

ירושלים

JERUSALEM

FIVE POEMS BY

JOSETTE AKRESH-GONZALES



JOSETTE AKRESH-GONZALES
I BURIED THE WORKWEEK

Sometimes I feel like I'm at the funeral of our way of life:

I've buried the workweek and that buoyant uplift on Friday afternoon, but also weekends, podcasts, the dollar, water-bottle islands floating in acid ocean currents, Hondas and Toyotas and Fords, hurricane-surge in subway tunnels, white sand beaches and diamond rings, the Patriots, tomato pickers tied to trucks, Netflix streaming, session beer in cans. Retirement.

I have not showered; I have covered all the mirrors.

The front door is open for the ten people who will say the kaddish with me. They don't have to knock. We all remember Marvel comics fondly, and when we hug tears well up over the end of Google and Disney. I'm sitting on a low stool and someone is bringing me hard-boiled eggs and lentils to eat. When they come in, they kiss my cheek and tell me they are so sorry. *Baruch dayan emet*, they say, a ritual blessing, incomprehensible in its literal translation *blessed is the judge of truth* or maybe it's actually *blessed is the true judge*. It's like our way of life is still here, somehow, I say. They see I'm kneading brown bread dough on the kitchen table and remind me not to cook or dance or laugh. I can feel the grain of the wood in the table and say, *I might need to take a nap*.

On the seventh day,

I'm sitting on my stool and someone says, get up, and that is the sign to me that the shivah is done.

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THERE WAS A MAN NAMED JOB

Every time I go to an American funeral, I think, **WOW**,
the Jews really get death. *I came naked from my mother's womb,
and I will be naked when I leave.* This is from the book of Job,
which traditional Jews read to the body as it fumes unembalmed
in the cool night air. Maybe we've always read this, a scroll some claim
is the oldest book in the world — older than Genesis! These Americans
trying to come up with something new, going beyond wakes and makeup
and flowers to arranging the dead in scenes that resemble life — say,
Uncle Rich sitting in the kitchen on a chair at the table drinking
a pint glass of Busch. *When three of Job's friends heard of the tragedy
he had suffered, they got together and traveled from their homes to comfort
and console him.* There's not many embalmers who could do that —
it's quite technical. And some asking for “green” burials.

Let the day of my birth be erased, and the night I was conceived. Just listen to that.
We Jews don't fuck around with death. If you're a Jew and you die, three people
sit and watch you — *Curse that day for failing to shut my mother's womb,
for letting me be born to see all this trouble* — your limbs shrouded in linen,
boxed in pine — you're already decomposing in the heat. *If only God
would speak; if only he would tell you what he thinks!* That first night,
the three that watch are called shomer (guard or watchman, but really
it's about honor) for *The poor must go about naked, without any clothing.
They harvest food for others while they themselves are starving.
They press out olive oil without being allowed to taste it,
and they tread in the winepress as they suffer from thirst.*

So in the morning when you tilt topsoil on the box in the ground,
it's not too far from tilling or harvesting, and the scientific fact
is right there in front of you, holy in its brown wormy shovelful,
holy in knowing that's where you'll go, too,
that's where it helps to remember the words of Job

as he cursed **יְהוָה** THE UNIVERSE
and **יְהוָה** THE ETERNAL CHAOS ALL AROUND US
responded: *Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars
and spreads her wings toward the south?*

JOSETTE AKRESH-GONZALES

MANDATORY PALESTINE

It is 1920 at San Remo and the boundaries of the mandated territories are not precisely defined
It is 2018 and I am streaming videos of the border and the tear gas and the tears and the blood
It is 1996 and I am holding hands with a boy in the golden sunset the desert air blooming
It is 1986 and my class and I are wearing blue and white in Manhattan at the Israeli Day Parade
It is 1976 and my parents are strolling in the West Bank and an Arab boy is throwing rocks
It is 1948 and four hundred Arab villages are under attack and are forced to evacuate, never to return
to their green olive groves
It is 1917 in the Ottoman Empire and the Turks are about to lose Palestine to the British Mandate
It is 2018 and a string of Palestinian protesters, hands held tight, shout and push at the gate
It is 1996 and we are outside a hostel in Jerusalem because a boy left his backpack in a bathroom stall
It is 1991 and Saddam launches scud missiles into Tel Aviv where my cousins pull on gas masks
It is 1976 and my parents could walk the mosaic tiles of the mosque at the hilltop holding hands
It is 1947, on the world map within the tiny arrow of Palestine a speck of white where the UN proposes
to hold Jerusalem as trustee
It is 1920 and a small boy and his sister have left the orphanage in Jerusalem in a ship bound
for New York
It is 2018 and I watch the live feed of a Palestinian baby bleeding in her father's lap
It is 1996 and we gather at Rabin's stone, heads down, placing pebbles on his grave, crying
who would shoot him
It is 1973 and the Yom Kippur War closed round like a noose, Egyptians crossing the Suez Canal,
Syrians rushing down from the top of the Golan Heights
It is 1948 and my grandmother is pregnant with her third baby boy, another New York Jew,
her Moishelah, my dad
It is 1918 and only a fraction of the orphans in Jerusalem find shelter, my grandpa Sam among them
It is 2018 and at least sixty people are dead at the border, hundreds more fist-sized holes at the exit
It is 1996 and
It is 1973 and
It is 1948 and
It is 1922 and
It is 2018

JOSETTE AKRESH-GONZALES
**IN EUROPE, MOTHERS ENJOY TWO
YEARS OF MATERNITY LEAVE**

Gun deaths are rare and infant mortality is lower than here,
and when the high-speed rail workers strike
the whole city shuts down.

I could move there with my family and learn the language —
in the middle of the night, that thought —
I don't really have a home town.

The closest thing I have is Brooklyn.
The boardwalk, and the pop-smack of men playing handball
under the boardwalk, their backs sweaty and all shades of brown,

Grandma changing out of her flowered bathing suit
right on the beach, seagulls and AM radio,
guys pushing carts chanting over the ocean and the people

Get yer fudgy wudgies here!

Get yer cold beer here!

Ice cold soda here!

But there's still Yiddish in Williamsburg,
in the southern corner of the neighborhood
a few streets sounding like the Lower East Side

in the early 1900s, when my grandma was born in a toilet
and learned what a carrot tasted like
at public school while her brothers manned the paper stand.

She told me the only carrots she knew were “soup carrots,”
and after she died, I closed the door on Brooklyn—
maybe I wasn't a New Yorker anymore.

JOSETTE AKRESH-GONZALES
**THE FRONT GATES OF THE
JEWISH GRAVEYARD IN CAIRO**

**The gates of Bassatine were locked
with a heavy chain and the graveyard
was surrounded by a wall.**

**It was too high to climb,
but along the far side
I spotted a makeshift earthen ramp.**

**I was halfway up the ramp when
someone started shouting at me
from inside the graveyard.**

It's closed, he said, the cemetery is closed.

I'm Jewish, I shouted down.

**Although his face softened somewhat,
he still wouldn't let me in.**

Talk to the rabbi, he said, you need an appointment.