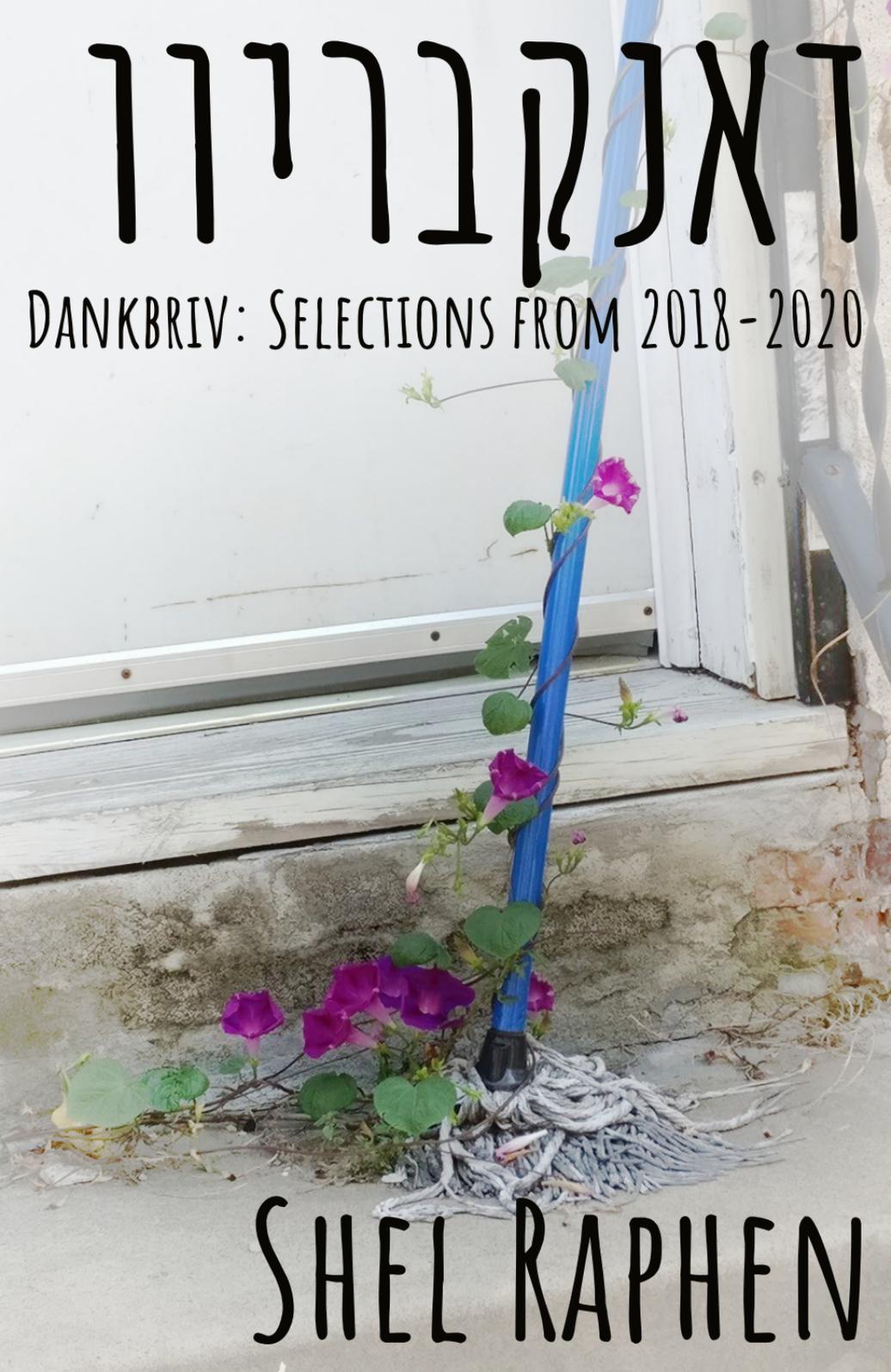


# דאנקבריוו

DANKBRIV: SELECTIONS FROM 2018-2020



SHEL RAPHEN

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

הקדמה PREFACE	1	העצן HETZIN	48
אהבה AHAVAH	4	Emma	49
An interpretive shehecheyanu between us, although I know you prefer what's traditional	5	The Pen and the Sword	51
Silence	8	Red (Young Mother)	52
Some say time was invented in 1847	9		
Constellations	10	דערלעבן DERLEBN	56
		For even if we lose	57
		November	57
		Someday	58
		TWENTY TWENTY	60
	12	Plastelos	61
גוף GUF	13		
Lines	14	טיוך TAYKH	64
Glottal Stop	14	Mikveh	65
Tactile Memories	16	Paradise City (In the Midst of the River)	66
Font Weight	21	Wissahickon	69
		Sirens	71
		Aquifer	72
		Asarah B'Tevet 5781	73
קעראטין KERATIN	24		
Nails/Nogln/נאָגלן	25	CHAPTER NAME TRANSLATIONS	78
Calluses	28	THANK YOU	78
Silicone	36	ILLUSTRATION CREDITS	79
ארבעט ARBET	40		
Dog Walker	41		
Patches	42		
Professional Boundaries	43		
Butterflies	45		

# הקדמה PREFACE

Dankbriv is Yiddish for thank-you letter. This book is a thank-you letter to everyone who supported me during a time of great transition in my life.

In 2019, I was diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, quit my full-time job, took medical leave from library school, and moved to Philadelphia to take a part-time internship and focus on physiotherapy.

This was an incredibly risky move, but it was made possible thanks to the support I received from supporters through Patreon; who were promised a chapbook called (E)Stranged Earth, about alienation in the Marxist sense.

It is now 2021, and a lot has changed. I finished my Masters in Library Science, resumed full-time work, and became an “essential worker” during a pandemic. I lost the inspiration for (E)Stranged Earth, and, looking back, most of the poems I wrote for it no longer meet my standards for publication.

I can no longer keep up with my Patreon, given my essential worker status, but I promised my patrons that they were funding a poetry collection to be published for free.

The poems that would have made the cut for (E)Stranged Earth have been mixed in with other poems that I wrote and published exclusively on my now-defunct Patreon. Mixed in are a few never-before published poems, and poems that had been published in now-defunct indie literary magazines.

This is my longest poetry collection to date, more of a book than a chapbook. I have selected my best poetry from the past two years that had not already been collected in other chapbooks.

I try to make my chapbooks work as a whole thematic piece, most of what is collected here are poems that do not fit into any particular project. I have sorted them thematically, but they are primarily miscellanea.

A sheynem dank to everyone who has supported me these past two years. I hope you enjoy my dankbriv.

א שרונעם דאנק

אהבה

AHAVAH

## AN INTERPRETIVE SHEHECHEYANU BETWEEN US, ALTHOUGH I KNOW YOU PREFER WHAT'S TRADITIONAL

I think I do understand  
in the kernel of your seed of perfection  
how that is not the need

I hear throughout a please  
understand  
my bruises

I wrote on this too, didn't I?

your experiences are as alien to me  
as mine are to you

I have no reference point.  
I cannot relate this back to me  
For each scar on your left  
mine is on the right

but I know that want  
for everyone who gets close to you  
to know the mineral makeup of  
the water you drew from the soil

whether the soil came from the yard or from the store  
whether the water came from tap or through a filter  
how much iron and how much zinc  
how much sun and how much rain

I think, zinc, is necessary for our bodies  
you would know better than me, but  
I remember seeing it on the label  
on the cereal that  
perhaps  
we both ate growing up

I remember thinking that zinc is a metal  
and does not belong in bodies  
but I knew someone once so deficient in zinc  
that their eyes grew big, their skin gray, and their head  
into a cone  
and they flew off in a flying saucer no really, I swear  
I know all of my stories are as unbelievable to you  
as yours are to me  
but this person abducted some cows on their way out  
and while property is theft, I think  
those cows probably didn't consent to being abducted

At the time

I couldn't understand why they abducted those cows  
but I later learned ground beef is very rich  
in zinc  
and that bodies will naturally crave  
the nourishment they haven't been getting

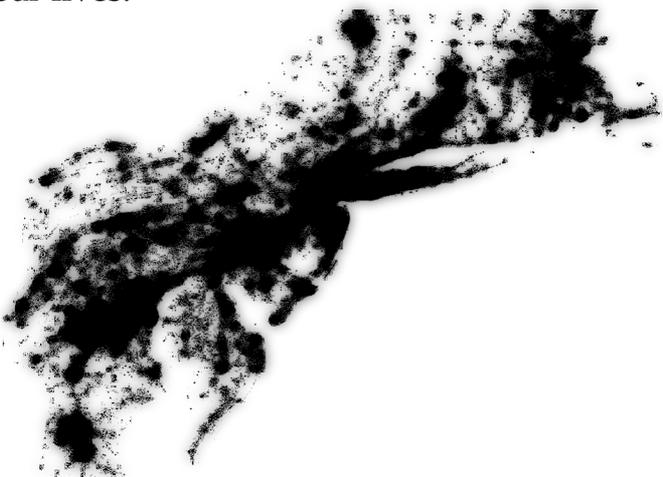
and I guess even zinc and iron are nourishing  
though I would never eat a nail  
which is to say I do get why you now eat bacon  
and I think you get why I avoid it  
even if I sometimes indulge  
which is to say I think we have both, perhaps, been an  
inverted form of hungry  
where we want to cook and serve our context  
and be nourished by understanding, by being framed  
which is to say I think every time you asked me  
if I now understood you better than before  
that the answer was probably yes

and that, I think, the answer to how we converged  
is that we both grew up towards the same morning sun  
craning our necks so our flowers face what feels warm  
wrapping our vines up the gutters so our leaves catch  
more light

my water came from the streams  
that once powered mills now long forgotten  
your water came from infrastructure  
built for a future paradise that never took form

or really, it just took form differently than was  
expected  
or really, whether we were watered by the past or by  
the future

right now,  
I am glad  
to have been planted  
sustained  
and enabled  
to reach these moments  
of our lives.



## SILENCE

And sometimes  
We just sit in silence  
On the phone  
breathing  
present  
As though your arm were around me  
Simply giving focus  
Only our breathing.  
Simply the noise  
or even the quiet  
just being on the line  
the background noise  
I close my eyes  
what a comforting whir  
to be where you are

It takes patience  
for the fruit to grow ripe  
a ripe berry tastes sweeter  
softer  
your arms

but it was your voice I fell in love with  
even when we don't talk at all

## SOME SAY TIME WAS INVENTED IN 1847

Tie me down to the four corners of the earth  
As the cruel morning sun  
displaces our knot

The smell of you displaces all resistance  
The way you hold me still as if to keep me  
How dare the El-Train come to take you

Could we lay a little while longer  
Listen to the soundtrack of the city  
Keep the window open, please  
Keep ourselves cold so we won't let go

But go, lest you be late  
Lest your boss grow cold and lonely  
Do not lose your life for me

## CONSTELLATIONS

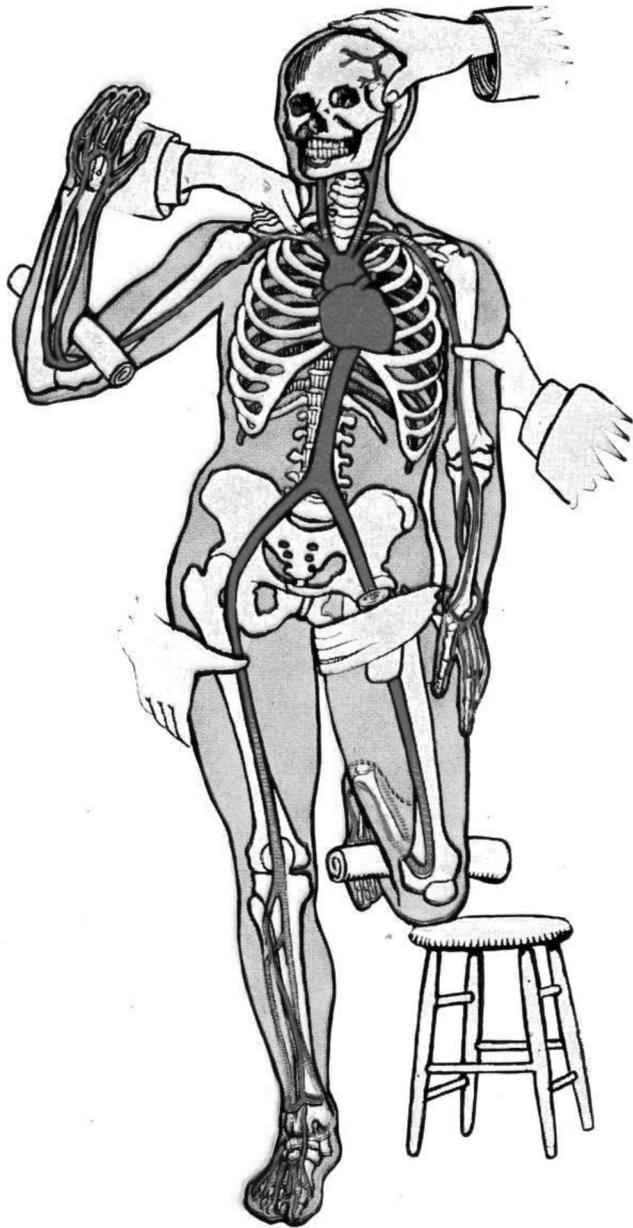
My sky is your sky  
Your stars are my stars  
And while here in the city  
The bright lights of many lives living  
Keep us from seeing constellations  
To the Stars, we are constellations too

From the international space station  
From the Moon la Luna di Levone  
New York is a shining star  
And lights along the rails link  
Boston and Philadelphia  
Into a bright celestial slime mold

For nobody ever gazes up and says  
Look, there is Regulus, alone and far away  
They see Leo, just south of Ursa Major

So perhaps in my yearning and longing  
I feel so far away but  
We are along the same ocean  
Reflecting the same blue morning sky  
We have each other and others  
And we are not alone

We are just waiting  
for our orbits to overlap again  
Waiting for when we align  
Our paths across the sky can be predicted  
We will meet again  
Slowly, as the Earth turns  
dancing around the sun



גוף  
GUF

א דיאנראמע וואס ווייזט אן די קערפערטיילען וועלכע מע  
קען צוזאמענדריקען כדי אפצושטעלען א בלוטונג.  
(זעהט זייטע 111)

## LINES

Take my lines  
and pull them  
pull my sides  
my shape outstretched  
these knees bend back  
fall forward  
out out out

take my pen and draw me  
what else can I be  
my topography is fluid  
when I said I was limitless  
I think you underestimated  
how little I care anymore  
about being a normal person

## GLOTTAL STOP

You are a body and  
there is a sound you  
have running between you  
an ugly inaudible noise

### The Glottal Stop

you are a body and  
you have a body part  
deep in your throat  
it opens and closes  
and it makes a consonant

you have become so used to it  
you don't hear it anymore

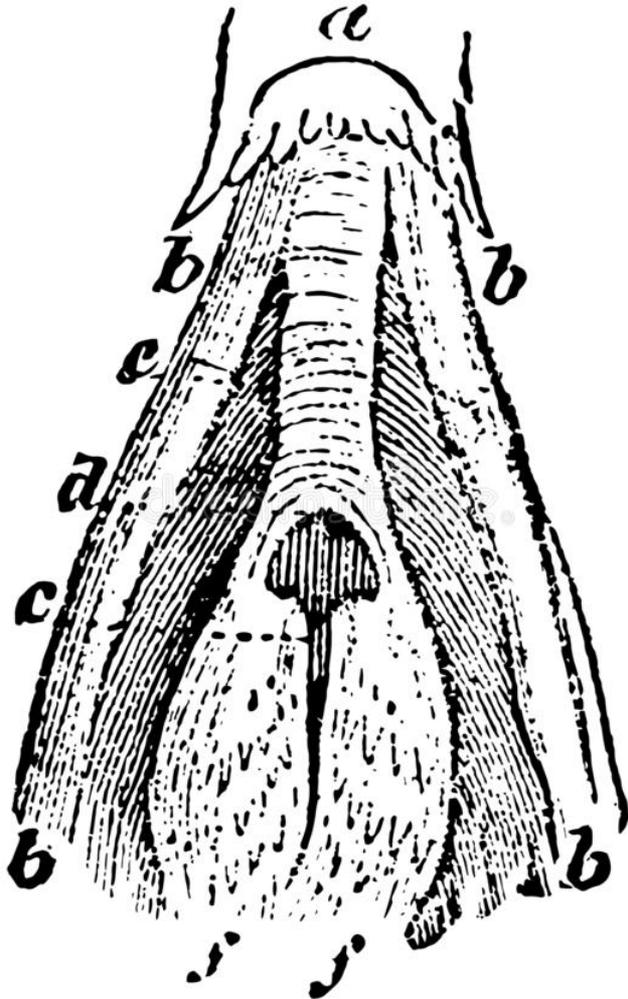
How every time you make a vowel  
you stop

air controlled  
you are conditioned

do you even remember how to speak  
without holding back?  
could you say AAAAHHHHH  
with the full breadth of  
everything you can give  
all your air and assonance

you gave up a part of yourself a long time ago  
this sound has run between you  
a deep deep sound  
an island far away

you are a body  
and you sell yourself  
your collagen and cavities  
your motions, emotions,  
your appearance and always  
your voice



## TACTILE MEMORIES

Swift sensitive tactile memories  
Tactile memories the fingers grazing  
gently brushing softly along  
to feel the gentle tense details of the realm  
we find us in, an alien, all big and new

Do you not see what I see  
Feel it with your fingers  
The crowning along the walls  
Follow it around the room  
It makes a curve just here  
Matte and soft and  
high pitched this white  
molding forms a shape  
Follow the lines and feel the  
pointed bit, a sharp angle  
'til swiftly down across  
a long curve to the wall  
Rough soft plaster white

Feel here, the wooden panels  
The lines down from bottom to top  
Notice the dark circles like  
the walls were burnt in these  
shapes like eyes form stories  
A dog looks at me from the wall  
My fingers get small splinters if I  
graze too far to the left towards  
the part in the lines where there is a  
small half cylinder between the gaps

Remember this way of perceiving  
Stimming the doctors call it  
Seeing the world as strange and new, I call it  
seeing with your hands

My eyes developed wrong, at first  
To see depth I had to reach  
out, out with my arms and hands and  
feel how far away it was

So when you throw the ball I  
reach out to catch it and  
knock it away and it's so fast  
I notice just the ball on the ground  
and I lift it

Feel that textured hash  
The surface is cross-hatched  
with strange swirling lines  
Press your fingers and feel that resistance  
Thin raised lines and air giving way the  
cold rubber somewhat wet with dew  
from the grass it landed in and  
in that dew a slight graininess a  
residue of dirt left behind beneath the foliage

Walk backwards on a balance beam  
Feel the pencil mold, hold it this way  
Write in circles and circles around  
The mold is soft, pliable, firm and giving  
It feels like an eraser does, fuzzy in a thin way

Miss Seagull, I thought her name was,  
A bird woman an  
occupational therapist who I saw  
once a week to play with putty fold this putty  
Make bubbles with it, is it because I'm smart?

Because I don't like to smile and I feel as though  
there was an orientation to this world  
that I missed where they told you all about  
the way the walls meet in a corner and  
the way the temperature changes  
right here to the touch  
where the pipes are and  
Have you noticed the way  
the ceiling looks like popcorn  
and  
that's why nobody seems so interested because

They already had their time to notice how  
strange it is that of all the ways the world could  
work we are all individual bodies  
with limbs and hair and  
we have to consume and excrete and bleed and  
we just as easily could have been cubes floating  
around in a colorful void and  
ambiently shifting the color of our surface the  
pitch of the palette the tone of the shade and  
there wouldn't be cars, in that world that  
way things just as well could have been

And in Boston's North End I  
notice every cranny and door where  
the steps look just a bit odd because  
nobody designed this so easily I can see  
stories forming here the way the concrete's rough  
exterior leaves pebbles on my fingers my  
mother tells me not to get dirt on my hands I  
brush them on my khaki shorts  
thar she bought me because  
at one time denim felt too scratchy for me and

As I grew up, I found denim more comfortable and  
As I grew up, I noticed less the little features and  
As I grew up, I stopped writing stories in my head  
about every fire escape and  
lost square doggy in my dreams and  
sitting alone up on the spiral staircase looking out  
on the pond seemed so far away someday  
I forgot I ever did it every day

until Lucy Sat me Down and showed me  
the crinkles in a plastic bag the  
way its geometry shifts with every touch I  
remembered the whole cavern world inside these  
bags and how I was told again and again not to put  
my head in them

Awoken in my body the way I stirmed I  
remembered pressing together the tips of my  
fingers and watching the way the color would shift  
on my skin the way my skin pulls away from my  
knuckles I thought at the time it was simply fun  
and normal and I didn't know the words  
"connective tissue" or "chronic"  
or "praxis" or "fine motor skills"

I was simply full of fascination  
My brain never pruned the trivial corners  
It's not that the other kids read the manual they  
simply don't notice the way that the floor forms  
traceable racing lines along the tiles they  
see a world less bright  
less loud less textured and stinky  
Their touch has no tone to it  
their letters have no colors  
their temperatures no pitch their  
sounds no tracing lines behind their eyes and

of all the cues to see upon a face they  
only see the ones that are important or  
that they think to be important and they aren't  
overwhelmed by gazing in each others' eyes

By how long, and which eye, and when, and why  
And when they say "love" it means itself  
and not how it could mean many  
many things to different people

And you know the reason Sally Anne might still  
find the ball is because maybe she forgot where she  
put it and by accident opens the box it's now in or  
maybe because Sally Anne is a puppet and  
the rabbit that moved the ball is too and  
children aren't stupid and we see the puppeteer

Maybe if I'd stayed in OT  
I wouldn't be so clumsy and  
maybe I'd have been pruned and wouldn't see all  
the wonder the North End has to offer that isn't  
gelato with little fruits on top to make it feel fancy  
but the way the clotheslines run from window to  
window and who set it up with whom  
and how and why  
it felt so magical, that time I spent alive back then  
and I only learned this year  
they ever said I was Special  
and now I feel stupid, but then I felt free  
and I cherish my tactile memories

## FONT WEIGHT

The weight of the line  
Sixteen pixels thick  
Unshakable unchangeable  
A zebra rests on my shoulders  
displacing and pushing them  
I can pray behind my back  
for it to all be some big lie I'm telling  
But I can pray behind my back

My legs are so thick  
And I am so heavy  
The ground is all small moguls  
The floor is cotton pillows  
My back is fine  
But not really  
My ribs itch  
but not really

I am wiped out completely  
I am trying to deny it  
I am trying to wish I was only lazy

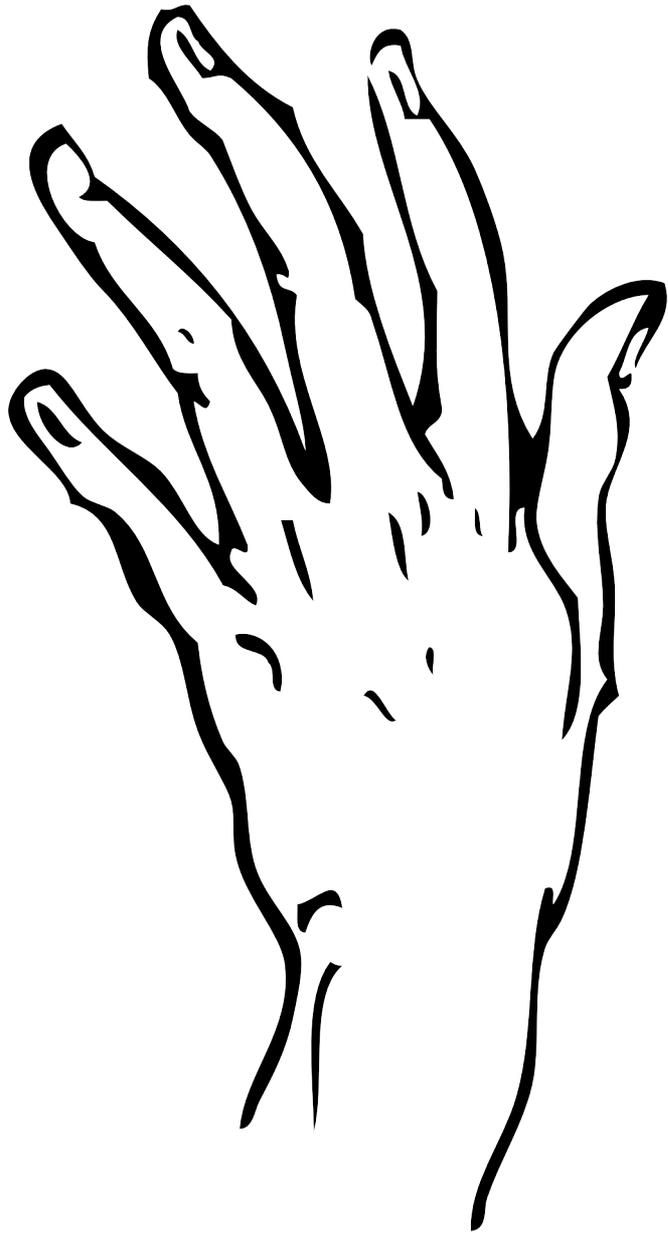
Because children are dependent on caretakers and I  
am becoming less and less independent and I am  
so afraid of becoming dependent and if I am  
dependent I will be alone and a child and I will  
wither and I am so afraid of being a child again  
and I have no choice but to be so charming and  
cute that you fall in love since I don't know how  
else I will survive which makes me basically a  
kitten which I find an incredibly offensive thing to  
think about since as everyone knows I am actually  
a puppy which is unfortunately also a type of child

But I am not a child. I am an adult. I am disabled.  
Un-abled. I simple cannot. That is the heavy thing.  
To be incapable. Disabled. Not disabling, not an active  
verb, but passive, it has been done to me, and it is  
done. I am the object of the sentence. I cannot do,  
I am done to. What's done is done.

If I admit this  
The weight of the words  
The depth of the lines  
The full everything and all of it  
I'm trying not to be melodramatic about it all but when  
words like musculoskeletal are involved you know it  
really is quite dramatic  
I am disabled

And the past is falling though my fingers  
My fingers that dislocate as I type  
The flying bird sign a new sign to say my condition  
A diagnosis forty-three syllables long  
But let me pray behind my back instead  
Mi shebeirach, avoteinu, v'imoteinu  
Let me daven and rock until my hips come loose again  
I will rise in spirit  
Physical therapy as praxis  
I am going to get this under control  
I will get my life under control  
and there will always be pain  
and things I cannot do  
and things I can do, but shouldn't

but for now please hold me and fetch me some water  
and I'm sorry for being a lot all the time  
and thank you for caring for me  
and I'm sorry but my brain is foggy again and  
At the very least I love you



קֶרַטִּין  
KERATIN

# NAILS / NOGLN / נאָגלן

נאָגלן

## NOGLN (TRANSLITERATED)

Oy, Aybeshter

Farvos vaksn mayne nogln gikher vi mayne hor?

Farvos ken ikh kreln, eyder ken ikh heyln?

Ikh ken bashedikn nokhamol,

eyder bin ikh veykh tzurik.

gring zayn azoy baysik tzurik,

un azoy koshe tzuvarten

a bisl tzuvarten un mayne hor veln tzurikkumen

ober, mayne nogln, azoy baysik, kreln

krel un krel, tseblutikn maynen kop

un zey... un aykh... un dikh....

Alemol, ikh muz flaysn shnaydn mayne nogln.

Ikh vil zayn bevaksn. Ikh vil farlozn zikh.

Ikh pruv oysvaksn. Ikh vil shatn keyn mol nisht.

Ven vel zayn ikh farvaksn?

Keynmol, s'iz ale keratin.

Ale fun mir vaks tsuzamen.

אוי ניבעשטער

פֿאַרוואָס וואַקסן מינע נאָגלן גיכער ווי מינע האָר?

פֿאַרוואָס קען איך קרעלן, יידער קען איך היילן?

איך קען באַסעהעדיקן נאָכאַמאָל, יידער בין איך ווייך צוריק.

גרינג זיין אזוי ביסיק צוריק, און אזוי קאַסהע צוואַרטען.

אַ ביסל צוואַרטען און מינע האָר וועלן צוריקקומען

אַבער, מינע נאָגלן, אזוי ביסיק, קרעלן

קרעל און קרעל, צעבלוטיקן מינען קאַפּ

און זיי... און אייך... און דיך...

אַלעמאָל, איך מוז פֿלייסן שניידן מינע נאָגלן

איך וויל זיין בעוואַקסן. איך וויל פֿאַרלאָזן זיך.

איך פֿרוו אויסוואַקסן. איך וויל שאַטן קיין מאָל ניסהט.

ווען וועל זיין איך פֿאַרוואַקסן?

קיינמאָל, ס'זי אַלע קעראַטין

אַלע פֿון מיר וואַקס צוזאַמען

## NAILS (TRANSLATED FROM YIDDISH)

Oh highest one,

Why do my nails grow faster than my hair?  
Why can I scratch before I can heal?  
I can hurt again, before I can be soft again.  
It's so easy to be sharp again,  
and so hard just to wait a bit.

A little waiting just a little,  
and my hair would grow back.  
But, my nails, so sharp, scratch  
I scratch and scratch, bloodying my scalp  
and hurting them, and hurting you

Always, I must diligently cut these claws  
I want to be hairy. I want to let myself grow out.  
I try to grow so I'll never harm again.  
When will I be overgrown and completely healed  
over?

Never, it's all keratin  
Hair, skin, and nails  
All of me grows together.

## CALLUSES

1.

When we harden our hearts,  
that is when the plagues come and  
For centuries we have struggled  
Why did G-d harden Pharaoh's heart?

Again and again  
She hardened him  
Encased him in solid keratin  
The world a dull rumble  
Hardly able to sense a thing

His calloused feet  
knew not upon whom he trampled  
His calloused hands  
Felt not the warmth of blood upon them

Why entomb his heart in stone  
Why not instead through his nose  
Breathe chesed, loving-kindness

Why not trouble him with guilt  
Or simply smite him  
And only him  
And not the Egyptian mothers  
Who had no choice to make

Why give Pharaoh a choice  
Only to ensure he'd choose wrong

2.

Every day I choose not to bomb the Philadelphia  
Regional Immigration and Customs Enforcement  
Office located on the corner  
of 8th Street and Arch Street

Every day I choose not to soak a rag in kerosene  
Not to stockpile gasoline  
and mix it with laundry detergent  
Shove it in a bottle with a match on top  
and toss it at that whole damn complex

Barad, a hail of fire upon the kingdom

I am not G-d

It is not for me to decide  
who lives and who dies  
But neither is the President  
And he's been deciding anyway  
Maybe if the Pharaoh had died  
a lot of firstborns would have lived another day

But there are more ICE offices  
Than on 8th and Arch street  
And more will die than just cops  
If I set a fire in the center of the city  
Donald Trump lives two hours away and

Haven't you heard?  
There's a plague going on  
We need to stay inside  
Did I miss the frogs? Pestilence already?

Someone set a fire in center city  
I'm cheering on the arsonists today  
While I wrung my hands over consequences  
A braver soul brought Barad to an unjust land  
I let someone else set fires for me  
Let the consequences be on their hands

But I think, if I had set a fire  
the police wouldn't shoot me  
And the people they'd blame  
It's their city, their risk, their fire to set

My windows are closed to keep the smoke out now  
An amalgam of tear gas, pepper spray,  
and smoke smoke smoke  
I'm rewriting this poem late at night,  
listening in on evil  
Fires in front of the white house  
Fires in front of city hall  
Fires on the pharmacy a few blocks from my house

We know how this story goes  
The Pharaohs will harden their hearts again  
Even Barad is not enough

These cops aren't even human anymore  
They're just cloven hooves the whole way through  
If they had any softness, left room for tears  
Perhaps they'd cry for their victims  
Beat their batons into plowshares  
Instead of beating black bodies  
But I don't see them quitting  
They're not tearing off their carapace,  
thick and blue

O'G-d, let me never be so uncaring  
Of how I hurt others so  
Let the tears flow forth  
and flow, and flow

O'G-d, bless the arsonists  
Bless the looters and liberators  
Bless the chanters and the runners  
Bless the locusts, and the darkness  
But please, bring an end to prisons  
Before the babies have to go

3.

The body learns where needs protection  
Callouses of keratin grow where there are wounds

Keratin, the most sacred part of the body  
That which protects the vulnerable  
That which grows  
That which scratches  
That which provides warmth  
That which dulls the senses and  
That which is vulnerable, and sensitive

Both roles,  
To be hard  
And to be soft  
Are sacred



4.

G-d hardened the Pharaoh's heart  
Because the Torah is a story

Perhaps if Pharaoh had been able to choose  
He would have freed the Hebrews  
Without a single plague at all  
But what'd be the moral in that?

Ask the Cesar nicely and he'll leave?  
Ask the King to end the Inquisition?  
Ask the Czar not to burn our homes?  
Ask the Fuhrer not to put us in camps?  
If you don't want to die, say please?

The real Pharaohs don't need G-d  
To make their hearts hardened  
And there is nothing sacred about it

So G-d had to harden his heart  
To ensure we'd have a good story  
A useful story

It tells us that rulers are stubborn  
That even in a plague  
They would rather let us die than let us go

Egyptian firstborns didn't really die  
It's just a story G-d gave us  
Written down in a tablet on a mountain  
So let's learn from it

5.

When we harden our hearts,  
that is when the plagues come  
I do not want to harden mine  
I want to feel everything, even sadness  
I want to be soft and sensitive  
I will not protect myself from love

Please never stop feeling  
I see in you your caring and trust  
I see a shining beauty in your heart  
A soft light that lets you hurt and be hurt

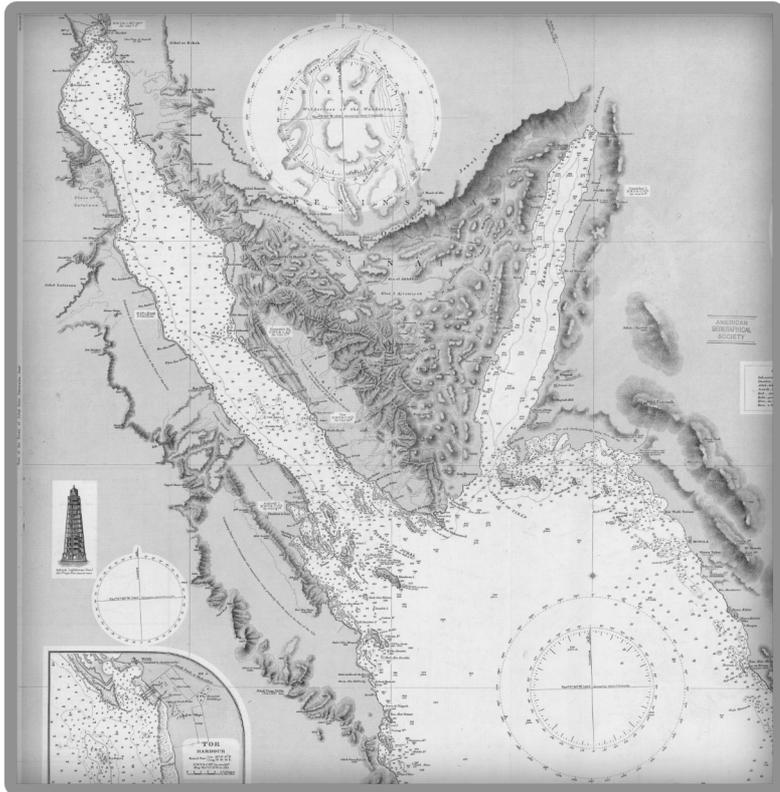
Sincerity will set us free  
Never stop trusting  
Never stop caring  
Never stop loving  
Never stop taking the risk  
of being hurt and hurt again  
Let's feel it all together

Grieving strangers  
Loving fighters  
Crying over hurricanes  
Anger at a lover's betrayal  
Disappointment in a burnt loaf of bread  
Adoration of a friend you've never met  
Envy of the rich  
who are weathering the storm upstate  
Hopeful and hopelessness

I want to feel everything

Be wise  
Be smart  
Have boundaries  
See patterns and protect yourself  
But please never feel stupid or ashamed  
Because you let yourself love someone  
Even if they let you down  
And when you're ready  
Take the risk again

Keep your heart soft and open  
And we will cross the sea of reeds again



## SILICONE

I know I know  
In this world it feels like  
your door is always open  
and anyone can lubricate you  
insert you  
and mine your silicone core  
for recyclable materials

and you think about how there's no real way  
to recycle silicone  
cheaply or easily

you think you are all used up  
and not worth the effort  
to breathe in new life

or that that life breathed in  
could only be for profit

I know  
In this world it feels like  
the doors are all closed  
the joints rusted shut  
and you don't get the oil  
to loosen them up

and you think about how oil  
only comes from dinosaurs  
mined under war zones  
how opening these doors can only be done  
if you harvest the silicone cores  
of other plastic toys  
to melt into silicone lube

but you know that silicone lube  
isn't safe for silicone toys  
like you  
it dissolves the outer layers  
makes a sticky breeding ground  
for bacteria and germs

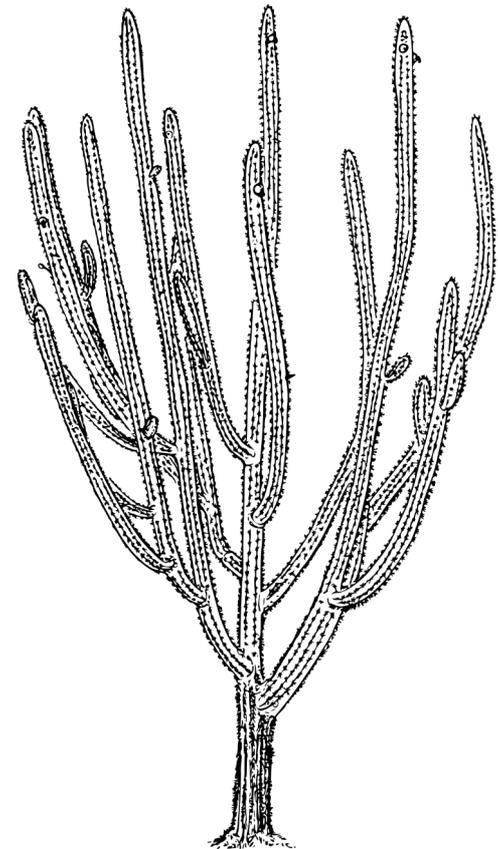
I once knew a dildo who  
Tried to sterilize himself through  
Slowly boiling himself in a Dutch oven  
Slow cooked for seven hours  
And he only got stickier

And I don't think he found a way to get recycled.  
I think he's in a landfill now.  
Completely and utterly immortal

so you murder just a few people  
you only buy the fair trade blood  
there's no way to ethically eat silicone  
shoving it down your throat  
choking  
lead additives eroding your brain

I think it was Marx, himself a plastic whisk  
who said if all the spatulas, vibrators, and water  
sealant rings bonded together  
into one big silicone mound  
we could snap those doors off their hinges

I think then  
perhaps  
there is a way  
to give birth  
to keratin children  
in a very different world.





ארבעט  
ARBET

## DOG WALKER

please imagine this, it is so important  
imagine a dog walker in the park  
on her leash is a hot dog  
being dragged through the grass  
"Are you walking a hot dog?" you ask  
"Yes," she says  
"gotta pay the bills somehow  
we all have to do what we can to get by  
it's tough work but this is how I survive"  
"What do you do with them when you're done?"  
"I return them to their owners"  
"Do they eat them? all covered in dirt and mud"  
"Not my business I just walk the hot dogs"  
"I have some favorite hot dogs,  
favorite ones to walk, that is"  
"Who is your favorite?"  
"There is a link of bratwurst that lives on the  
corner of 48th and Larchwood; the marjoram is  
fragrant even still after so many walks"  
"Can I pet her?"  
"Sure"  
You kneel down to pet the hot dog  
fingers reaching for that shiny skin  
but a Dachshund runs by and eats it up  
ah, there it goes  
munch  
"ah, fuck" says the hot dog walker  
"not again..."

## PATCHES

You wear your politics on your jacket  
And the jacket comes off at work  
At the store  
Job interviews  
And anywhere where you don't know  
If everyone who sees you  
Will already agree with the heart  
That you're wearing on your sleeve  
  
You wear your jacket to the bar  
Hoping someone finds it sexy  
When you believe  
What you believe  
  
Even this item  
Decorated with everything you are  
On the inside  
Is on the outside  
Is removable and  
Really quite performative and sometimes  
I wonder if I put  
A patch  
On my jacket  
Will it be less genuine than to never  
say  
what I believe  
at all

## PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

We speak behind panes of frosted glass  
Although, we do not know how many layers  
or when they have been lifted

A prisoner's dilemma

If we both stay behind the frosted panes  
we will always be lonely and safe

If I think you have lifted your veil  
that I am seeing a true self  
and I reveal mine

only to learn you were not true at all  
you may report me, you pathetic snitch,  
and I will lose everything

If we both lift our veils

If we both trust that the other is not frosted  
We risk forming a fruitful beautiful bond  
such splendor so bright and reflective that  
those around us may tattle  
what pathetic voles  
couldn't stand a glimmer of life in the Dead Time

So to stay safe, we always stay veiled  
behind many panes of frosted glass

But lo'

Slender Aphrodite has overcome me  
with mild attraction for a coworker  
Is his pane of frosted glass what I find so alluring  
Stained with appealing patterns  
for employers and employees alike?  
Should we meet outside the Dead Time  
How many more panes of glass am I seeing  
Is this the craft of a man seeking to seduce

Should we dare to be alone,  
will you show true colors so violent and brash  
Colors you hide at work, for work, to get work,  
and hold down work?

When I lift my glass and show my truest self  
how I'm not like the other girls,  
I've got a few more organs,  
and cloven hooves

(Moo)

Will he reject what he sees  
And every day at work we sit in silence  
never speaking of the world we almost had

Best to stay safe

And alone

Hide in the Dead Time and be only something  
never someone never honest never real  
Never knowing what we could have  
My mildly charming coworker and I

## BUTTERFLIES

Her teeth are longer  
and when she drinks her coffee  
her mouth unfurls from its coil  
to sip the nectar  
her tongue wraps around the back of her skull  
she looks almost entirely completely human  
she is sitting in the chair at the front desk typing  
I don't think she knows  
that she dyed her hair the same color  
as the person who sat there before her  
though her hair is shorter  
though her stature is shorter  
though her face is thinner and longer  
and her eyes a bit smaller

She is quiet  
and friendly  
and there is nothing wrong with her  
at all  
but the way that everyone accepts her  
perhaps you should accept her

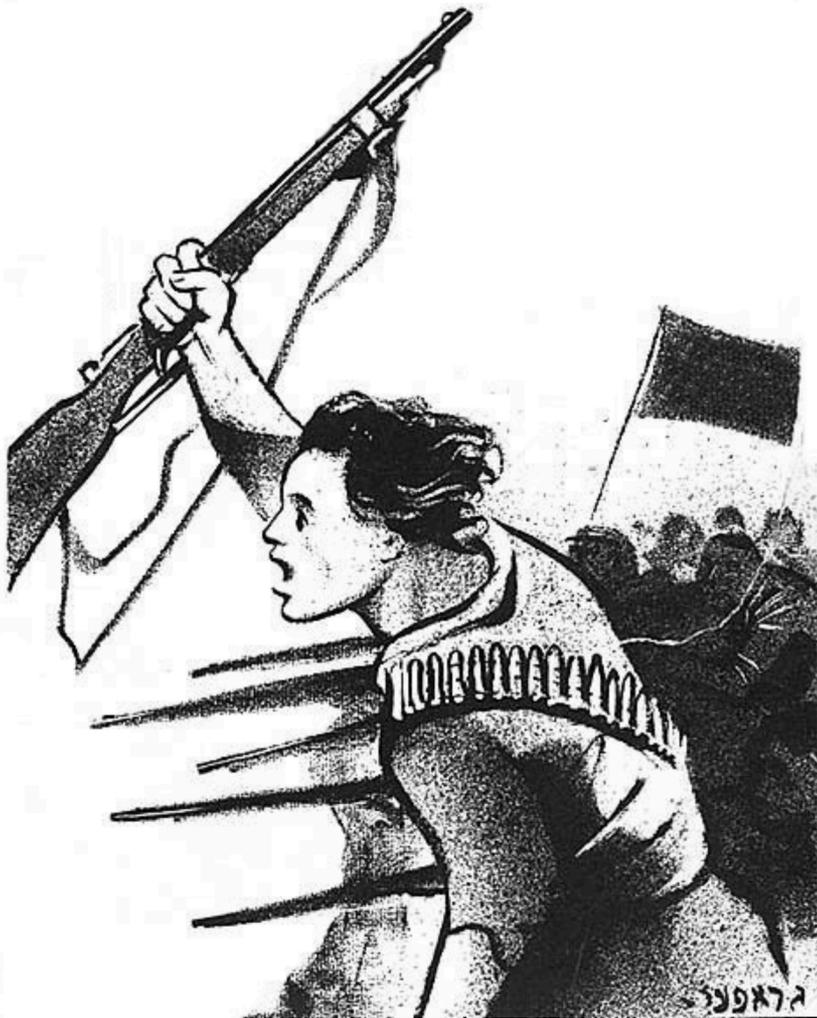
it's just that when you call the front desk  
now she picks up  
and when you email  
she replies

nobody is talking about it.  
or what happened  
or why  
you can welcome the butterfly  
but you never said goodbye to the caterpillar

you saw her every day

The caterpillar was there for you when you had claws  
in your shoulders  
and you lent her your phone  
and sat with her  
when someone got shot on her street  
and she called each of her kids  
and waited  
and waited  
while the phone rang and rang  
and the office was empty  
and no, this was not work related  
four of her hands in yours  
three holding phones  
and one drumming on her thigh  
bouncing half her legs

at this point the butterflies outnumber the caterpillars  
and the butterflies are better at their jobs  
and they're much prettier  
and the patterns on their wings remind you  
of caterpillars  
their names only spoken in whispers  
the one that offered to do your hair or  
the one that made everyone dinner on thanksgiving  
because she couldn't make it to PR that year  
and she wore thick perfume to hide the smoke  
and when the hurricane came  
you all pitched in to help her family come over  
so the next year she did make it to thanksgiving  
and then one day the posting for her job went up  
and you never  
saw her  
again



העצן  
HETZIN

# EMMA

When my eyes first opened  
I saw ashes  
When your eyes first opened  
I saw the world

My whole life I've been wondering

And I learned so young how wrong this system is  
and I looked at the other girls, that is, the girls  
and

My whole life  
I've been wondering

But it seemed it could never be  
and it seems it never would be  
and it seems as my life comes to its end  
it never came to be  
but the ashes have been cleared from the grill  
and new coals have been lit  
and I see it again  
I don't see you much these days  
but I see circles  
and circles

Today I saw so many young people  
Doing what I never did  
I worked, and I sang,  
and I did my best to raise a family  
all the while weighing on me  
Wondering

Had things been different  
Had I been born another way  
Differently  
Later  
Earlier

and I may have said some things I regret  
and I may have done things others don't like  
but I see hope now  
What I never did, is being done  
and what isn't being done  
is something I know I can do

Fire  
I will see fire  
From ashes I came and to ashes I will return  
A new world will be born  
No one above me, and no one beneath  
And nobody else will get hurt  
(but people will still hurt)  
but maybe  
that hope can flourish  
and the world to come will be.

My whole life... I've been wondering  
and now I know  
and now you know  
and you see

Not alone, but together  
follow me

## THE PEN AND THE SWORD

The pen is mightier than the sword  
said the lord to the peasant  
his scabbard at his hip

The pen is mightier than the sword  
said the judge  
his bailiff's hand reaching for  
the holster at his hip

the holster at his hip  
has a gun in it  
the barrel of the gun  
can launch a bullet faster  
than a pony can deliver your letter  
from Paris to Versailles.

Nobody writes with pens anymore  
The sparks flow from all ten fingers  
your lightning strikes millions  
perhaps power now flows down  
the wire of a fiber optic cable

No.

The pen is mightier than the sword  
says the landlord to the tenant  
but the cop's gun will kill you  
before you hit send

## RED (YOUNG MOTHER)

Put fire in your eyes  
young mother for your child is aflame  
My bride has many beats she can drum to  
and for you, a mournful battle cry  
Her shores stained red  
and red we will remember

You hold her red-stained coat  
You show us that jacket that baby's blanket the  
standard red fatigues  
And in your eyes...

Only cowards dream of Mars  
and think the sun our enemy

It is not in heaven  
the den of the men who took your daughter  
they fill her with gas  
her deserts turned to glass

Their barracks are built of brick and stone  
concrete walls and tarmac roads  
have you ever thought  
about what tarmac is made of  
concrete cooked in oil  
petroleum asphalt slag and sludge  
They dig it from your daughter's pores  
They sate their thirst with endless wars

The fire fills your retina  
Your macula  
Your optic nerve

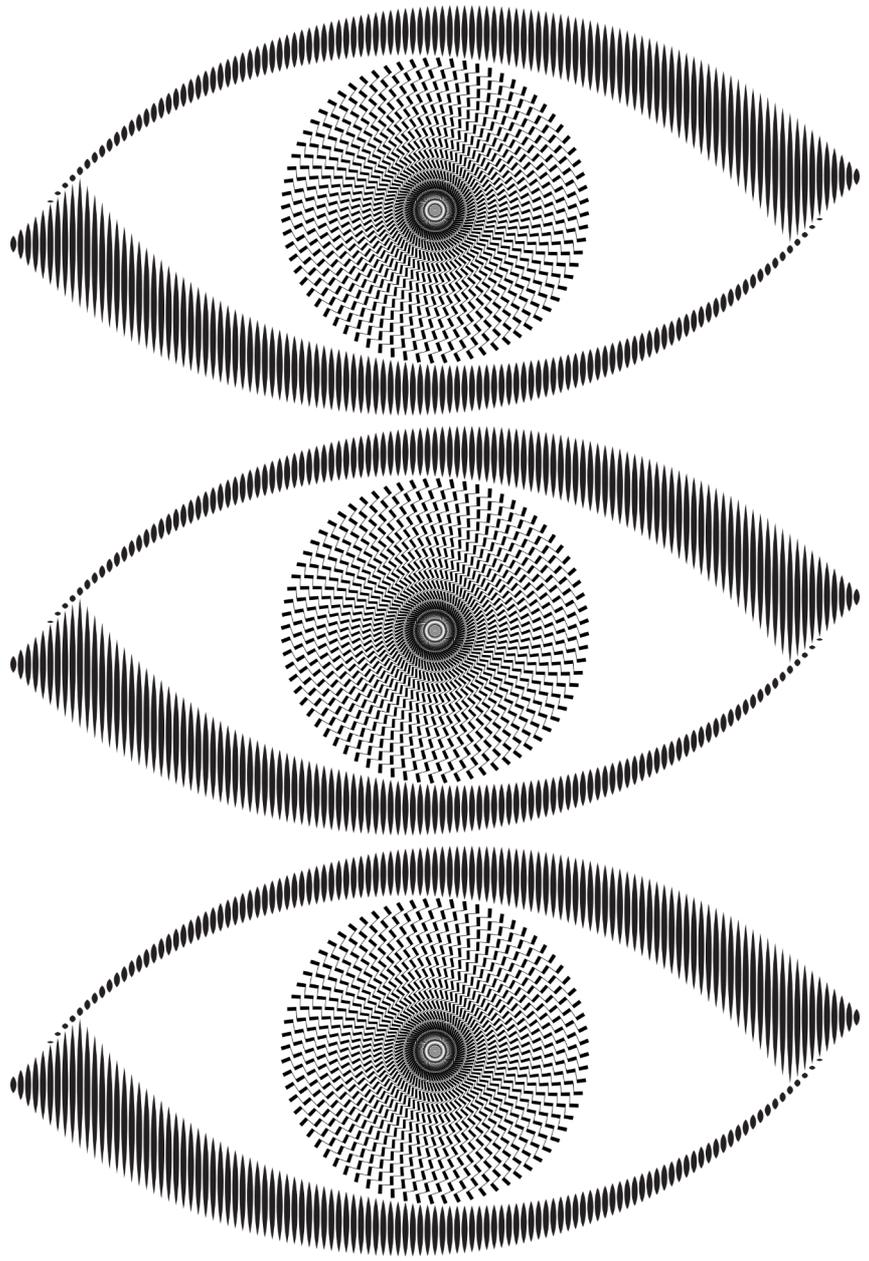
You say to the rebel  
That you only ask  
To take those men  
(and women)  
Take them and make them feel it  
The fire in your nerves  
The fire down your spine  
The pins and needles  
The sense of circulation slowing down and stopping  
Through each and every artery

You say to the rebel  
Young mother  
That you are the rebel  
And you will don the dress of the rebel  
The discount used hoodie of the rebel  
The cheap jeans of the revolutionary  
With the holes growing near the thighs  
And you will take up arms  
black, brown, and burnt arms  
Linked arms, hairy arms, calloused and soft arms  
And the people without arms  
will take up legs and wheels

And your arms  
Arms that held your daughter when she was born  
and in her eyes you saw reflected  
the entirety of the world she would make  
and in her hand she held the woman who would,  
one day, build that world,  
but you didn't know that yet.

You didn't know you would have to be the one to  
build the world she was going to make.

And when you take up arms  
Young mother  
You can take up rifles too  
It's okay.  
It will be okay.  
you will make it be okay.  
Put fire in your eyes  
Young mother  
You will never forget the enemy  
And you will always remember red



דערלעבן  
DERLEBN

## FOR EVEN IF WE LOSE

From all abandoned places  
New life sprouts forth  
Not necessarily human life  
But new life none the less

## NOVEMBER

A sweeping crescent of birds perch  
up on a branch marking seasons  
I do not feel we are approaching  
October anymore

Stockpiled orange bottles  
A crate of meals, ready to eat  
Three storms of water

Not October  
We are preparing for another world  
The birds flock all the same

## SOMEDAY

Someday,  
Somebody really is going to eat their landlord

First,  
they're going to take a butcher's knife  
and cut off his head  
Humanely, of course

His body will be broken down  
into breast, thigh, leg, and wing  
His carcass will be salted and boiled with herbs  
to make a fragrant landlord broth  
The rest of him will be put in a bowl with soy  
sauce, wine, garlic, pepper, and bay leaves

He will marinate in the fridge overnight  
He will be transferred to a Dutch oven,  
where he will be joined by spring onions,  
potatoes, carrots, and chilies.  
The landlord broth will reunite with him  
He will be covered and slow cooked for ten hours

He will be stirred occasionally  
He will be paired with Jasmine rice and served  
In a little red bowl  
To his former tenant's dog

The dog will get sick  
from the garlic,  
but the tenant doesn't know that  
The tenant puts the leftovers away in the fridge  
And later,  
while high,  
will forget what was in that Tupperware container  
And that's when it happens  
They eat their landlord  
And the most beautiful part  
Is that nobody ever comes looking for the body

## TWENTY TWENTY

THE 2020s WILL BE THE DECADE  
THAT EVERYTHING HAPPENS  
WE NEVER THOUGHT WOULD  
FOR BETTER OR WORSE  
ALL OF IT  
WITH ABSOLUTE CLARITY  
WE WILL SEE  
WE WILL FEEL  
THE ABSOLUTE TANGIBILITY OF AN  
ALTERABLE WORLD

*(This poem was written in November 2019)*

## PLASTELOS

It was difficult to explain to our children  
the cause for celebration

Yesterday we had a festival  
We sang new songs  
and old songs  
Ate new food  
and old food

And we buried seeds in the ground  
and we tilled the soil  
and there was color  
and art  
and games  
and it was so very difficult to explain  
to our children

Yesterday, the plastics finished decomposing  
It has been over a millennia since the last plastic  
factory closed down  
Yesterday, the final landfill became fertile again  
Our planet finally finished healing  
from the trauma of our ancestors

I have never touched plastic.  
I saw some in a museum, as a child  
but even that has now decomposed  
Has finally  
finally  
become soil  
something living  
something new life can grow from

Yesterday, at the festival, we planted so many trees.  
Special trees, genetically modified to absorb carbon  
dioxide from the atmosphere at such a high rate that  
someday

eventually

Even the atmosphere will have healed  
and I will be gone  
and my children will be trying  
to explain to their children  
why they are celebrating

Such an abstract, complicated idea  
That thousands of years ago  
The land, sea, soil, air, was divided up and controlled  
by only a few people  
and they filled the air with gas  
so much gas  
and they filled the earth with  
"plastic"  
this mythical, cheap, substance  
which could be made so easily  
and would outlive anyone who made it

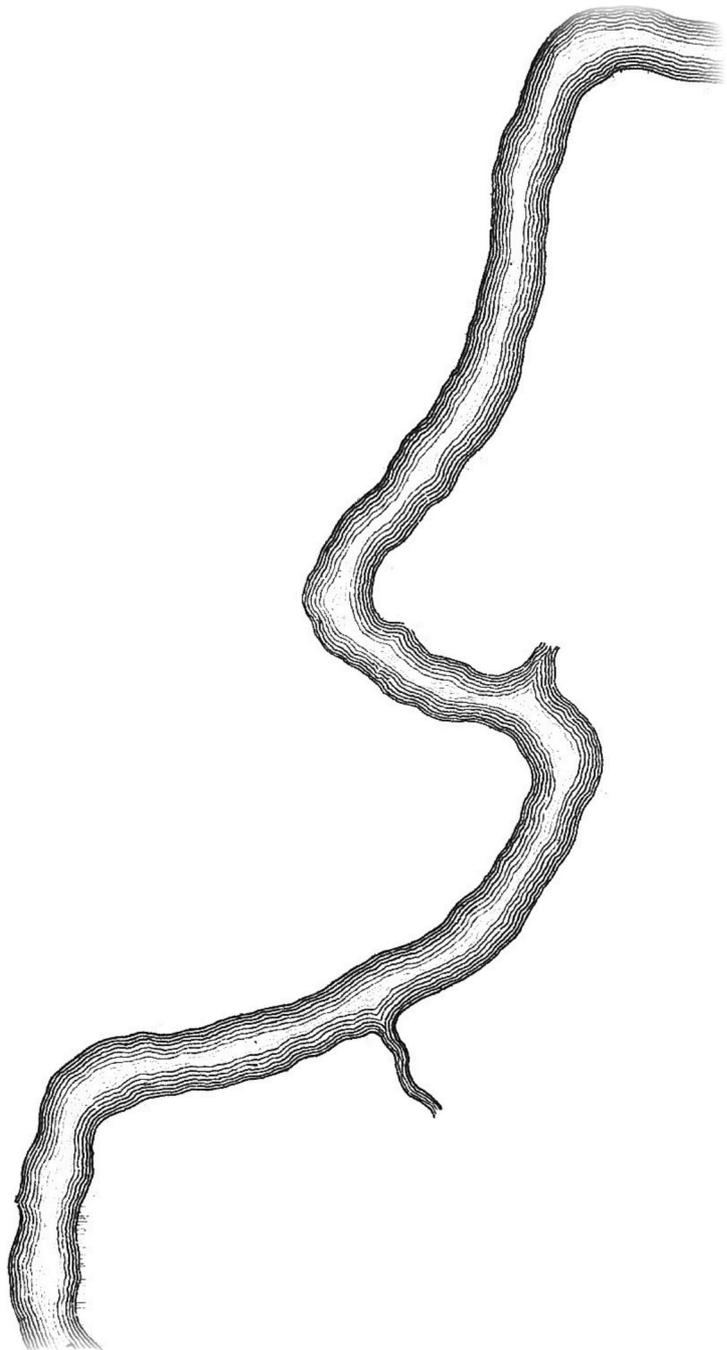
What do you mean, MaPa? What do you mean they  
controlled the land? How do you own land? Did they  
keep it in their pocket? How did they own the water?  
Did they pour it into a very large cup?

Yadi, Yadi, tell me more, how did they change the  
weather? Amora told me they lit fires. They lit so  
many fires that the weather changed. How did they  
do that? Why did it take so long for people to stop  
them?

And so we sat in the grass, at the festival, telling  
stories of the past, the past we barely remember,  
the past we barely understand, the stories of our  
ancestors, of which only ancient sacred books  
recount,

The stories that explain  
why we are celebrating the Plastelos.





טַיִךְ  
TAYKH

## MIKVEH

1.

in the walk-in freezer I can drop for a moment the  
corners of my mouth and breathe the silent whir

2.

when the zip ties were clipped  
And I stretched my arms  
Not the impending incarceration but  
That still moment as the blood returned to my hands

3.

Embraced in living waters  
the warmth of a body  
Held in those moments completely myself  
Every weight washed away  
lost in the lake  
Up and up I catch my air and float on my back  
The stars are clear the moon is new  
The Perseids shoot across the sky  
The peepers sing and  
naked strangers laugh and cheer  
Shehecheyanu have you ever in so long  
felt unlimited  
Floating in living waters

## PARADISE CITY (IN THE MIDST OF THE RIVER)

In the Midst of the River  
A starlit trail in depths of night  
The Moses of her people came through here  
Bringing black Hebrews to the Promised Land  
So the legend goes

And for just short of a decade, they called this land  
Paradise  
Because Truth lived on a commune here  
for a scant few years  
and the City of Progress had John Brown  
and rust came to progress  
and Brown is not how I would describe the faces  
in Paradise City these days

A mountain cuts Paradise from Progress  
and then the highway cut Progress from the river  
and soon, rust came to Paradise too

And then one day, somehow  
Paradise became the rainbow mecca  
the dike for dykes to settle down by  
Sex shops on main street  
Nolwotock became New Lesbos  
The white flight destination of choice  
for lesbians with letters after their names

And when I came here  
there were still two sex shops on main street  
and the year they painted that rainbow crosswalk  
was the year the last gay bar closed down

But to me, I came from rust to rust  
I followed an icy trail a year when gas was cheap  
As settlers do, I built my home  
In the midst of the river

and now the Oxbow overflows  
and I see how quick the river runs

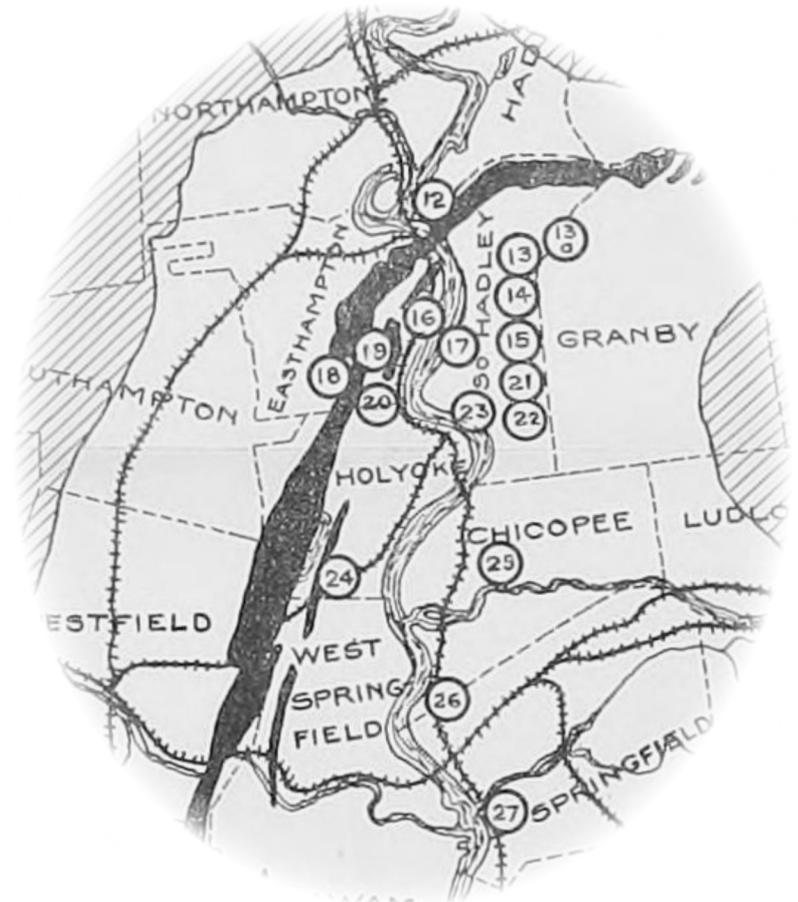
A river is not a place where things stay still  
I tried, but the currents kept pulling me  
south and down and out and away  
My arms tread water  
but my legs can't kick  
fast enough to fight  
the undercurrent pulling  
this whole town's everything constantly outwards

The river is a place people travel through  
Since Truth and Brown  
and the Moses of her people  
to Smithies learning literature  
and runaways from rust to rust

Boutiques for tourists from Windsor  
owned by rich fucks from Windsor  
run by workers who could never live in Windsor  
and can't afford Paradise neither  
so they take the bus from Paper City  
From rust to rust  
and from the owners to the customers  
to the workers  
Nobody stays in Paradise for long

Paradise was built on displacement  
Smallpox, war, and counterfeit wampum beads  
Rent, again, is rising  
and even the settlers are being displaced

The backbone of our community  
doesn't live here  
and the river is red  
and red  
and copper  
and brown



# WISSAHICKON

Beneath the Vine Street bridge  
A river of cars is always flowing  
At night the purple skyline glows  
The light of Comcast shines down upon us  
Busy people making business

But when the virus hit  
The motor river stopped  
The vines grew up the ridge again  
Silence at the library  
Books without their readers

Logan Square's nothing but a circle of asphalt  
No life carried by the useless hot pitch  
And at the fountain sat no people  
Nobody in sight, but Mr. Penn  
Looking down from city hall's steeple

But water is a wild thing  
The water always keeps moving

We can dam it for so long  
But stone in time succumbs to water  
Desperate to run run run  
The river changes course  
Oxbows form and flood in season

When we're gone the water runs  
When we're gone the oceans rise  
The rivers rush to meet them

Wadis dry and rain down again  
Tidal pools on rocky shores  
Host hermit crabs and fiddlers  
Currents and sandbars form and flood  
As the moon makes her laps

What I find comforting is how it doesn't need me  
The water always keeps moving  
I don't need to think about it  
I don't need to know about it  
Completely outside of me  
and my solipsistic paranoia

When I'm stuck in my stories  
Not sure what to believe  
The water is still always moving  
The river's course changing  
The dams eroding  
The waterfalls flow  
The tides ebb

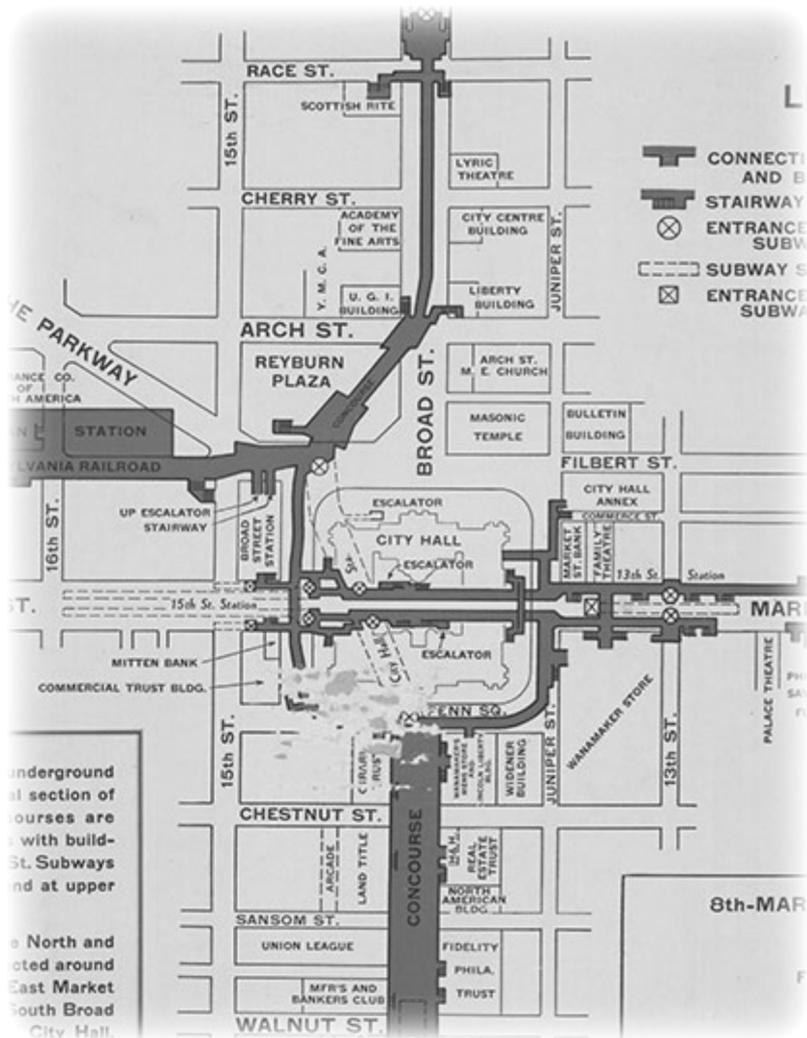
And I'm waiting for my bus connection  
Wondering  
Who should be my insurance beneficiary  
Who will plan my funeral  
If I die this year  
Will it be a Zoom funeral

Oh  
Look  
The Wissahickon is still moving  
It's been moving this whole time  
It never stopped when this all started  
No matter what I decide  
This part of the world  
Right here  
Will always still be alive

# SIRENS

It's hard to masturbate with all the sirens these days  
Will aggressively spraying cold water up my asshole  
live up to the hype?

The correct poison is still poison



# AQUIFER

People can be a river  
Underground, off to work  
An aquifer beneath the streets

They built Baltimore Ave on a creek  
They built a brook under Broad street  
More than a Brook, oh how it rushes

But I worry,  
as the water starts flowing again  
As I see a little more people each day  
That a sinkhole will open up above us

And a trolley falls in, crushing the train  
A new dam on the river,  
a reservoir floods the valley

South Philly is a swamp now  
Fascists defending stone and steel  
But what about the people, drowning

There is so much labor

The virus is named Crown  
It spreads at work  
While commuting  
It has no mind, it only grows  
And it makes us alone  
it keeps us from breathing  
And it hits Black people the hardest  
And this isn't a metaphor  
But a virus that spreads through capitalism  
Feels like a thin one

# ASARAH B'TEVET 5781

⌘

If I said Kaddeish Yatom  
five hundred thousand times  
My heart would still feel empty this year  
Yet still more than that have died by now  
Yet still there is more to do to mourn  
I search for yet another prayer  
Yizkor, Ma'ariv, Sh'ma, Ahavta, Amidah  
Let us say the mourner's kaddish yet again  
Yitgadal vyitkadash shmey raba  
And again  
Yisgadal vyiskadash shmey rabo  
This time in English  
Blessed and Sanctified be The Name...

⌚

What does mourning do for the dead  
To comfort their absence  
To honor their memory  
To atone for their remaining avonim

⌛

Were I to die,  
what would I want from mourning  
May my death be information to you  
Learn a lesson from my passing  
Carry that memory with you  
And may it bless you with wisdom  
so that you may live  
And this would comfort me

May my life leave a verb behind  
Gather what good I have done  
May my memory bless you  
With the energy to continue the work  
Plant carob trees and heal the land  
And this would honor me

May my death be an end for you  
But remember what love I gave you  
May my memory be a blessing  
That brings you comfort when you cry  
So that I may be there for you still  
And this would atone for me

⌜

For the five hundred thousand  
And counting, here alone  
How am I to mourn  
When each and every one is surely unique  
An entire complex story  
To an end

Learn, comfort, honor, atone

To know it's real  
To promise it will end  
To do my job  
To stay at home

ן

Five hundred thousand  
And counting, here alone  
And yet I know none of them  
But we are closer than we thought  
Yet we are further than we wish we could be

י

Everyone I've known who has died  
Died from suicide or cancer  
Mostly suicide  
A little bit cancer  
Usually trans women  
Usually on an unknown day  
By an unknown method  
So today is their yahrzeit  
What could we learn from suicide  
What good is comfort to them now  
How would we honor them  
How dare we atone for them

י

What good does mourning pogroms do  
Greatest grandfathers  
Killed by cossacks  
Christmas eve  
Know we're never safe  
Assure them we are safer now  
Try to survive  
Say never again

ן

Try to survive  
Bring books to the nurses  
To read alone  
As they do what we all do here  
On the front of hospital city  
Do our jobs  
Stay at home  
Again and again  
An act of mourning  
Every day

May their memories be a blessing  
So that we do not join them

ו

For the unremembered dead  
Who we mourn this day  
Not knowing who we mourn  
Whose memories cannot be blessings  
May there be peace  
In their old quiet ends

And for all the five hundred thousand  
And counting, here alone  
Who would not be mourned this year  
Had they not been sacrificed  
To those idols of silver and gold  
DOW, NASDAQ, and GDP

May HaShem avenge their blood  
Blessed be the name

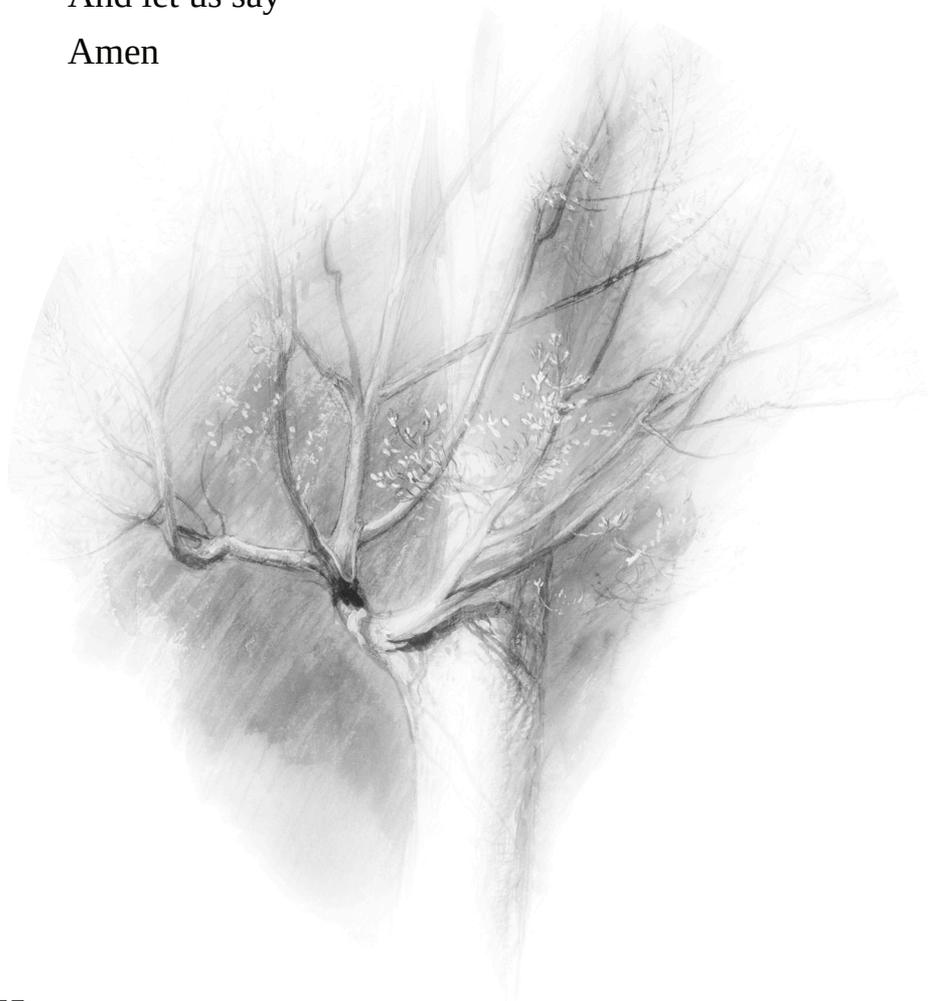
,

May the Highest, who makes peace  
In their highest places  
Bring peace to us

And upon all our people, and upon  
the ones who we were told were our enemies,  
and upon the whole world

And let us say

Amen



## CHAPTER NAME TRANSLATIONS

**Dankbriv:** Thank-you Letter

**Ahavah:** Love (Hebrew)

**Guf:** Body

**Keratin:** Skin-Nails-and-Hair (English)

**Arbet:** Work/Labor

**Hetzn:** To Incite (a riot)

**Derlebn:** To-live-long-enough-to-see-it (an event)

**Taykh:** River

# THANK YOU

TO ALL MY PATRONS:

YATCHI BEA KHR MORITZ EIDEL CLÉMENT  
HEATHER TOM BLACKLE NAT JAE KY JESS  
"STRONG JESS" JAY JOSIE SAM

# ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

Page 7 - Satellite imagery from NASA, edited by author  
Page 11 - Der Familyen Doktor, p31, 1926 - Yiddish Book Center, edited by author  
Page 15 - Patrick Guenette, morphartcreation.com  
Page 23 - Anonymous, Pixabay  
Page 31-32 - Parnes Haggadah, Bob Parnes  
Page 35 - Nautical chart of the Red Sea. Surveyed by Captain T. Elwon, Commander R. Moresby, and Lieutenants H.N. Pinching and T.G. Carless - 1873 (Public domain) - American Geographical Society Library  
Page 38 - Anonymous, Pixabay  
Page 39 - Cover from Der Hammer, 1927  
Page 47 - Cover from Der Hammer, 1936  
Page 55 - Gordon Johnson from Pixabay  
Page 62 - Landfill park, edited, from a defunct retail listing  
Page 63 - British Revolutionary War map of the Delaware River at Fort Mercer, 1845 - Library of Congress  
Page 68 - Triassic Life of the Connecticut Valley by Richard Swann Lull, 1915, - Wellesley College Library  
Page 71- Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company. The Underground Pedestrian Concourses, 1936, - Free Library of Philadelphia Historic Map Collection  
Page 77 - Budding Sycamore by John Ruskin, 1876  
Covers - Original photograph by author

Dankbriv by Shel Raphen was self-published in Philadelphia, PA, in 2021/5781 under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International license. All illustrations used are public domain, created by the author, or otherwise have a license allowing for their use in which case they retain their original license.

# OTHER BOOKS BY SHEL RAPHEN

*Afterimages (2016)*

*Jovian Flesh & Fauna (2018)*

*Alef el-Tav (2019)*

*Moments in Motion (2020)*

*Poems That Are Not About Coronavirus Disease 2019 (2020)*

All of which are available for free download at <https://shelraphen.com> and at <https://workingdog.itch.io>

The latest information on how to obtain a print copy is generally on my website. At time of publication, there is a global pandemic limiting the availability of print copies.

My twitter is @workingdog\_

## **Special Thanks:**

Jay, for proofreading

Eidel, for bookbinding

Mimi, for breaking my writer's block

The Aces, who stuck with me through 15 months apart

Sicily, for giving me rides to and from work during

the peak of the pandemic so I could avoid

overcrowded buses, this might be why I survived

My co-workers and my union, for obvious reasons



Do Not  
ENTER