An opening poem

Here Today

G-d is here
today. She is
a spectacular G-d,
all good company
and magnificence.
She sings, barks,
and is an able contortionist. (She
learned this in India.)
She does splits
when you don't
expect them.
She has a big vocabulary.
She is part Jewish
part Buddhist
part wind.
She plays excellent piano,
speaks Urdu, breathes
deeply, and does
the sun salute each day.
This G-d knows the words
to many songs. She bakes
bread, and often makes
strawberry shortcake.
She turns these small mountains
so green you want to eat them
and then
she just hands you
a long light yellow porch
where you can sit
and sit and sit
to watch her move
so slowly you would miss her
if you weren't watching closely.

—Esther Cohen, from Shul
Děkuji/Thanks

God created, God created a sprig
so I could weave wreaths.
Thanks, thanks for pain,
which teaches me to inquire.
Thanks, thanks for failure,
that will teach me diligence
so that I could, so that I could bring a gift,
though no strength might remain,
thanks, thanks, thanks.

Thanks, thanks for my weakness,
which teaches me humility.
Humility, humility for joy,
humility without oppression.
For tears, thanks for tears,
they will teach me emotion.
For the living who, for the living who speak out
and cry for sympathy.

Thanks, thanks for thirst,
which revealed weakness.
Thanks, thanks for the torment,
which will bring deeds to perfection.
Thanks that I do love,
though fear might be gripping my heart.
Lamb, thank you,
you didn’t die in vain,
Thanks, thanks, thanks...

—Karel Kryl
Beatitude

Blessed be parts of my body I cannot reach in the shower—out of sight, out of mind.
Blessed be aluminum, without it we are all sadder and unadorned.
Blessed be infinity and its children, particles of stretched color and light moving through a pixelated sky.
Blessed, all blessed.
Blessed be the cats moving among cheap office furniture; theirs is the kingdom of smarty.
Blessed be the frangible, for they know not a thing about it, skipping as they do down streets strewn with bottle caps and pizza slices falling from the so blessed sky.
Bless us in the shopping center, cabbages and our carriage with the one stuck wheel.
Bless the electricians, for they shall know pivot and burst. Blessed the lemon cake, the beautiful nerve, the bedspring and the radio voice.
Blessed be emptiness and the severalness of what a day!
Blessed be the office furniture with the fake wood grain: some things come close and that’s enough.
Blessed be the open window; let the late bees come on in.
Bless the fortuneteller and the barber; for they shall inherit the kingdom of downtown boogie-woogie.
Blessed be the extended family and the lightning rod and the butter softening in the ceramic dish on the counter.
Blessed be cyberskin and serranos.
Bless us in our verisimilitude; bless your best party dress, sybaritic blue.
Blessed be the lunch-makers, the sweepers and the stuffers.
Blessed the Tupperware filled with yesterday’s Bolognese, the splintering wood and they who hesitate, for they shall be ratified, shall be outright expressed.
Blessed be the leopard print chaise and the women everywhere in purposed repose.
Blessed be the unruly hair and the mole in the middle of my back, unwashable!
Bless linen and silk and particleboard.
Blessed be the numerator’s glorious variance; it tends to get the short end. Blessed be the radius and ulna and humorous elusive, for they shall move the meat of my arm.
Blessed be the arms.
Bless the stomach and the sclera; they have ideas all their own.
Blessed be sparkle and sinew.
Blessed smarten and clutter and understudy.
Blessed be the compilers, for they shall know the nervous yellow bloom.

—Sheila Squillante (from the Worship issue of Qarrtsiluni)
Every sunrise and sunset, birth
and death, storm and flood, blossom
and snowfall. Every lip balm,
paperback novel, beggar and bowl
and hair salon. Every glass of water,
muddy gorge, mother
and market and corrugated roof.

Rhododendrons, dirty oil barrels
filled with groundnut paste,
filligreed teapots, emerald beetles,
scrolls, wooden tulips, bottles of beer.
Sequoias, crepemyrtle, dwarf birch.
Every rubber band. Every paperclip.
Every open sore and aching tooth.

How does Your mouth not tire
of speaking the world into being?
Almighty, Your creations cannot imagine
infinity without growing weary.
It's hard to remember
Your mouth is purely metaphor
though Your speech is real.

You speak every atom in the universe,
a mighty chord resonating.
Every fold of skin, every grain of sand,
every iceberg and hibiscus come from you.
If You ever chose silence, even for an instant,
we would blink out of existence
as though this experiment had never been.

—Rabbi Rachel Barenblat
Pied Beauty

GLORY be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

150

Praise to you in your holiness
Praise throughout your expansive realm
Praise for the power of your doing
For your abundance and everywhereness
All praise
Praise with the blowing of trumpets
Praise with the psaltery and harp
Praise with timbrel and dance
With stringed instrument and pipe
Praise with clear-sounding cymbals
And with crashing cymbals

Every breath is your praise

—Zen abbot Norman Fischer
A List of Praises

Give praise with psalms that tell the trees to sing,
Give praise with Gospel choirs in storefront churches,
Mad with the joy of the Sabbath,
Give praise with the babble of infants, who wake with the sun,
Give praise with children chanting their skip-rope rhymes,
A poetry not in books, a vagrant mischievous poetry
living wild on the Streets through generations of children.

Give praise with the sound of the milk-train far away
With its mutter of wheels and long-drawn-out sweet whistle
As it speeds through the fields of sleep at three in the morning,
Give praise with the immense and peaceful sigh
Of the wind in the pinewoods,
At night give praise with starry silences.

Give praise with the skirling of seagulls
And the rattle and flap of sails
And gongs of buoys rocked by the sea-swell
Out in the shipping-lanes beyond the harbor.
Give praise with the humpback whales,
Huge in the ocean they sing to one another.

Give praise with the rasp and sizzle of crickets, katydids and cicadas,
Give praise with hum of bees,
Give praise with the little peepers who live near water.
When they fill the marsh with a shimmer of bell-like cries
We know that the winter is over.

Give praise with mockingbirds, day's nightingales.
Hour by hour they sing in the crepe myrtle
And glossy tulip trees
On quiet side streets in southern towns.

Give praise with the rippling speech
Of the eider-duck and her ducklings
As they paddle their way downstream
In the red-gold morning
On Restiguche, their cold river,
Salmon river,
Wilderness river.
Give praise with the whitethroat sparrow.
Far, far from the cities,
Far even from the towns,
With piercing innocence
He sings in the spruce-tree tops,
Always four notes
And four notes only.

Give praise with water,
With storms of rain and thunder
And the small rains that sparkle as they dry,
And the faint floating ocean roar
That fills the seaside villages,
And the clear brooks that travel down the mountains

And with this poem, a leaf on the vast flood,
And with the angels in that other country.

—Anne Porter
Morning Poem

Every morning
the world
is created.
Under the orange
sticks of the sun
the heaped
ashes of the night
turn into leaves again
and fasten themselves to the high
branches—
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands
of summer lilies.
If it is your nature
to be happy
you will swim away along the soft trails
each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered
lavishly,
every morning

And if your spirit
carries within it
the thorn
that is heavier than lead—
if it's all you can do
to keep on trudging—
there is still
somewhere deep within you
a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted—
whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not
you have ever dared to pray.

—Mary Oliver
The Wild Rose

Sometimes hidden from me
in daily custom and in trust,
so that I live by you unaware
as by the beating of my heart,

Suddenly you flare in my sight,
a wild rose blooming at the edge
of thicket, grace and light
where yesterday was only shade,

and once again I am blessed, choosing
again what I chose before.

—Wendell Berry

Scaffolding

Masons, when they start upon a building
Are careful to test out the scaffolding;

Make sure that planks won’t slip at busy points,
Secure all ladders, tighten bolted joints.

And yet all this comes down when the job’s done
Showing off walls of sure and solid stone.

So if, my dear, there sometimes seem to be
Old bridges breaking between you and me

Never fear. We may let the scaffolds fall
Confident that we have built our wall.

—Seamus Heaney
Prospective Immigrants Please Note

Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly
and you must look back
and let them happen.

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.

— Adrienne Rich
Prelude to the AMIDAH

You Reading This, Be Ready

Starting here, what do you want to remember? How sunlight creeps along a shining floor? What scent of old wood hovers, what softened sound from outside fills the air?

Will you ever bring a better gift for the world than the breathing respect that you carry wherever you go right now? Are you waiting for time to show you some better thoughts?

When you turn around, starting here, lift this new glimpse that you found; carry into evening all that you want from this day. This interval you spent reading or hearing this, keep it for life -

What can anyone give you greater than now, starting here, right in this room, when you turn around?

—William Stafford

Without Ceasing

The wash of dawn across the sky reveals your signature.

Cicadas drone your praise through the honey-slow afternoon.

The angular windmills on the ridge recite your name with every turn.

And I, who can barely focus on breath without drifting into story:

what can I say to you, author of wisteria and sorrel, you who shaped these soft hills with glaciers’ slow passage?

You fashioned me as a gong: your presence reverberates.

Help me to open my lips that I may sing your praise.

—Rabbi Rachel Barenblat
Prelude to the TORAH READING

You are here to receive this prophecy,
I am so certain of this I would wager life on it.

Get open, fast. Get to the highest point
available, that hill, for example. Even better,

the tree on top of the hill. Clamber up,
go on. Do what the branches do, reach up,

tilt your face to the clouds. Now you wait.
Prepare to hear. You never know what the voice

will sound like, perhaps not a voice. Maybe
like a current of electricity sizzling, sparking,

or the snap of knuckles cracking. A slide whistle
or kazoo—don’t laugh, it could happen.

How would that look, God talking to you,
you laughing it up in a tree on a hilltop.

Be a lightning rod, an antenna. Reception
can be active, you know. Think of a dancer

being lifted, all her muscles tightening
around her bones. She is lighter for how she

lifts herself, gets smaller, more powerful.
Call the message to you, show you can

be trusted to hear and hold it. Don’t even think
of coming down from there, you just wait.

You stay up in that tree, listening. The words
will come to you, they will, they will.

—Hannah Stephenson (from the Worship issue of Qarrtsiluni)
To Be of Use

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.
They seem to become natives of that element,
the sleek black heads of seals
bouncing like half-submerged balls.

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

—Marge Piercy
MOURNER'S KADDISH (MT p. 294)

Otherwise

I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.

At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.

—Jane Kenyon
A closing poem

Lauds, Summer: An Antiphon

It never grows old, this sun rising here
    every morning
As much as I ever wanted anything, listen:
birdsong, a dying language Practice
its rise and fall, its loss, familiar
as the body You can never
get close enough to the ground to pray
Long blue heron, sunslant on the underwing
armfuls of butterfly weed and orange
Holy, holy this morning, here and gone

—Jeannie Tomasko (from the Worship issue of Qarrtsiluni)