Carol V. Davis

Bargaining with God

I’ve never been one to bargain, though they say it’s part of the game. The merchant needs money too, especially with a spindly legged card table wobbling on a cracked sidewalk and the threat of his jewelry being snatched by thieves. I took a half-inch figurine from a dime store once. My mother guessed and I’ve been paying for it ever since. Is it possible all my sorrow stems from this? I learned to bargain with God as a teenager, with a mother on the crevice of death so many times. I negotiated her longevity to see me married and the birth of the first grandchild. I was in synagogue a few weeks ago when a sliver of pain shot through my ribs. Convenient, as I was already talking with God, but maybe I’ve used up all my lottery tickets, when we lost jobs and had to go to the free clinic. It’s hard to keep asking.
Carol V. Davis

Speaking in Tongues

In unfamiliar landscapes
Yiddish diminutives, terms of endearment,
drop my tongue, morsels, a little sweet, a little sour.

Then the curses begin their training: bulking up
on a diet of sarcasm and sneers, centuries of practice
honored to this art.

The Wyoming cowboys in the bar
stare at me in disbelief.
They’re used to horses that whinny but this sounds
like something you’d attach to those decorated manes,
the kind no real cowboy would get near.

A geologist, also not from these parts, explains in a tone
reserved for restless third graders, just how to find a vein of coal.
Never mind the tops of mountains sheared off crew-cut style.
If he doesn’t find it, someone else will.

In Virginia they asked if
I’d ever seen a real movie star. I’ve seen plenty:
without all that makeup, they’re not so special.

Those cowboys really did tie bandanas around their necks;
you could tell they knew knotting from birth.
They didn’t have to scuff their boots to show they meant business.

These curses didn’t know where to go. The bar was full.
Every time one fiddler sat down, another jumped in.
Barely room to squeeze in between one slide of a bow and the next.
The windows fogged up; outside the snow thickened like insulation.
It was time to get serious: the curses hauled out
everything they had and let them have it.
Carol V. Davis

The Cut of Diamonds

On the bus from Crown Heights
a curtain divides the men from women.
They exit separate doors,
men in the front, women in the back,
filling into mid-town high rises where
on the sidewalk young women in
impossibly tight skirts step
over unseen panhandlers.
Women to offices and private shops,
men to the workshop floor, where they
are protected from the excesses,
the customer with silk necktie who orders
every month for a different mistress.
They do not need to know such things,
shielded by women in shaitels of real hair
who work the front counter.
The cutters’ eyes crack open
only for Torah…and diamonds.
Start with the cutting pattern,
a choice of baryon or radiant pavilion facet,
the proper orientation of the stone.
Place the rough stone in the machine.
Know how to please, to coax shape,
not like workshops in Warsaw or India
where they saw with lasers, the rough
stone losing 70% of its weight.
Here the pattern applied to any outline desired:
round, trillion, oval, the effect can be wonderful.
It is not unlike an arranged marriage,
the magic of a matchmaker, how she knows
who will fit - stroking two names on a page
with stubborn arthritic fingers.
That is why she is trusted to arrange the match,
why she attends wedding after wedding.
There is the bruting, shaping the stone
by rubbing against another diamond,
polishing the sides on a wheel
covered with diamond dust.
Then finally trust, letting go,
the absolute belief in all things.

shaitels: wigs worn by women for religious reasons