

DAVID CAPLAN

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White Stone

*for Ana*

*Yemin Moshe*

Garlands of trinitarias shade an artist's studio,  
plainer than their synagogue halfway down the hill,  
its ceiling painted with stars, a glass chandelier.

They shush each other and laugh.  
Brothers who did not die in Turkey died here,  
snipers atop the Old City walls testing

the stories British mapmakers imagined.  
*What kind of world did you expect?*  
He kisses his hand after shaking his friend's,

their last words in Ladino for the day,  
for the neighborhood peace made too dear.  
Perfectly angled, a bride lifts her chin.

Montefiore's windmill doesn't work; it never did.  
Only for photographs and spice boxes,  
silver stuffed with clove and cinnamon,

shaken to hold off the week.

*Holy Sepulcher*

They lean their crosses against noon's long memory.  
Latin hymns, Coptic chants, Greek bells,  
even the Muslim key-holder cannot separate each devotion.

Old arguments queue by the empty tomb.  
Who replaced a nail? Who cleaned a lintel  
without permission? Which shadow regouted the cracked tile?

In Aramaic such disputations would sound familiar.  
Strange as Jews, they follow discredited maps.  
Silently a couple kneels on the unswept floor.

*Beit Midrash*

One room to learn and pray in,  
both forms of argument. A sink in the hall,  
a wall busy with hats, boys quote sages,  
  
claim and counterclaim sung like riddles.  
Impossible to hear a single voice, a conclusion  
raised from the tiny print.

A pond a mile from the Atlantic,  
last year's neighbors raced miniature yachts,  
the cow lily a local watercolorist sketched

barely disturbed. Behind us,  
a mudflat shivered into the bay  
as if it remembered the island,  
  
remembered what it would not share.  
Ana, listen to the noise  
the boys make, three languages

forked in one thought: *The timid  
cannot learn and the impatient cannot teach.*  
Tidewater hurrying across sand,

a catamaran heeled to keep  
from toppling, one pontoon  
windward in the air, the other

balanced in its reflection.

*On Another Attempt to Blow Up the Dome of the Rock*

Three steps backward, three forward.  
Bow and ignore whoever bows beside you.  
Close your eyes, if you know the words.

The window closed to a car alarm, a stray  
crouched beside a dumpster, hissing in heat,  
the air that promises no rain from May to September.

Only the schedule of sacrifice remains:  
the perfect lambs, the doves,  
sprinkled by the altar, the blood that drew Him close.

A tongue retraces a broken tooth.  
*Speedily in our days:* past the stones  
paratroopers wept before and kissed,

the hiss of Hebrew everywhere.

*Shacharit*

The day's first bus circles its congregation:  
a pharmacist bent over the counter,  
his head on his left arm, a few psalms

behind the owner of the laundromat  
who kisses his prayer book before closing it.  
The white stone hardens like light.

Last night pigeons blessed our clothesline,  
fireworks ended a wedding.  
Was that why you dreamed

of vultures white as stone, brawling for more?  
The last day of the month squats on the sill,  
the window fan repeating what we do not say:

*My God, the soul you gave me is pure.*

### *Dollars*

The doorway a soldier runs past hides its address.  
A raised finger signals a million, two means two.  
This close to the Wall, landlords count in dollars,  
a cot in a closet, a sink for a bath.  
Two brothers sort a pomegranate's seeds,  
one for each commandment  
from *I am your God* to *Don't forget  
what Amalek did to you*. This close  
to the Wall, each step finds a grievance,  
each grievance an excuse: stones  
cleared of houses, a trash heap's insult.  
When the missionary rolled down his window,  
they spat on his cross.  
I felt, he said, like my fists were praying.

### *Red Heifer Steakhouse*

Three students from Baltimore  
roll up their white sleeves and cut.  
All that exists is the meat in their mouths,  
  
the idea of an after-dinner Dunhill.  
As for the waiter, he stacks a tray of glasses,  
hoping to get home before his wife falls asleep.

So here goes. Last night on Ben Yehuda,  
a heckler asked for you, Rebbe,  
asked when you will rise from the dead.

"It only takes only a minute," they repeated. "It's not too late."  
"Instead of putting on your tefillin.  
how about I shave off your beard?"

A finger cocked like a pistol, but no one laughed.  
So a sabra snaked her hips to the bad time  
a drummer kept, a case open for tips.

"You are a Jew, you are holy," the boy said  
instead of goodbye. How many prayers have I missed,  
three times a day for how many years?

*Make mine medium rare, the center pink but not bloody.*

*Mandelbaum Gate*

April 1967  
For Deborah Lipstadt

In East Jerusalem you learned how to overhear,  
donkeys among graves, the letters  
you had to walk across,

learned how a half-truth stays  
on the tongue. *My parents love the Bible,*  
you told the vice counsel who asked about your name.

*Jews used to come here  
to hatch plans on how to cheat people.  
But in 1948 they stopped . . .*

Petra could wait. You could not.  
At Mandelbaum Gate the border guards agreed  
you had guts but no common sense.

*The Self in Jerusalem*

Your fist against the table,  
wine spills like an alphabet.  
So lick your fingers and slur

each letter, your hands  
on a stranger's shoulders,  
a stranger's hands on yours:

Great  
is your faith. Great is  
your faith. Great is your faith.

Let the self break and dance to the breaking.

*The Last Ditch Battle Museum*

To humiliate a man so the blood leaves his face  
is to kill him. Just look at the faces on the wall.  
"I'd rather die with two feet than live with one,"  
a prisoner repeats, ash on his chest, a handkerchief  
to cover his face like smoke.  
A widower sits cross-legged in the square, squinting.  
Twelve generations looted in two hours; no adults look back.  
At Zion Gate humiliation breaks into memory.

Past the Israeli flags, the marketplace changes languages,  
butchered calves and portraits of Saddam Hussein  
displayed like local saints, curved daggers for tourists.  
A boy chases a ball kicked from his hand.  
He has his pictures, too.

*The Jews have become ordinary . . .*

*The Jews have become ordinary.* Yes,  
ordinary as this city. At Café Hillel,  
smokers gossip like smokers

on any sunny patio. A man cools a coffee  
with his breath, checking his email,  
newspapers from whatever country he left.

Like this city, neither graceful  
nor graceless: ordinary as the scooter  
parked on the sidewalk, the box

to hold tympanic membrane  
at first mistaken for a leaf,  
the puzzle of a fingertip,

kneecap, and coccyx, retrieved from a fence.  
Ordinary, the psalms  
strangers recite for strangers. Ordinary,

the coffee, the gossip, the sudden quiet  
the same as anywhere a husband is told:  
*God heard your prayer. He said no.*

Let others debate the afterlife,  
the precise geography of souls,  
punishments and rewards.

Ordinary, those who dwell in Jerusalem.

*King David Street*

A breeze quiets King David Street.  
The time for prayer has passed.

Last Sabbath our hosts served cashews,  
dried apricots, almonds, figs,  
nuts whose shells salted our fingers,  
cracked open and gutted.

Each taste named its blessing, the formula to give thanks.

See how quickly the window forgets our reflection,  
pomegranates chained in silver,  
your eyes keeping their expression as they  
return to me, a sweetness on my tongue, a foretaste.

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