Hoopla

Patty Seyburn

When it rains in this uncharacteristic fashion, certainly a billion drops devoting their brief spans to the scouring of my property – such generosity! – I cannot help wonder how many people are enough at a funeral procession. Rabbi Samuel Bar Ini said in the name of Ravi: twelve thousand men and six thousand trumpets. But marching bands wear such big shoes, and it's hard to find a phalanx of horns these days – how many did Joshua use to dismantle the architecture of Jericho?

Ulla said: as many as, say, would form a continuous line from the city to the grave.

Not far from my mother’s grave at 8 Mile and Woodward at Machpelah, named for where Sarah, the first gorgeous matriarch was buried, lies my cousin Dora, whose leg was amputated and her dad bought her a motorcar but still she died, the Angel of Death unappeased by the leg. He is not fooled by synecdoche: the part standing in for the whole, but I am a fan of fraction, a little at a time and so stick my toe out before submitting my ankle and the rest of the torrent, before I shake my fist at the heavens: is this the best you can do? I make the firmament weeps with mirth, diffusing certain tensions, since God and I have put on the gloves more than once. Always, I carry the sense of nextness in my pockets and I rub it like an amulet worn to ward off
meter-reader, holy roller, dwarf and prince –
those who want an exchange of goods and services.

Now I’m only sorry I do not know more
people well. It would have taken a regular spot

at a bar where hard-boiled eggs live in a jar
and peer out as if to say, what are you looking at?

My procession will be meager, so I will hire
professionals – even the poorest man in Israel

should provide for his wife’s funeral not less than
two flutes and one hired keener. I will instruct them
to cluck as though they knew my measures, how well
I liked the sound of sibilance at dusk, and the way

I cleaned a gutter until it shone so the water
could flee through it freely, as though pursued

by bears, to its proper end. I want the suit and dress
in tatters of remorse before they eat their fill –

feast of dairy or tender sliced meats or altogether
trayf? – you choose, you’re paying – at the house of shivah,

where they should never get enough of those stories
that reveal my true nature – the one about pudding

and performance art, the one where I get mugged
by an off-duty security guard – and though no one

should sing or lift the piano’s lid, I’d like to hear
a little niggun, one of those wordless melodies

where God should fill in the meaning and the rain
says, aw, hell, I’m going back to my house

for a little pathetic fallacy – the lady is dead, people!
Can’t you work up a slump, some staring off into

a meaningless distance? But the mourners have
such a good time they tell my loved ones,

this one’s on the house, the most extravagant cast
of extras since Moses’s minions exited stage right
into the Sea of Reeds, lamenting the perils of monotheism as starfish grinned up

at the great line waiting to cross over into only-God-knows-what, for-how-long- and what-for

and because they are history and we are unpardonably late to the scene, roads slick

with hindsight, the rain mutters beauty, beauty, and soon, we are soaked in it.

**Long Distance**

My mother calls me for the first time from the afterlife. I am pleased to hear her voice, her tough-broad, film noir syntax, her old-world dubious tone. *It’s not so great here*, she says. She must have run into my Aunt Toots.

The Talmud says, *Better one hour there than a lifetime here and better one hour here than a lifetime there.* I hope the Angel of Death knows: you cannot silence my mother. Steal her breath, still her tongue, sew shut her lips, export her soul – it’s no use. The pencil-chewing, beehived operators of the cosmos will always put through her calls.

When she calls again, I will tell her how beautifully the cantor sang at her funeral, how much we praised her, how many people attended. *It was a cast of millions.* There were a dozen limos. She will know I am lying. She raised me to be a bad liar.

We prefer doing things we’re good at. I am a fine dweller on subjects that sadden me. The whistles and bells of remorse and mortality are my stock-in-trade. I am a serviceable alto, though I should never be given a solo. The Talmud says, *It would be nice if you had a point.*

This is my problem, of late: all lines, some planes, no points. I am expansive and linear, but cannot reach a conclusion. I tell my mother, *the world is full today.* A hummingbird hovers near my voice. I wonder if it will fly in and release my vocal chords from the burden of service. What would I do, could I not speak?
I was raised to sit eighth-row center and comb the clearance rack, to fear the law and eat canned peas, to excel.
It served me well, give or take.
My mother asks, *do you have any coins in your pocketbook?*
When I was young, she forbade long distance calls.
They were for rich people.
The middle class spoke locally.

_Ma, don’t go._
I rummage around in my pockets, wallets and change-purse, plunge my hands into the couch’s seams.
No luck in Mudville.
My mother hums, “Mean to Me” with a little vibrato.
My mother says, *they want me to get on a bus._

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