

*Death of an Artist*

De Kooning, in love with his mother, erected  
a city of women in paint, a miracle of art,  
to calm the harsh waters of his ego.

Rauschenberg, in an act of underrated nerve,  
with the simple weapon of an eraser, destroyed  
his friend's masterpiece, signed

Yours,  
Bob

De Kooning never forgave him that gesture  
and gave up on friendship forever.

In the last phase of his long career, Rauschenberg  
populated remote warehouses in Manhattan  
with great sea turtles. De Kooning wept  
for his mother, the true subject of his art  
translating heartbreak into bright ribbons of color  
sweeping across his canvases  
in disentangled rainbows.

The death of an artist brings down the sky  
like a prayer shawl over the heads  
of the living.

On Yom Kippur  
my hands were brushes washing the world  
with azure. The martins overhead  
dripped whiteness on the bridges, laid out head to toe  
in mourning.

## *On My Great-Grandfather's 131st Birthday*

Who was this man? I've never even seen a photo.  
Somewhere in Poland, or what is now Belarus  
he likely lived surrounded by mud and cows.  
My imagination pits him against the rabbi—  
a staunch anti-conformist, a freethinker—  
but history informs me that he laid *tefillin*  
three times a day, said his evening *Sh'ma*  
and went to bed with a tightening stomach.

My great-grandmother must have begged for sex  
on Friday nights, groping for him  
in the noiseless dark, as *cholent* slowly burned.  
I want her to have been a strong woman  
for her time, but again the books inform me  
she put hope in her children and the *Nayer Velt*.

They would not recognize me, the handiwork  
of two generations of Americans,  
their great-grandson. And I wouldn't know them  
so removed are we from each others' worlds.  
But who can help imagining our meeting?

"Who are you?" my *elter-zeyde* interrogates.  
"The son of your only granddaughter,  
Hannah-Basha." "Why have you shaved your beard?"  
"Aren't there more important questions you could ask?  
For instance, what are my beliefs about God,  
what do I eat for breakfast, in which part of the world  
do I live?—inquiries of import and some relevance."  
The old man seems unmoved by my arousal  
and protests with a heavy finger, "*Apikoros!*"  
Yiddish for heathen, epicurean.

The language he speaks, an Eastern dialect,

spins out of control like a man slipping on ice.  
Time and destruction have refracted it  
unrecognizably - now neither of us has a key  
to the other's world.

"Tell me about yourself,"

I prod, moving a step or two closer  
to the egg-yolk yellow of his sleepless eyes.

"What's to tell?" "I knew that would be your answer."

"A dead man has few words, but no hairs on his tongue."

"You speak in proverbs. Tell me about yourself."

"You know the story of the prophet Nathan?

You are reminding me of him." I want

to scream, *Tell me who you are!* but ask

"What happens when we die? Does God exist?"

I know there is no answer to my question

at which point my great-grandfather disintegrates

into a manic fog of gesticulations

and I to the endless dialogue in my head.

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