

The Explosion of Binary Stars

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This book is dedicated to my brother,
Andy Blank, 1957–2010

An Air France Flight from Rio to Paris

When the bird went down we could not see it
break into silver reflections that careened
off the skin of deep waters, hear it explode
into the silence off Fernando de Noronha
where men catch aerodynamic dog snapper
with scoop nets they mend over and over.
If there was lightning, we didn't see it.
Maybe the storm clouds were like walls
as massive as the walls of Jericho.
Charybdis threatening to swallow them whole—
all those people and one baby, 228,
not a lottery ticket or the molecular weight
of gold—196.97, if you care.

The next time I climb onto the back
of a bird and sit astride it like a jockey,
my arrows clenched in my teeth,
I will whisper the name of the drowned.
Or maybe I will take a pill, wear my best
underwear and imagine pages of my diary
afloat atop the salt water, all the different colored
inks smudged, my words running
together until what's left looks
like a Rothko water color of sea anemones.
Yes, of course, the diaphanous tutus
of sea anemones amid the debris.

Under the Snow

After dinner I scrounge for my ticket
to give to the underground parking attendant
whose cuffs of his bulky hand-knit sweater
are pulled low over his hands.

Inside his glass cubicle a book of physics
lies open, I recognize such plutonium
packed pages, the cramped numbers
amid a few “q”s, “x”s, “f”s and “y”s .

A former boyfriend studied Special Problems,
tried to explain the difficulty of rulers
without calibrations small enough to measure
the speed of elementary particles or large enough
to determine the height of a cliff from which a rock
is dropped, if the splash is heard six second later
and sound travels at 340 meters per second.
Over these dilemmas, outside the familiarities
of Euclidean space, he would frown and scribble
tight equations hour after hour, while I streamed
through Faulkner, intoxicated and out of breath
in the green of a single run-on sentence,
page after page dotted with hidden moonshine
stills and the scent of Magnolia trees in bloom.

I query this thirty-some guy with hairy fingers
who has apparently immigrated from the bowels
of Russia with a Green Card, acquired through
the largesse of a philanthropic organization
which helps Jewish scientists come to teach
at Columbia or CalTech, though I discern some
have fallen through the grate like lost keys and toil
as night janitors or parking lot attendants to put milk

on their oil-clothed tables in apartments that smell
of root vegetables and sweat. I hand over \$10 and ask
further about his studies—his field of research
is the neutrinos produced in *electron-positron annihilation*.
The fragile bones of Russian ponies
buried beneath the snow of the Volga steppes.

Remembering Three Walled Cemeteries

1. *k'riah*

In the wall of darkness a tale
Is enshrined like a star

Its mortar tastes like ash

But nothing can be explained in this way—
Explanations make sense
 In the way of explanations only

Things the eye cannot long hold
Expelled on a low tide

2. *onen*

We saw them piled by the river
We try to forget
But we close our eyes
And see them by the river
When we fall asleep

Our river shorn of its blue
Promises nothing, moves too fast to befriend

Friends died together, held out their hands

The radishes black as spiders
As if a film of butter lay across his open eyes
Only a hawk above the potato field
The school gate rusted off its hinges
Bricks from the station's chimney toppled across
 the tracks
The train tracks no one would bomb

3. *taharah*

Crushed skulls in the dirt—
Shells in starlight, fragments
Of men whisper electrical
Messages between cortical cells
Gyrations of white matter
Where dead men live on
As ghosts amid the matter
Of fresh bread with seeds
Soup on the stove
Fragrant, innocent as a cow

Baby wolves howl
For their mother under
The new moon

The other moon
Also howls

Carpenters file to the square with wooden bowls
Butterflies migrate through my eyelashes
A mouse guards the kitchen door
Twisted loaves with seeds

When things are this bad, things do not line up
Jelene is gone
Ninita never goes out after dark
Vassi never kisses under the new moon
No one has a cat
No one remembers the name of their cat
We cannot imagine a world with cats

4. *k'vurah*

The liar always finds some woman
To love him
Anyway

A fellowship of liars
Who took away
The men
Turned men into soap
Turn soap into lead
What's left by the drain
What's left before the brain
Drops
Into sleep
At this point in history
A point has no dimensions
No perspective

No eye
No I

Still they howl
Drops of rain begin to fall

5. *kevod ha-met*

In the long-padlocked theater
At last the red curtain rises
Again above the empty stage
The audience sits transfixed
By the playwright back from an island
Of bananas, parrots and moss
Who writes a permissible play
With the prop of a bowl of cherries

That sits throughout the three acts
A man shaves off his beard
The mystery concerns a miscarriage
Dust to dust
During two interminable intermissions
People smoke on the steps
Above the plaza empty as rain

6. chesed shel

Liars with gay batons and ingots
On their soapbox shoulders
The ones who followed orders, too
Somehow them, too

The sounds of leaves keep them awake
Lines of men caught in the music of leaves
Or the dreams of children
Separated from their mothers
What measurement can be salvaged?

Above all, the uniforms must be proper

As, after all, we come from dust

7. tachrichim

From the roof you can see the ocean
A sliver of blue just a bit darker
An azure crease
The color of Vassi's eyes

Fingers moves the beads
Beads the color of ocean

Prayer beads to finger over and over
If we say this over and over, it will still be true

A loaf with seeds no one eats
Seeds the color of ivory, the color of bones
Crushed by the waves of rain
Of years, of ash, of other things
In orbit behind the eye

Behind the old church of St. Volodymyr
The venerable monk pulls the bad tooth
Without whiskey, twists his pliers with all his force
Bends his knees for extra torque

This plaza is where it happened
They took them away
The one-armed man with a moustache
Oversaw their burial
Like teeth in the furrows of the field
So many lies cannot hide the truth
Bodies piled like matches

8. hevra kadisha

Jelene cannot forget
A wild bird sick inside her chest
She cannot remember the prayer
Does it go right to left or left to right?
Do they hear it? Is there a stove pipe
Into the heavenly body
To transmit the prayers
The full range of notes
The bass grandfather missing a thumb
The soprano fiancé in her red kerchief

Children off-key in the choir of St. Volodymyr
The old plumber who snores

Dragons arise from the buried teeth
The plaza buried in ash

The cat named Lena is gone
For days hunting the meat of the moon
Vassi feeds the hawk with a broken wing
On the plaza old men drink tea in the afternoon
Across the plaza girls walk arm-in-arm
Jelene talks to herself
The baker feeds her day-old rolls with seeds
For all of these animals and people only three cemeteries!
Three walled cemeteries

People buried where they fell

9. emet

First Ninita fills her pockets with stones
Then she burns the scrap of paper
The directions take her deep into the forest
A hundred paces to the south her dress rips off like paper
Near the river that is too fast to befriend

No pears ripen here

Bubbles come to the surface
A door blows open
And slams
Boom!

Unlit candles kept in the drawer
The moon lengthens each day

Like a teardrop or a boy's
Kite so high it is a red dot
In the overcast sky
No day exactly the same length
Jelene uses her tongue to shine the soup spoon
A bush bursts into flames

The faculty thrown from the roof
The youngest boy escaped
They bolted the door and set the building on fire

10. sheloshim

Fresh wolf tracks in the snow
White candles in the drawer
An abandoned rat's nest in the tablecloth
Discolored lace in shreds
Coming apart
In the cold center of the moon

She closes her mouth to guard the darkness
A cousin of darkness seeps out of her open eyes
The father of darkness smothers the river inside her
An orphan of darkness naked in the light of her stars
All these darknesses rule the catacombs of her body
Inexplicably three cemeteries