

Conversation Pieces

Volume 48

# MARGINALIA TO STONE BIRD

by  
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*to BT, SN, and ST—with love and gratitude*



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## ***Burns at Both Ends***

If you burn this fierce, firebird,  
you'll finish yourself off,  
you'll die young, they said.  
I tried slow, sluggishly,  
ended up beige and feeling like gruel.  
Who cares about tepid? Better the sizzling  
feathers of nightmares,  
the flesh of desire subjected to torturous time.  
Old age doesn't scare me. I'll live as haphazardly as before,  
dropping clutter and rubies wherever I walk.



## Finding Voice

## *The Three Immigrations*

### First immigration—The Strangers of the Glass

*in dress of handblown cinnamon and blue*  
and speaking speckled bubbles in the glass;  
Their power is to come and pour a road—  
to molt the land for us,  
then leave

### [The In-between]

with luggage of caramel leather and brass locks—no,  
there's no romance in this travel. Only a crumbled  
book in Yiddish and a tin  
of buttons (*remember the horn one from grandmother's*  
*mustard dress she wore on the train to...*) cut from all the old  
dresses, and grandmother's  
death certificate is ten days old. A plastic bag  
of photographs. A dry salami.  
In Hungary, they put us behind bars.

### A Mini-Map

There are two waters in my land  
bridged by a road of molten glass,  
and if you step on it, you'll pass  
outside of tenses:  
neither past, nor present, nor a future, nor  
(first, second, third) a person (singular or plural)  
instead, a being on the road of glass

**[In Hungary, they put us behind bars]**

to wait for the plane. Like rats in a ca- /  
people / sheep to the sla- / (*now you cross out*)  
My grandmother's ghost  
struggled to follow us, but lost her way  
somewhere in the fields between point A  
and the warehouse. They didn't  
let us peek out. My father said  
Budapest must be beautiful

**Second Immigration –  
The Strangers in Soldiers' Clothing**

*war-tossed in weeping ships  
they arrive at Northwater. They left behind  
everything,  
even the ocean. Brought only the bell  
forged by citymakers  
by true voice-makers in the old country. The song  
tolls the dead into their new earth. They build  
a church at Graveyard Island, and hang  
their voice there; then on  
to the road of glass*

**[Arriving, the Gulf War]**

is the first thing I remember. Bombs falling, and a gaping  
hole in the wall. Sirens. A family of four,  
we locked ourselves in the bathroom. The gas mask smelled  
like gas, or burnt rubber,  
or a language.  
Cockroaches ate  
my mother's salvaged wedding dress, and I learned  
to speak; made up three languages to hide in

## Beginnings are endings

When they reached Southwater, the war clothing  
seeped into their skins and they as speechless as fish  
that clog the glassroad,  
fish for the souls of the dead  
scraped onto the glass.  
They settled by the Southwater,  
walled off a city there. Called her Bell,  
or perhaps—  
nothing.

## Third Immigration – The Strangers with Animals

*They come joyfully, bringing only  
their most beloved ones—a small city  
guarded by white beasts in the heart of one person; another  
carries a snake abjad to spell the truth  
in blunt consonants. Another's heart  
protects the bird of vowels.  
Shall they unlock  
the larynx of love and longing, or shall they step  
onto the road of molten glass?*

## [I was so terrified, I don't remember]

a thing of that last journey. I'd packed  
two changes of clothing (my mother had bought me  
four-inch heels with her last money; I cannot  
wear them, but have no other shoes).  
Three books—  
a battered copy  
of the Poetic Edda in Old Norse, Biblia  
Hebraica Stuttgartensia, and Ted Hughes' *Crow*.  
I do not remember  
how they stood—my father speaking  
for the last time, or my mother—

before his stroke. I do not remember  
how the plane smelled, or the long winding line  
at immigration services.

Alone.

In the future of me, the San Francisco Bay Bridge  
circles my head like a red dragon crown.

**Coda: I made three languages**

to hide in. Each within  
the only land I've ever called my own  
between the waters. I am still the same  
or am I? How to know  
if all my journeys are translated in the skin  
or am I dithering  
before the road of glass?

## *Resh*

I have scratched off these cave-walls  
the abjad in which the self is transcribed,  
that script without vowels, desert-parched, unaware  
of oceans—but a sheen of sweat  
rises from the walls like dew,  
three thousand years after the miners.

I don't need to return here,  
where I've toiled these lives and years ago,  
a turquoise miner who paid the stone back in tears,  
who carved crooked symbols when nobody watched.  
I have been here, I have passed,  
with only myself to erase me  
bending down from future immemorial.

Circumscribed by sweat and turquoise dust, hidden  
in folds of the star-embroidered night,  
I dreamed myself into this future, not knowing  
of perils—of sorrows that constrict me  
tighter than collars of blistering stone. I did not think  
that I would forget me, and yet grieve  
for languages that have been lost between us,  
three thousand years of mothers' names gone.

I have erased and reinscribed  
both of us onto the stone page of my story.  
Easy to say that nothing's been lost,  
but I don't know what I am overwriting  
when none is here to slap my wrist.



Marginalia to Stone Bird

How can I speak for us even if you're me,  
type what it felt to wake in that cave-mine hungry,  
to scratch wordselves into the indifferent rock?

But our abjads are almost the same;  
I carve resh for my name,  
for memory's not the extent of it, not  
when the dry desert wind still blows between us.

## *Odysseus on the war train*

My hero, when you left Penelope did you  
imagine never stepping off this train? Its every wagon  
a Trojan horse that carries soldiers far from home  
and every Trojan horse a coffin. You would seek  
adventure, but your paramours are rotting  
like empty grain-stalks in deserted fields and skulls  
of babies smashed against the walls and husbands rotting  
in battlefields—you too were eager to depart.  
She will remake, you say, the tapestry and bring you home  
and wash your feet and make your bed again—but she unravels  
your roads each night. Unmakes the language, spreads  
the shroud of silence over you, and prays you never  
return.

## *Dybbuk Song*

When I hung between heaven and non-existence,  
tormented by spirits that sputtered white and slender  
between the worlds gone black, I saw your soul burning to  
me from beyond the curtain that separates the living from  
us, that letter by letter presses us out into the void; and I  
sang, to you, and you to me.

Will you call me an affliction? Me, a sticking spirit that  
has wheedled back into this world through tiny holes left  
by letters embroidered upon the veil that separates the  
living from unliving—me, who squeezed through holes  
embroidery needles left in the tapestry of the letters of  
your life—me, who acquired a lettershape to reach you

Which letter will you choose for me, which letter shall  
you sing—a consonant, a mem, a shape of water—carry it  
in your palm and spill it, carry it close to your mouth and  
ask me: why are you here?

To atone for sins, I whisper, an always-answer, an  
expected answer—to atone for that which I don't hold  
as sinful; for you, through you, I will fulfill the 613  
commandments I have neglected in my life; I will weave  
tsitsit and tie them to the corners of your clothing, I will  
weave them from hair of your unborn grandchildren, I will  
anoint them with dew

and I won't cherish hatred in my heart, I'll plant a  
vineyard with your hands and leave imperfect grapes  
ungathered. I will cease from tilling in the seventh year,  
oh, I'll never start, I'll let the earth between the stars and  
bitter fields of the wave lie fallow, and fill the land with  
blackbirds I will launch from your open palms

sing to me, then, sing to me this dew, you who are  
forbidden to sing before men, you who sang me out of my  
torment and through the veil of letters—you, who did not  
hesitate—

through your mouth I will speak, through your mouth I  
will say my deeds, atone for my sins, with your hands I will  
carry—this self, this mem, this water, this snow and ice to  
fill the mikveh in which the world itself will immerse to  
become purified

once again to see that which is holy and which is unholy,  
unrestrained by commandments of men, constrained  
lovingly by truth that shines dewlike from your song, that  
shines even though you have been forbidden to sing it—

walk away, oh, walk away from those people, these  
customs, these veils that hold you, walk away from this  
shame, this solitude, this resignation—even though you're  
afraid of pain, beloved, between heaven and dissolution  
pursued by tormentors of white slender fire, like I have  
been; but know that each of us sticking spirits believes  
themselves pure, believes themselves holy—and it is holy  
deeds that return us, again and again, through the veil of  
letters, to this here, this you—

walk away and sing