CAR REPAIRS IN THE PARKING LOT

Three people are working on old, American cars.
One man with a white van—his mobile mechanic's shop—
has pulled the engine out of a black Monte Carlo.
Another crawls from under a Sunbird
rusted and battered tail pipe in hand.
The third, an Escort, hood open, unattended.
Owners ostensibly inside the auto supply
searching for the proper replacement part.

Although I don't need one, I've brought a man.
Newly minted. Nine months ago, breasts removed—
scars from the surgical drains healed quickly
now the only skin rupture from needles
delivering daily hormones, he refers to as T,
and the resulting faux-adolescent acne pimpling his face.
He's more of a man than me. Still, it takes us two tries
with a return in between to find wiper blades that fit.

MY MOTHER'S VANITY

Visiting, I need to wash my hands.
She replaced the vanity with this *au courant*
oak cabinet just as Ronald Reagan became
President. There is only a small space

for water to drizzle into the faux marble sink—
the bathroom is packed; pots and palettes,
powders, compacts, and applicators
stored ramshackle in plastic containers.

I want a trash bag to empty it all:
counter, small shelf, back of the toilet,
the entire medicine chest. I want to throw
it all away. Give my mother a clean

slate, but I wash my hands. Rub soap
from a pile of four half used bars
then dry on threadbare hand towels
and walk downstairs. There are no new

beginnings, no fresh starts for mother.
Only a lifetime collection of make-up—
mauve, purple, burgundy, silver.
The many reasons my face is bare.

MY FATHER'S PORNOGRAPHY

One hot July day when I was thirteen
my best friend and I snatched the mail
from the carrier as he inserted it
through the slot in the front door.
No penpal letters, no catalogues,
no real correspondence but carte blanche
from my father to open his junk mail,
so I tore into a thick, black, plastic package
and found glossy paper with small
squares of color popping up from the dark
background. Inside, pictures. Things
I'd never imagined. Men with penises
in their mouths, men showing their asses,
men with what I would later learn to call
long, hard cocks and hairy balls.
For the first time, I saw outside the triangle
of my house, my friend, and the local 7-11
into a world where people didn't marry
collegiate sweethearts, return to hometowns,
and teach at their alma mater, a new world
where people watched something
besides television, lived as adults
without children, ate at restaurants
with waiters, bought gourmet groceries,
traveled to places without shopping malls,
and wore watches that didn't say Timex.
There, desire was telegraphed in public
with tattoos, silver, and Levis, and sex
happened outside cotton-poly sheets;
it was the world I wanted to enter and
holding those pictures I knew
I would not stay in Saginaw
for the same reasons, twenty-five
years later, my father could not escape,
then, my horrified mother yanked the photos
from my fascinated hands, cursing me
and my very best friend and my father
and we never spoke of this again.

MEETING THE DICTATOR

“I don’t believe they have any rights at all.”

Robert Mugabe, Prime Minister of Zimbabwe

Well, we must have some rights because here I am standing next to you, shaking your hand. Somewhere I earned the right to have this brief, uncomfortable conversation. The wife of the former Malaysian prime minister has hastened away after her introduction of you and me. Even she, your hostess, didn’t want to talk further. We are uncomfortable.

What do you, an eighty-year-old African, and I, a thirty-five-year-old American, have in common? Little. But our brief conversation is prolonged because I am the only person in the room talking to you. Let me amend: I am the only person willing to talk to you. All of these peace people are angry about your presence at this conference.

You: evil African dictator. Them: benevolent, peace-loving, white westerners. Which I am too, but I’m also curious.

I’m the oldest child—I always fancied being a dictator to which one sister will still vociferously attest. Is it fun?

Do you like controlling an entire country? Do people bow in your presence? Does everyone defer to your opinion?

Do you never defend your ideas? When you speak, do actions happen? Do you never have to convince or cajole? That’s what I would want out of being a dictator.

Complete compliance. Still, it seems like there are problems with the paradigm. Like today. You leave your country and are alone at a cocktail party standing next to a white, western lesbian. Yes, it’s just you and me, Robert Mugabe.

If I had known I was going to meet you, or any dictator, really, I might have chosen something different to wear.

I’m wearing an old, well-worn, worsted-wool Jones

New York suit. Does it matter to you that I bought my clothes from an outlet? Does it matter that they are not new?

I’m wearing a silk shirt my wife chose just for this trip.

Silk will make you look wealthy and important, she told me.

I am neither. She didn’t anticipate I’d meet a dictator. I didn’t anticipate how lonely you would be. Even with fourteen attendants.

All fawn every moment by your side. Still I look into your eyes, and I know you are alone. Holding this glass of guava juice,

I think about what I will tell my friends back home in the States.

I met Robert Mugabe. Yeah, the dictator in Zimbabwe.

I’ll play it cool. Casual. They’ll be impressed.

I can hear them now, *Wow, I haven’t met one dictator yet.*

*What did you say? Oh, no, What did I say? What did I say?
I grip my glass of guava. I'd like to be witty and wise.
Mr. Mugabe, I understand you think queerness was imported
from the west. Is that true? I'd wait coyly for his reply.
Then that must make queerness just like your religion: Catholicism.
I'd like to be confrontational. Try to kill me, Robert Mugabe,
Kill me like you killed the queers in Zimbabwe. I'd like to be
provocative. Are you hungry, Mr. Mugabe? Food is everywhere,
but you, you must starve. Our conversation never gets that far.*

TESTING ABRAHAM

Perhaps he fancied himself Abraham, the father of nations, but he found himself the father of three daughters, one now long dead, the other two with no plans to propagate— I can't help but believe we were some sort of cruel disappointment until I learned, had my Dad been born ten or twenty years later, reached maturity, say post-Stonewall, he might not have found himself with family or at least not with our family, my mother, my sister, and me, he might have been with a family like my adult family, only it wouldn't exist because I wouldn't be which is really beside the point because this is the point: when I was running the gay and lesbian community center there was one group I didn't understand: the bi married men; they met once a month, there were literally hundreds of them and for the longest time they were the only group to meet on Saturday night while everyone else went to bars or concerts or out on dates, they gathered in relative secret, albeit at the gay and lesbian center where they would never tell us their last names or even a telephone number to contact the leader— they always said they would call us to check in, resolve problems, which they did, regularly, quietly; still I don't understand, they had over three hundred and fifty men gathered— who were these men? why did they stay married? were they really bisexual? or just waiting to be gay? what did their wives think? did they have children? so many questions and no answers, not even after my sister sneaked a peek at my father's email on Christmas Eve and found, well, I don't know what exactly she found—I never asked—she just called me crying and accusatory did I know? did I know my father was gay or bi or whatever you call it when a man has a wife and an apparent erotic interest in other men? did I know? did I know? I told her no, I didn't know, which I didn't, and I told her I was angry that she read Dad's email, which I was, and that begat a familial schism of Biblical proportions in which I am just a scribe who will bury this book and deny, deny, deny all knowledge – I'll pretend I'm Rebecca, daughter of Bethuel, son of Nachor, whom Milcah bore to him, a stranger in a strange land until I am drawn into this drama once again.

SISTERHOOD

1. FEET

Whenever I see my dead sister
she is barefoot. It was fine
this morning at the swimming pool,
but wintertime, wrapped up
in a parka and scarf, I shudder
to see her feet completely bare,
but the funeral director said
shoes and socks weren't necessary,
and it had been hard enough
to find a dress that fit.
The mortician failed to fix
her up enough to leave the lid
open, so before the closed,
public viewing, we gathered
in private to see her face,
lacerated, abraded, sort of smashed
and, thanks to the artistry of
mortuary science, caked in make-up.
My mother screamed,
grabbed her baby's body.
My other sister peered
behind the satiny drape.
She looked up, pasty.
No shoes and you should see her legs.
They look horrible—contused, twisted.
I said, *It was a car accident.*
She said, *Look, look.* I never did.

2. DRESS

When it was time that Monday afternoon
to choose a dress for her for the funeral
I wanted sweats and a t-shirt—the outfit
we'd all eventually remember her in.
Instead, I picked a black and white check
with a Peter Pan collar. It made my mother
happy, but for me it was too formal.
Laid out, she looked like a child,
not a young woman: tall, lithe, and hip,
a dancer who favored simplicity.
Besides, the dress was too small.
Now when I see her walking away from me,
there's a sliver of her back showing—
hardened from desiccated skin
with no circulation and yellowed like
a cheap paperback novel. The dress,
cut down the center, held together
with eight or ten safety pins. I always
call out her name; she turns, smiles.
Facing me she wears blue sweats,
a plain, white T. No pins
pressing waxy, dead skin.

3. SHE AND I

We were never close.
Never dyed our hair together.
No tandem manicures.
No joint shopping excursions.
We fought.
Earlier, in the back seat
of the Caprice Classic
on family vacations
and later on the telephone.
Before she died, I told her
no one could take her seriously.
It was the way she talked.
So fast. And breathless.

Ending every declarative
with the intonation of a question.
She dismissed me, angrily.
She said, *You don't understand
my artistic personality.*
I didn't. The dancing.
The boyfriends. The alternative
music. I disdained
them all. This is the truth:
I've loved many women
more than my sister.
Had she lived, she would
have been nothing more than
a familial correspondent—
treacly holiday sentiments
and Hallmarked birthdays.
Occasionally, I might have
called her; late on Sundays,
with an obligatory update.
But now we're closer
than we've ever been. Dead,
my sister is finally present.

4. WASHER

At twenty-two, in her rental apartment,
she owns one.
I, in my newly-bought house,
find a behemoth left behind.
Twenty years old, drab, olive green,
it hulks in the corner,
outsizing anything
I've ever owned.
The previous owners knew
it could never be removed,
and who would want to?
For the first time, I clean without quarters.
Gathering laundry in large plastic baskets,
I carry them two flights down
to the dank as a ditch
Michigan basement.
When filled, it clunks and grinds,
swishes and swirls, then spills
dirty water into the drain

or drips, drips, drips, until
a drizzle runs across the floor.
Then, I never asked
how she saved for her machine,
how she moved it to each new apartment.
I never imagined front-loaders
in my future kitchen,
how after her death my parents
would donate her washer to the Salvation Army.
I never asked her,
do your clothes pile up,
do you ever forget to remove them so they sour,
where do you dry them?
In the open air?
When you put them on,
how do they smell?

5. HAIR

Hers was never like mine. Blonde and thin
with ends that split in summertime.
As a teenager, she dyed it with Sun-In;
harsh chemicals turned her platinum.
To wrap her hair she cut sleeves
off old, battered, white Ts,
while I wove a thick, French braid
or sported barrettes, large, handmade.
Now I've cut my hair. I hear her
constant tuts and tsks. Long hair no longer
binds us. But I still dream her,
hair, thick and lush, long at the sides.
It curls and waves in ways
it never did when she was alive.

6. CARS

My sisters and I swap stories.
Sordid encounters with mechanics,
stock-piling engine oil,
indignities of not-classic-just-old
motor vehicles—detectable emissions,
unmuffleable exhaust,
an array of meaningless
or once significant broken parts.
My Mercury Sable ticks miles

beyond one hundred thousand,
broken sunvisors slapping passengers
with each sharp turn,
almost like my old Tercel,
abandoned freeway-side
when the engine gasket blew
spewing steam and smoke
at seventy miles-an-hour;
its window seal,
decayed by sun,
leaked, spawning mold
beneath rotting seats
and when I had to drive
the dog to chemo,
she wouldn't ride inside,
just sat on the curb
and cried until I called a cab.

7. CHARIOTS

In Los Angeles, my living sister
drives an old Volvo,
nursed or jerry-rigged
each year to pass
the California emissions test.
The driver's door only opens
from the outside—
she cranks the window,
then reaches out to release;
in her mind, that Volvo is gilded,
drawn by stallions.
We romanticize our cars
in spite of our sister
who died in hers.
The sun hit her eye.
She pulls forward.
An unseen semi down the empty
morning highway
smashes her side, crushes
her against Oregon igneous.
I imagine her wearing a seatbelt—
we're all good that way—
still, her head hits the windshield
and the enormous engine
of the 84 Mustang—

if you've never heard it,
it roars, not a horse,
but a lion, landlocked,
ready to run
when the key engages—
destroyed on contact.

8. RETAINER

It is lost at lunchtime
in a McDonalds
on our way to Florida.
Wrapped in a white
napkin, set on a brown tray,
then forgotten until fifteen
minutes down the eight lane interstate
past Valdosta, from the back seat,
my sister meekly says,
I can't find my retainer.
Are you sure? Are you sure?
We rustle around looking
for what my sister knows is lost.
Back at the arches, we look in disbelief
at twenty bags of rubbage. We rummage
through. My mother cries
about the six hundred
dollars the retainer
will cost if we cannot find it.
She screams, *We don't have money*
to throw away. Then, pawing
through styrofoam, splotted
with special sauce, single servings
of squeezed and sprayed ketchup,
hundreds of stray French fries,
I do not know that in twenty years,
I will make a joke graveside.
Pity, her dying so young.
If you had known,
would you have paid
to have her teeth straightened?
Then, picking through soiled paper
for my sister's corrective,
I do not know that when
I sweep my own floors,
I will pick out pennies
from dust and dog hair—
usually, but not always.

II.

SIX CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CANCER

-for Nikki

I. THINGS DONE CHANGED

I am listening to Biggie Small's *Ready to Die*

*I've been robbin' motherfuckers
since the slave ships/with the same clip*

and I know cancer
is something our mothers
and grandmothers get.

*Gimme the loot
Gimme the loot*

Sure, this album has been digitally remastered;
that old cassette tape was stretched to distortion.
True, I'm driving a new, blue Nissan Maxima
a wretched four-door, family sedan,
but my beloved Toyota Tercel finally died.

Yes, I've gotten older, but listening to Biggie
I am twenty-three and we are carousing late at night and
driving down Michigan Avenue and
playing our music really loud and eating coney dogs
and rapping with the Notorious B.I.G.

*You chronic smokin', Oreo cookie eatin', pickle juice drinkin'
Chicken gristle eatin', biscuit suckin', MUTHAfucka*

and we are laughing so hard we are crying and
there is no cancer in your breast.

II. ONE LYMPH NODE

Both rounds of dye
and the MRI
showed nothing
no metastasis
from the tumor
in the breast tissue
to the lymph nodes
it was good

something to celebrate
then a shadow
on an x-ray
hardness in a manual
examination
small concern persists
so the doctor insists
another surgery
a small one this time
to remove one lymph node
you tell me *it is nothing*
the doctor thinks it is nothing

III. GOLD DIGGER

You have a six-year-old daughter
and breast cancer
and I am listening to hip-hop
because it is loud and honest and crass

*Met her at the beauty salon
with the baby Louis Vuitton
under her underarm*

and because I want our old life back,
but I can't get it back so I just
sing into your mobile vmail:

*18 years/ eighteen years
She have one of your kids
Got you for eighteen years.*

You ring me back :
It ain't all that—
you and your ghetto-ass gangsta rap
not just the men are trapped
Click.

Beep.
Another message.
You're sick and depressed
but my battery's dead
so I didn't know
until the day you go back
to the doctor after his vacation
after your surgery.

I call and I call
I croon into the headset,

*Get down girl go head get down
Get down girl go head get down.*

You, driving again to the doctor
for radiation therapy prep,
leave a message on my voice mail:

The one renegade lymph node?
Benign.

IV. YOUR SCAR

In my twenties, women's naked breasts
were everywhere for my enjoyment:
co-op bathrooms, joint house parties, my own bedroom.

*I know you want it,
the thing that makes me—*

I've seen your breasts a million times.
We wear the same size bra. Yours: pink,
peach, nude, black, white and lacy.
Always lacy. Mine: white and white and white and white.
Lace makes my nipples itch.

Now the only breasts I see regularly are mine—
viewings usually confined to the shower—
and my wife's. If I get to see other boobs at all,
they are swollen and calloused;
sucked by an infant for their comfort,
their nourishment, not mine.

*My milkshake brings all the boys to the yard,
and their like, it's better than yours.*

With age our breasts are contained
in functional cotton, strapped, padded and underwired,
but I miss my past—the ease of breast access.

*Damn right, it's better than yours
I can teach you,/but I have to charge*

I want to see you breasts. Your small scar.
The uneven shape and size.
I worry the next chance I'll have to see such a scar
will be on my chest or the chest of my wife.

I can barely comprehend that you have cancer;
I can't contemplate the carcinomas of my future.

V. ANGEL

*Life is one big party when you're still young
But who's gonna have your back when it's all done*

You write, my oncologist, my radiology oncologist,
and my surgeon are acting like the three stooges,

or maybe it's just my RO and the ultrasound radiologist
who can't decide between them what procedure to do.

I write, soon you will have had more doctors than lovers.
You reply, that's a nightmare, although recently

doctors have felt me up more than any lover.
I type, take action. Change that tide.

*Shorty, you're my angel, you're my darling
Girl, you're my friend when I'm in need*

VI. SURVIVOR

Less than two months post-diagnosis,
you describe yourself as a cancer survivor,

*I'm a survivor (What?)
I'm gonna make it (What?)*

and I suppose you are. They have cut open your chest
and tested and treated and poked and prodded,

*I'm not gon give up (What?)
I'm not gon stop (What?)*

but you aren't getting married for another year
because you're going to lose all of your hair
and puke your guts out,
so I am surprised that you use the word survive

I will survive (What?)
Keep on survivin' (What?)

because I don't yet feel
like we are surviving this.

**THE WEEK BEFORE THE SIXTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ALLIED
TROOPS' ARRIVAL AT AUSCHWITZ**

January 28, 2005

There are only two English-language channels
on our hotel television: CNN and ESPN.

We marvel at polyglots around us; they speak
French to the waitress, German to one another,

American to us (I've heard people from Great Britain;
I'm reticent to claim English as my native tongue.)

I'd happily settle for the moniker diglot
but even that would be inaccurate.

On the Metro to dinner—our biggest
indulgence—traditional *haute cuisine*,

my wife tells me about the *Arc d'Triomphe*.
Hitler marched his troops under the Arc

when he occupied Paris. Parisians, she tells me,
sat in cafes while he conquered.

They drank coffee. I understand:
the *café crème* is the best I have ever had.

The award-winning documentary, The Shoah,
airs repeatedly in French, German, some Yiddish

and another language we cannot distinguish.
It has French subtitles. We recognize some

words as they flash on the screen. We understand little.
We know how the story ends.

CANNIBAL

Split open like the apple missed in the August picking
and held too long to the tree, I filled with brown, mealy rot
and fell to the ground. When not even the aphids wanted to consume
my flesh or leave me to their maggots, I ate my own innards.
I dined on the delicacy of my liver; it was dense and fatty and
cleansed my body as it sat in the sun for my consumption.
I ate through my intestines, large and small, like sausages.
My lungs nourished me for years. I squeezed them to breathe out.
Released, they took in air. I ate their fleshy lining, spit out
harsh cartilage, then sucked blood-engorged capillaries.
I feasted on my ovaries. Ate them raw and fried and scrambled.
I splayed the fallopian tubes. Dried and salted them like jerky.
I ate my own uterus. All muscle, and tough from, not age, but anger.
When, seeking sustenance, I reached my throat and headed
for my brain—I knew eating them would kill me—but
I was all grown and, inexplicably, someone loved me.
I put my organs back. Contained beneath muscles
with freshly-wound tendons, a clean myelin sheath.
I wrapped my body in the same old skin, not supple,
not stretched, used, but still useable.
Now when you see me, you don't know,
I'm half empty inside from eating myself alive.

A NEW REFRIGERATOR

I didn't actually want one, but after your mother died,
you, with a big check in your pocket, became obsessed.

I measured. We shopped and shopped. You
selected and purchased. This one. It is too big—

just barely, but still, —it is too large for the space.
I want to return it. Get a smaller model, an easier fit.

You refuse. You want this one and only this one.
You say, *We needed a carpenter*. I say, *You deal with it*.

The electric behemoth sits in the center of our kitchen floor
for months. I tell our visitors that this refrigerator is

your grief—large and in the way—transformed into my headache.
Finally, I pay the housepainter an extra three hundred

to put the refrigerator in its place. When she finishes,
I admired how perfect it is. Drawing a glass of water

from its cool interior, I cry. My anger, never at you.
I want what you got. A mother to give me

something stainless, purposefully cool and icy,
something frozen for a reason.

THE FORMER PRIME MINISTER

*I hate how these women hide themselves beneath head scarves; for once I don't disagree, I sip my diet Coke; I look at the woman two tables away, a few strands of hair have fallen across her face; I want to tuck them in; in twelve hours, I will be at the airport, stamped and ready to leave for Thailand; I will be exhausted and sick. It is ironic: I will have a sore throat, not from my talking but from my silence in the face of the rhetoric of the former prime minister—he wants to incite opposition to the U.S. war so he throws verbal red meat to this largely Muslim crowd. The Jews this; the Jews that. *The Jooosss control America; the Jooosss control all of the banks; the Jooosss control Hollywood.**

Unoriginal.

Misguided. Wrong. But I tell myself, there is not a leader of a Muslim country

who doesn't serve up such pork fat to his people. I am uncomfortable, but I am silent; I get a massage, I buy a Turkoman carpet.

The next afternoon he speaks in solidarity with the holocaust denier jailed in Austria, he asks, *Where is his freedom of speech?* Ironic from one who jailed many: children from Australia, his own deputy PM. He asks, *Why can we not question the number six million?* He asks, *What if it was 5,999,999?* He passes it off as a joke. It's not funny. Then he talks about Auschwitz. He says, *There was nothing found there after the war. No camp.*

No oven. That evening, we boycott the final formal dinner; I stare at the hair of the woman two tables over. I will go to the airport early the next morning shrouded by darkness. I will keep thinking about Zarina, the woman wearing

a Donatella Versace scarf as a hajib; pink, grey and textured, made from the finest silk. I will wonder if she bought it in Italy. I will wonder if she spoke to the shop clerk with her perfect, British-accented English or if she spoke perfect Italian also with a British accent.

I want to touch her scarf, her head, her hair. I don't. I study the lines beneath her scarf: her ears, her tied up hair, her skull.

I imagine them as my own. I want to believe in some sort of transcendent feminist sisterhood: Donatella, Zarina, and me. I want to believe she isn't thinking about the final solution for the Jews. My throat hurts. I tie my hair back in a knot. I board the plane. I walk away.

ACCEPTANCE

He was there the other day
at the reading sitting in the back,
black cap, gray turtleneck, jeans.
He was smiling. It was hard
for me to see him—he's so short—
but I could see the lunulae
on each fingernail the entire time.
Hands, soft, refined; nails, long;
cuticles carefully pushed back
illuminating ten half-moons,
one for each midnight reflection.
I knew he came because I kept
my promise from before
he died, *write our lives*,
he told me, making him
my co-conspirator, though
I'm left with all the work
while he jaunts in and out,
a mythic satyr. Today,
he's pleased with me,
though he pranced out
before the crowd dispersed.
I could not speak to him,
but I imagine: he's watching,
smiling, occasionally laughing,
head thrown back,
tending his fierce, strong nails.

MY FATHER'S MIMEOGRAPH

When turned on, the machine buzzed,
but warm, it hummed. In the corner
of the basement, shining stainless,
a basin for water, drum larger than
my child head, and special paper,
the master, three pages bound
at top and bottom, carefully fed by my father
into the new Selectrix, which I covet for its
femininized name, once a Selector
now, ERA imminent, Selectrix.
I envy it for a while: the time
and care my father gives it, but it liberates
the old Underwood for my purposes—
a play, a series of YA books. Also inherited,
a stack of once used carbon papers
to mount between two fresh white sheets
and duplicate like father. Sometimes,
the carbons leaves the tips of my fingers black,
but always I yearn for the blue
of the mimeograph. I sit in the basement
corner anticipating the warm hum;
then, when my father positions the master,
ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk.
The magical machine whirs pages
into an imperfect stack. Warmed by electricity,
the edges curl as they dry with multiple
choices for biology and chemistry—
answers I'll eventually learn and circle—
for his ecstatic appellations.
Even grown, I crave his praise.
The other day he called me about seventy
volumes of the Britannica Great Books.
He tells me, *They are bound in leather.*
If you have the shelf space, I will buy them for you.
I hear the years of his promises.
The world is black & white. Good will prevail.
If I read these seventy books,
I will have all the answers I need.
I don't have the shelf space.
I open a bottle of Waterman
encre noire; I breathe in deeply but
the liquid pigment carefully sucked
into the reservoir behind my nib
doesn't have the inky odor I seek.

AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame – Hannah Senesh

For Glen Johnson

We meet again by chance at the airport.
You, delayed returning home
from the islands—a birthday weekend
with your partner whom I've never met
and cannot remember his name
nor how many years it has been.
My wife and I snowed in
all weekend. We chat and,
although this is odd,
I smell your breath. There,
the warm smell when you speak,
spittle when you aspirate plosives.
It reminds me of after my sister's funeral
at the outlet mall a half hour
south of Saginaw, I collapse
into your arms at Ralph Lauren,
not crying—tears had given way
to exhaustion—but needing,
desperately, comfort. You said,
Buy new sheets, good cotton ones.
Good sheets always make everything better.
Then, I remember dinner
with a prospective donor—an auto
scion. Two decades our senior,
we asked him for money
for the gay and lesbian center
and after he committed but before
coffee, he said, *Can I touch your hair?*
Initially, flustered, then, *Sure,*
and he touched tentatively
then gently ran his hand
through your hair. *I've never touched*
another man's hair. Yours is so soft,
he said. In that moment, we both saw
longing. Not love or lust but longing
for a world where one man can touch
another's hair, and this makes me
remember our old friend who didn't
make partner at the most august
of law firms—back in '92,

was it? I tell my wife, *It was
because she was a bulldagger.*
I still see her, flat shoes, black pants,
close-cropped hair. *No*, my wife says,
she isn't at all. And I don't know how
to tell her, *yes, she is, it is just you are
more so*, but it doesn't matter
because today my wife is at the pinnacle
of her career, bulldagger or not.
Glen, we made this world.
Changed what it means to be queer.
Not you and I alone
but together with thousands.
Now I look around and see
the results of our labor and
at last I am no longer tired.
*I know we have some difficult days
ahead but it doesn't matter
to me now. Because I've been
to the mountaintop.*
Now, I dwell in the valley.
*Like anybody, I would like
to live a long life. Longevity
has its place* but here at the airport
you near fifty, ribbing me about forty,
we are both surprised
to be alive and don't even ask
about those from the past
to not review what we have lost
when there is so much
we have gained. The world has changed
since we were friends.
We meet at an airport.
Once we were the match.
Once we were the flames.

III.

ONE EXPLANATION

Elaine's family owned a Chinese restaurant in this dumpy, redneck town thirty minutes away from Ann Arbor—I can't remember the name—but I'd have starved without it. Elaine hated white men who dated Asian women. She'd see the despised couples on campus—always frat boys with gorgeous Chinese or Japanese women (occasionally Filipino, rarely Thai or Malay). She'd approach them and say, *Do you like Chinese pussy? Is it better? More exotic? Is that what you like about Asian women?* Then she would turn on the women, *You are being exploited. Reject the whities.* It was daring. Uncomfortable. The couples, mortified, but silent as if what she said was true. Elaine was always angry. That's what I liked about her. At first, she only dated Asian men, and then, only Asian men who had never been with a white woman. A friend of mine was Japanese-American, his girlfriend, white. She hated them. Later, he married a white woman; now they have a baby who is beautiful. I send them holiday cards and postcards when I travel to places like Thailand where I walk the streets and, emboldened by my completed Hep series, eat food from all of the vendors even the one woman who offers to kill and cook a chicken for me. She holds the caged chicken with the staring chicken and says, *Cheap, cheap.* I have never been that close to something alive I could eat. I buy vegetable dumplings and pay her more bahts than she asks. This prompts her again to offer the chicken. It is raining. I walk to the international telephone booth, and call my wife. She is angry about work. *They treat me like shit. I'm just another house nigger to them.* We talk, her anger softens to loneliness. I am sick from a cold, tired from jet lag and hours of touring ancient wats. I want to eat chicken but not freshly slaughtered; I want chicken with sweet and sour sauce back in Belleville—that was the name of the town!—at the China King Express—right off the freeway. I haven't talked to Elaine in years. I want her to be angry and fierce and righteous—things I am no longer, but she, too, may be feeding on something new.

ALTUN HA

You are walking among Mayan ruins.
Awakened again from incessant American
amnesia you remember: great civilizations rise
and fall and rise again and they are not all white
and they are not all centered in Europe and they
all leave some remains. You marvel at hundreds
of steps stacked up to platforms in the sky.
Here a coliseum with perfect acoustics—Listen—
Listen—There a room with no windows where
they did surgeries—then the limestone cooling room
to manage temperature and air flow
efficiently in 300 and 400 A. D. You look
at the jungle. Its edges don't encroach as if held
by the power of the memory though it is clear
they are mowed by the local Creoles
(here half black, half British – not French
as in the States). Young men gather
with small crocodiles, snappish mouths immobilized
with rubber bands. Holding them they say
want to touch? want to touch? and *picture?*
picture? picture? Your guide tells you
how the Mayans created girls' perfectly round faces:
two pieces of wood placed over and under
a newborn's head. The forehead and the nose
pressed flat, so, too, the skull bones
as they began to fuse. You are shocked
then murmur to yourself, this is how it always
is our: bodies manipulated for beauty.
Two weeks later, back home in the States,
you will take your Iranian carpet to be cleaned.
This carpet you love, made of goat hair.
The Persian man who cleans and repairs fine rugs
for rich people will tell you derisively, "It is goat wool.
Wool, not hair." You will say, *I know*. He will say,
"These women in the villages just use it
because they have nothing else." He will say,
"Your rug is not of good quality or high value."
You know. All we make in life is from what
we have around us. Much is not of high value.
Still we tie small knots on goat hair,
still we press our faces flat.

PLUMBING

When the regulator valve
springs a leak after Thanksgiving,
I turn off the water main
and the hot-water heat.
My wife and I buy gallon jugs
of water, a bushel of wood
to bunker down.

In the chill of our house,
she learns new things about me:
I can wash dishes in a pot
with only a half gallon
of water, heated on the stove,
and wait until we're out
in public for restrooms.

I, too, learn a thing or two.
With small pieces of wood,
large logs, newspaper,
a stack of New Mexican
pinyon, she can stroke
the fire's flames all day long
until I become jealous.

For two days, we cook
elaborate dinners for the benefit
of oven heat. Then, Sunday
evening, amid steaming
vegetables, basting meat,
rising bread, baking brownies,
she looks at me and says,

I miss my mother.

The household chill reminds
her of the world's warmth
when mother was alive.
Now, orphaned at forty-one,
she is in our frigid house,
alone because I was

just enjoying this time,
waiting for Monday morning
when the plumber will arrive.
He fixes everything.
For an entire week, our house
smells: pinyon and grief,
the many ways we make love.

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

It seemed like a reasonable answer
to the macabre question, *How do you
want to receive the cremains?* Fed-ex.
Previously returned remains from
cremated pets were shipped safely,
sealed in plastic and nestled in mimicked
McDonald's Big Mac containers.
We set them on the mantle.
Three weeks later, these arrive
at my office—a large bulky box.
I sign while the carrier dusts
his hands on his trousers. That night,
not quite tipsy from a shot of bourbon,
my dining companion and I heft the box
to carry it to the car. Gray grit
on our hands. We open the cardboard
to see the biodegradable urn, designed
for floating ashes on water, flopped,
inside uncovered. Humans are not
entirely ash to ash, dust to dust,
our bones, our teeth do not burn easily,
that's what my father told me.
He knew more of bodies, of what
remains from when my sister died.
Alive she always insisted, *Cremation
then into the ocean.* My father said,
Tell your children, but as if she knew
her immature ova would never reach
conception she repeated: *Cremation...*
So, we knew what to do, although
my mother resisted—a *grave, a headstone.*
In grief, she insisted. So my father
split my sister in their basement
and sent one half to the Pacific and
one half to the public cemetery in Saginaw.
Although now, my mother-in-laws ashes
spilled in corrugation with a gray cloud settling
on the floor of my office, I know my sister,
dispersed in the Pacific and buried
underground, also has settled, unintentionally,
in the basement of my parent's house.

SEEING ANNIE LIEBOVITZ'S *A PHOTOGRAPHER'S LIFE 1990-2006*

When I walk in already I am angry
about Susan “the long-term friend.”
Another for whom the study of gay men,
fashionable, but pussy-licking lesbians
are to be denied. Even the obituary
reads only, *she is survived by a son
and a sister*. Three years later,
Annie concedes, “Yes, you could say we were lesbians,
though it is not a word Susan would use—”
and here she pauses, “or approve.”
So when I see Susan in the small photos,
snapshots amid outsized glitz and poised glamour
enlarged to be bigger than any one life,
she peers out at me as if from a small
cabinet or cupboard, cramped,
not even large enough to be a closet,
while Annie pins these pictures in a barn,
listening to Rosanne Cash, crying. She lives on.
So I soften to Susan. Her cancer-wizened face,
shaved head, tired eyes. I want her bookshelves,
filled and ordered. I want her trip to France and Jordan,
but most of all, I want her to use my words,
which now she will never do.

ELIYAHU HA-NAVI¹

I imagined Elijah a middle-aged castrati
until I read and find him to be young, virile
like Ajax—the strong man of the Heebs.

I think of my own father—the strong man
of my tribe. In the basement he bench-pressed
on a small, red carpet remnant; in summer,

he'd lift weights midday in the cool cellar.
He'd emerge red-faced, glistening with sweat.
Wintertime, warmed by the furnace, he'd heft

late at night. Below, his life was fully his own—
no intrusions from daughters or wife.
Now far away from my parents' home

the iron men in my life lift weights,
carve pects, quads and glutes in large, airy gyms.
They cruise and shower and shave

in well-lit, public spaces. I think of my father
in our dark basement – building the body
of a gay man in stark isolation.

For him, I take comfort in Elijah.
Perhaps with his Elijahic body,
G-d will give him two tries—

the Phoenician princess Jezebel, then
an Adamic lover. Maybe after forty days
in the wilderness, after being fed by ravens

in the desert canyon, G-d will say to my father,
Elijahic one, Arise and eat,
and perhaps with strength from the second meal,

my father will walk through the desert
of public gyms, bars, quiet dinner clubs
until he reaches the mount at Horeb

¹ Hebrew for Elijah the Prophet

where a “still, small voice” may ask,
Ma lekha po, Eliyahu? Why are you here, Elijah?
And he may answer, *I am no better than my fathers.*

But if I am asked of him,
Ma lekha po, Eliyahu?
I will translate,

Who are you, here, Elijah?
and I will reply, *You are my father.*
I could want no better.

FOR JUDITH REMEMBERING GRACE PALEY AND JANE COOPER

You are sad about losing two
one generation ahead of you,
and I read your grief on email
but don't feel it with you.
Yes, I'm sad—both poets I love—
but also relieved. This is death
in its natural order, as it should be:
women my grandmother's age die,
and women like me scramble
to buy black stockings for funerals,
because we don't keep mourning
in supply. For me, it wasn't
always like this, which I can't tell you—
it would be like last night at dinner
when I was short with a friend.
She was outraged about people
protesting dead soldiers' funerals
How can people protest a funeral?,
she asked, as if this was new,
and even though she's on my side
I was harsh, *Americans are dying
in Iraq because we embrace the gays*,
which is true at least for the protesters,
but my words were caustic,
they startled her. I didn't care;
the sudden attention
because of the soldiers,
my friend's new-found outrage,
where was the anger
when my friends died?
James, bloated even in the casket,
skin stretched over hardened flesh.
I remember his mother's shock—
two weeks earlier, she learned
her son had AIDS, was gay.
At the funeral home—the only one
in the city that would embalm “the AIDS”—
we learn of James' brother
two years earlier, also dead, AIDS, gay.
Before his final coma, James
was still working, everyday in our office;
planning a benefit, attending meetings,

but wasting, wasting away
so with him we all ate like crazy.
I gained ten pounds and
at his funeral, walking behind suited,
white-gloved pall-bearers,
the black stockings I'd already worn
to three funerals that month
chafed my left inner thigh.

HAWK SUMMER

I've seen it a few times
scampering across the street
to the creek or rushing

back into the underbrush.
Worried he won't find
enough to eat, my neighbor

is feeding this fox; ground beef
on her back porch. Next door
he is feasting on the herbs,

digging up each plant,
eating only the leaves
he desires. Driving,

I watch for his lithe body,
yellow eyes. I see him
only at twilight.

Hawks have nested.
I search the skies to see them fly;
by mid-August their brood

should be soaring.
We are warned to care
for small animals,

confine them inside.
My summer is filled with wild
imaginings. I talk to my aunt

on the telephone surrounded
by deep purple. Her husband
is having an affair

with his brother's wife.
There is nothing I can say,
nothing she can do,

to make this landscape easier.
I tell her about the hawk,
I tell her about my neighbor's fox.

IV.

DE FIDELIS

1.

In Michigan, September dusk is chilly.
We linger in the parking garage
of the downtown Millender Center.
Wind whips through concrete;
the sun sets. Cars cruise by, we identify
makes and models from internal
combustion, the squeal of turning tires,
running engines. Our ears, expert
at this exercise. Neither wants to leave
the other. Polite conversation exhausted,
we turn to taboo. What we dream,
secret hopes, aspirations. We've touched
only once when you brushed my hand
to light a cigarette—but I tell you,
you must stop coming in my dreams.
Risky words. Twenty-four hours later,
each leaving other lovers, we begin life together.

2.

I am wearing a cream, cable sweater,
cotton with a cowell. It is my favorite.
First worn from the wash; line dry
required; often, too eager, I wear
it damp. Still shapen and knit tight,
it is formal for meetings and
comfortable for gathering with friends.
Two years later, this sweater, a sweet
reminiscence of our fall together,
until you spill oily food—salad dressing,
perhaps, a creamy alfredo. The sweater,
destroyed. No wash can clean it.
I never find a proper replacement.

3.

The first year even the best-made
beds in cold climes lie naked.
Sheets and covers cast aside.
Oil companies make profits
on the backs of new lovers.
Once we would wake at five,
talk through sunrise, then rush to work.
Home again, we resume
what we regard as our real lives.
Later, early sojourns turn from intimate
discoveries to shared anxieties.
Phone calls pierced darkness
with bad news and pillows,
matted or lumpy, absorb
more tears than muffled screams.
For a while, our angry cat, Gertie, pees
on the bed despite constant litter
cleaning and multiple vet trips.
Sometimes, between three and four
a.m. on a break from her game
of bridge, your dead mother visits,
I tell her about our life as if it matters.
She strokes your hair and smiles.

4.

Your mother remembers
meeting your father
when she was nineteen,
just days from prom queen,
she tells me, *He was stunning,*
tall, athletic, beautiful hair,
and you should have seen
his socks—cashmere—
Last Christmas, you gave me
three pairs—black, argyle, cream cable.
They are perfect. Soft, warm.
But after three washes,
the heel is threadbare.
I imagine your mother
discovering this early in her marriage.
I wonder, what did she find

to hold that lasts?

5.

This is never captured by Hollywood:
anxiety after each of you leave
another to be together.
We spend years worried
about each new friend or
acquaintance. New evening activities—
volunteering for political campaigns,
card clubs, poetry readings—
any late night out, leaves one
at home to wonder,
will the day come
when we rehash the well-trod line,
this is the best day of my life,
and it becomes the worst of mine?

6.

My anxiety, compounded
by family history—
her father's first child born
six months and one year
after he married her mother
(this was ten years before
she was adopted) and
a quarter century before she,
at fourteen, picked up
the telephone to overhear
her father's amorous imbroglio.
Two years later, her parents divorce.
She declares to me her fealty
but I worry, what if infidelity
is passed on in families?

7.

We buy rings on a lark
near Valentine's Day
though we do not save them as gifts,
just get them sized.
Mine, a permanent resident on my right finger;
Hers, an occasional embellishment.
When asked about marriage,
I hold out my left hand, bare.
We say, we'll marry when it's legal in our state.
This makes me feel perfectly safe.
Then I hear of European tradition
that adorns the right hand
with the wedding ring.
I think of all the continentals
considering me married.
Customs are always easy.
Still, with no band—
no initials and date inscribed—
we date our existence like scientists
testing for radiation emissions,
dating half-lives.

8.

The hardest year was seven,
not an itch but an irritation
that persisted.
I resented the repeated
need to shop,
run a household,
mostly the way she enjoys these things.
I wanted time for myself.
now I see people at this point
in their marriage, they ask
how did it pass? The truth
makes me look bad, but
I tell them. My lover's mother
was sick and suddenly her death
was in sight and I, not wanting
to be the sort of woman who leaves,
I tried to stop complaining,
(she will tell you I didn't, but I tried),
I cleaned and made arrangements

for over a dozen trips. Easter egg
baskets for mother and daughter.
We all knew how the story would end.
It did. Then I couldn't be the woman
who left another grieving and by the time
the veil of loss had lifted
we were honeymooning again.

9.

When my sister reads
my father's email on
Christmas Eve, she calls me
the next day, angry.
Her voice, drawn, thin, dark.
She demands, *did you know?*
Did you know? As though
we were in some secret fraternity
with every member carefully
vetted, reviewed, and approved.
She doesn't understand
how capacious the questions of sex.
How it seems almost accidental—
you share a cabin at summer camp,
you meet a woman about whom you've dreamed.
I imagine it this way for my father,
meeting someone willing in his sixties.
I hope for the same virility
but my sister is just seething in anger
and my mother in shock and disbelief
and I have to admit
I never expected infidelity
to visit my family.

10.

Growing up too young to be
a child of the sixties, I am aware
that sex in the seventies was different
somehow special, more exciting
and, aided by powerful antibiotics,
without fear or precautions.
While my homosex was always tempered
by the specter of premature death,
some recall sex without inhibitions.
In this tradition, I think of sex in the seventies
with longing, even yearning,
until it becomes not sex in the seventies
but sex in one's seventies,
a concept I'm forced to consider
when the beloved uncle
tells us he's been unfaithful to his wife
of thirty-some years.
More than relatives, they were correlative:
marriage and happiness
retirement and joy
lover and companion.
Now my aunt, reduced to mistrust and misgivings,
confides, "He's addicted to the oral sex."
This makes me worry,
someday the same accusation could be flung at me,
but for now he's called
to account for his transgressions.

11.

I quip to friends—
it's inspiring to see the untamed desire
that propagates among the retired;
we'd like to imagine ourselves
horny at sixty-seven,
getting it on with a new one at sixty-eight,
committing cunnilingus at sixty-nine,
all just foreplay to the wild sex of the seventies.
Gales of laughter erupt and spill all around,
but it's not true.
We're moralistic in our thirties and forties,
as shocked by their new adolescence
as they once purported to be by ours.

12.

Now I wonder about Hugh's visits
to Thailand—R&R from the military—
I think of the person who gave me
a foot massage the week I was there.
He—or she—I couldn't tell—rubbed
my toes, my heels, my calves,
proceeded up my thighs
until I opened my eyes.
Thank you, I said. Then she—or he—
I confess, I like to know the gender,
it is central to my sense of orientation—
stopped. Did Hugh not simply say,
Thank you?

13.

When did we first demand exclusivity?
Who deemed it so?
Surely not G-d, the primordial polyamor.
She loves us all.
And Adam had the inaugural “starter” marriage
leaving Lilith to enjoy her later days as a singleton.
The Torah tells the truth—
lust and love break down to betrayal—
it mocks us: you've been forewarned
as though forewarned is forearmed
as though there are armaments
to wage this war beyond our flesh,
our feeble hearts, minds and tongues.

14.

For years I wanted to be my aunt,
direct, plain-spoken,
clear about priorities
beginning with family but extending to a wide array
of social and ethical responsibilities.
And you, my beloved, I fancied you, Hugh,
enjoying the flurry of activities,
and even the occasional nattering.
One year, our aunt and uncle took six cruises.
They've visited every port on the planet,
but travel didn't bring them closer.
We all fear it may never be enough:
miles, apologies, moral accounting.
We watch the unraveling of family,
knowing now we can be neither—he nor she.
We hold to one another
though never too tightly.

15.

Everything that has brought me
to this moment in my life
every movie I've seen
every book I've read
every philosophy I've espoused
every ideology I've studied
tells me I should hate
this uncle, my father,
my beloved's father,
but I can't. These old men.
Ineffably human.
I am them.
Each day, I walk out the door.
It is a choice.
How I return.

16.

Once I believed marriage was received
separate from one's self
a third thing to which two people could cleave,
something concrete—a large antique chest
not finely made, utilitarian,
the kind the moves from the farmhouse
to garage to a first apartment
or the long-lasting sheets, part polyester,
that keep being given to family members in need.
But marriage isn't like that
as much as it's shared,
it's an individual burden
or gift—depends on the day—
like this morning,
I meet a gorgeous woman
wearing old Levis, a silk shirt
and I am my uncle who slept with his brother's wife
and I am my father with a clandestine lover.
Indiscretion is easy.
There is nothing to stop me.
For today, I make a different choice.