

Pieces from the Blue Notebook, 1996. [Merle Bachman]

Writer's Statement:

This was the notebook I took with me to New York the first time I studied Yiddish at the YIVO summer program, at Columbia.

This is the kind of poetry as musing/thinking/piecing-together that I love best (to write; to read, as others write it).

The questions I ask and things I notice here—at the threshold of knowing any Yiddish, and with the faintest acquaintance with the Yiddish poets whose own obsessions would drive my “Recovering Yiddishland” book-- still speak to me.

The disorient of being out-of-place, the familial loss that feels (becomes) historical; the body in its language, as its own language—these things still part of my ongoing work.

[beginnings, undated]:

What does it mean to be *in* but not *of* a place?

--a slender preposition that supports a glittering weight

*

Scrape away the outmost layer
the one grafted onto old wallpaper with its
pattern of fountains & then on down
to the plaster—dull, blank—
 it's always been there
they just covered up its staring with
designs, some millimeters thick

Paper; layers
stripped-off & then
the wall, as frail
 —you could punch
a hole in it, only then
the dark emptiness would be too much.

In a world of argument, be still.
Be the one who swallows her words
(as if she possessed them in the first place)

Insert, here, an image
of sun stroking grass, sucking the moisture from it.

Insert, here, an image of
internal landscape—the way breath furs
the breastbone.

*

What am I doing, what else could I do,
quivering, weak-eyed, poring through words
no one else loves,
the centers of daisies with their petals torn off
still a dull glow.

Something uncoils
at the thought of Jerusalem—
(the Oakland Rose garden
same pines
same dust of needles, intense sun)

a place that assigns meaning:
constructs it for you
into which you fit, like it or not.

Take charge:
don't be a leaf in the stream.

*

6/23/96 (first evening in JTS dorm):

... a bare apartment: that's all right, I know how to deal with it, occupy it.
enjoying (when I can) the idea of being here—as close to a homeland or motherland as I
can reasonably get.

The # 9 line rears out of the ground behind this building and I can hear/see its shattering
progress, at regular intervals (still uncounted).

The odd questions I'm trying to bridge, with the substance of my life—
photos of Jim; postcards of California (an old map), the ocean near Elk—
and of Mulberry St., 1906.

An "unidentified woman immigrant"
sleeping on her belongings on an
Ellis Island bench
(head resting on the large basket
hands embracing it)
--And of Albany—

the places I feel “at home,” for
different reasons.

6/28

the small crack between sleep & waking—
it clogs with dust.

Death-Angel,
you are a sidewalk & an encyclopedia,
invertebrate & caustic—
seldom do dreams force words back
inside your own dripping mouth.
You’re doing a job, someone’s job,
the bricks of the city
depend on it.

(This poem reads like a translation.)

[later --]

Does Yiddish have a location?

...
what does it mean to
have a connection—follow the
thread—back to the banks of the Dniester
or to Warsaw?

[mourning the unexpected loss:
summer I gave up the dream of a child, saving/fixing everything; the home, family,
domesticity; culture, tradition, a sonorous regularity]

*

thunder in Manhattan
Jewish *essen*, *paprikash* stinging

the air-soup warm, has grit
a fire pepper

possibilities
are soiled

(one language slowly
eats another
& you don't even realized

what's been replaced

vays vayse nekht

someone else wrote that line.

authenticity
shivers from it
threatens
to tow you out to harbor

and everything written begins to sound
translated

(in the interstices a train rears
out of the ground)

East River a memory an oil slick
you could say, a filth

dumping tons of trash in exchange
for a few
bright shells

heavy together, we can lean
forward, into
the past

students, memorize for tomorrow all polite
expressions (such as

--*he's* fly fishing at Brookie Heaven
I'm *shvitsing* on a cot in this room suspended
over Broadway—
 but why not?

--a failure
to translate
or

he was replaced (momentarily)
by nouns & inflected adjectives

7/3 for grandpa

language not in a state-of-emergency
(black cherries, *shvartse* kirsh
preserved in Chekov's bottles)

where they stood *el mole rokhomim* at the edge
of a field, now
 an edge of concrete—
poor grandpa, his stone among others have pressed
up against it till there's just the fence
next to a road where
cars do 50

poor grandpa who spoke five languages
was literate in four
coughing himself to eternal sleep at the age of 41
& the wife, eight children, one a mere infant (one my mother)
 and so on.

wind plucks a tree's beard.
no goat, no hay or
milk, warm & sour from the teat

just a cemetery crammed with the usual dead

the seal of asphalt close at hand.

How hard it is to remember
what was never mine to live.

7/10

M. uncovered a memory.
It was real (the words it
was made of): *real*.

Sometimes, *kinder* or
a joke: *gey shlufn!*

They scattered words from another
language into their speech.

We were given two names.
One, for public—for friends and school.
The other, secret—used—when?
Mulke with the pulka! --jokes.

What they heard, growing up—
he (*tateh*), in Manhattan, the Bronx; she
(*mameh*) outside of Albany (the farm the nice
German Jews sold them).

A wrinkle—*kneytsh*—
at bottom. tender(ed).
A bolt, like dropping dead at 56
too much *shmaltz* stopping up your arteries.

Images. Her picture scares me—
huge woman with a shelf of breast, full face, stern hair
smile-less. (*Gib mir a shmeykhl--*)
Solid as a shut door, behind which

lies the Old Country—
Europe: handkerchief
field, poppy seed birds
sticks & stones

a featherbed
the blunt-stitched *mantl* (cut open & stuffed--)

--a shared mythos pricked them to
leave, go forward

and language a damp fortress to live
inside of.