

RETURNING TO THE CITY OF HYPHENS

By

Matthew A. Salomon

Submitted to the

Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

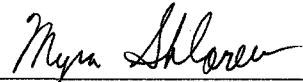
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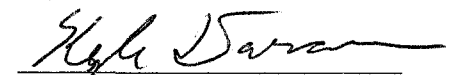
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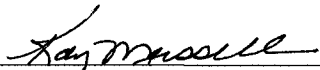
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6 December 2007

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For Francine

RETURNING TO THE CITY OF HYPHENS

By

Matthew A. Salomon

ABSTRACT

Returning to the City of Hyphens is a collection of original poems and prose that is largely inspired by people, places, and languages that no longer exist. Each of the works included in this collection aspires to transact a return. The destination of record—the City of Hyphens—is, of course, not a real city, but an imaginary city that is inhabited by real punctuation, by hyphens—each one calmly mediating separation and inseparability. Everything we can know of the City necessarily involves preemption, interruption, and disruption—the negotiated terms of return.

The collection opens with *Future Perfect*, poems dedicated to members of my family. The persona poems in *The Return of Herr Ruhe* examine some of the concerns of an exile returning "home" after decades of absence. The poems in the third section, *Returning to the City of Hyphens*, address the inevitability of return, in its many guises, valences, voices. The final section presents the first two parts of a longer prose narrative, *Moritz Tannenbaum and the Green Knight*, based on the 14th century Middle English epic poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but set in 1970s Brooklyn.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A version of my poem "Yiddish Lullaby" (p. 5) was originally published in *Folio* in autumn of 1994. The epigraph for the collection is excerpted from page 3 of Sarah Arvio, *Visits from the Seventh* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), page 3. The epigraph for my poem "Killeany Pentimento" (p. 46) is excerpted from a 1911 poem by Anna Akhmatova (ВЕЧЕР/Evening), available online at http://www.stihi-rus.ru/ahmatova_vecher.htm. The epigraph for "Moritz Tannenbaum and the Green Knight" is excerpted from page 343 of Charles Moorman, *The Works of the Gawain-Poet* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977).

I am deeply grateful to the College of Arts and Sciences at American University, the Department of Literature, and to the dedicated teachers with whom I've worked: Andrew Holleran, Brigid Maher, Richard McCann, Michael Manson, Madhavi Menon, Jeff Middents, Marianne Noble, Kat Tracy, and Michael Wenthe. Thanks also to Niamh Corcoran for her poetic gifts and her friendship.

I can acknowledge but never repay my debts to Myra Sklarew and Kyle Dargan who were patient, gentle, and ferocious readers of my work. Their dedication to the lives of the poem and the poems of their students has changed my life.

Finally, I thank my family: Maxim, Robin, Michelle, Murray, Mom, and Dad. And, to Francine, for her support and sacrifice—I dedicate this work with love to her.

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MORITZ TANNENBAUM AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

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But we know only this air, and memory,
once, or several times, removed and turned

Sarah Arvio, *Visits from the Seventh*

Senbazuru

The name given to

one thousand cranes

glides into the meadow

by the boreal lake,

unencumbered

by illness, or by cure.

Is there a name

to give to *one*

more crane?

FUTURE PERFECT

Future Perfect*For Francine*

The way you look at things

that so want to be

looked at that way.

But where in the chain of gazes—

where are we bound?

Where-

ever we will have been found,

tomorrow beckons back to our day,

and something free returns to stare,

something true returns to say:

Keep this way. Always near,

always strange. Keep this way.

le Canal Rideau (en hiver)*For Robin*

skaters with lanterns

spinning spinning

peeling back the lightless plush

flashing by in bending orbits

and sliq-slaq urish hush

widely casting whirled-up chunks

of shaken firmament

abandoning all pretense

of obsolete intent

Yiddish Lullaby*For Michelle**Far away,**an ancient kingdom,**the kingdom's noble king,**the king's dreamy queen,**the queen's fragrant orchard,**the orchard's tallest tree,**the tree's strongest limb,**the limb's warmest nest,**the nest's smallest bird,*

then

*the kingdom was lost,**the king was no longer,**the queen was bereft,**the orchard defiled;**the tallest tree thirsted,**the strongest limb shattered,**the warmest nest tumbled,**and the smallest bird**flew.*

The Dream*For Francine*

The last of the hearth's embers
is now the dreaming fire
of aged sleepers. Each dreams
an unburned list of tasks,
of appointments, and errands,
and projects—all abandoned
for now. Already forgotten within
the rockier provinces of memory.

Dreamers cannot expect a safe return.

Even so, they dream
through the cold night
and slowly lean their dreams
into each other, until their
temples touch like candles.

Then, from the embers,
the dream returns.

On a Bridge Over the Tobol River

For Maxim

We chose you that day. On an arched
bridge we played our game, selecting
our steps, gliding like ballerinas
this way and that, eluding
the animal waste and other
realities that littered our path.

You can always return to that day,
to the serpentine Tobol currents
rushing under and away, hustling
to an unseen room where you were born.

Return to skies blackening with the smoke
of a thousand blazing heaps of remnant crops,
and the mocking arcs of a million fleeing magpies.

Return to razored horizons, distant stands
of white birches, gone gold with autumn,
upright in the distance like candles,
beckoning with the lure of such things
that burn without being consumed.

And, beyond the trees—the persistence of steppes,

invisible except for the unearthly
chill of their delivered winds.

How those winds that marked us that day
for no more and no less than we were—
humans playing god on a bridge.

You can always return to that day,
but know that we trembled as we played.
Not because there is no such god
but because there is no such game.

After the Stroke*For Mom*

after the stroke

they say

return is imperative

and you—you

who've barely begun

and rarely noted

what they say—

must return

no matter

which image

filled your stalled

frame—fingernails

on your child's hand

cutting into your palm

as the IRT roared home

or the distant silhouettes

in sunset fields of mid-

summer Polish grain—

do not fail to return

never envy the grain
its sun or the sun its grain—
we culminate and call it fate
though we'd prefer a fuller revenge
on inexactitude—return

to that place where
all these years as they say
even from the very beginning
I will have been waiting

Wilderness*For my father*

the caravan is come

the caravan is gone

now the darkness empties

the evening of our vague weeping

worming into the undertow

into the purpled flesh

of learned loneliness

bending forward toward

another dawn's plan

when again the caravan

will return and sere lips

will part to whisper once again

abba! abba! not knowing

how else to begin

THE RETURN OF HERR RUHE

Invitation

Herr Ruhe, permit us to invite you
to return to the city of your birth.

Please, Herr Ruhe, do not misconstrue
our humble request, we invite you
return to a home that once cast you out.

Wart nicht, Herr Ruhe, bald ruhest du auch.

Digital Clocks

The big red cat turned toward the commotion
made by the milk glass spilling at the breakfast table,
stretching thin fingers over the old man's journal,
blurring the words, mixing *ward* with *nimmer*
and *weiß* stirring them into cataracts
that race off the edge, drip drop falling,
puddling the white tile below.

The big red cat stops licking himself long enough
to observe, to assess, and then lap up
the bone-cast pools of words. When done,
he waddles back to his perch in the sun,
opens his mouth to recite the grace,
but instead a yawn ovverwhelms him,
at the very moment the digital clock
flashes *yet another minute gone*
in a silence that, in cats, wakens
no alarm.

Why search the first causes of things,
muses Herr Ruhe, when minutes and epochs
have given up ticking?

Kodo

Inchoate

scraping. A far

scraping. Wing touching

skin. An earthnear

scraping, nearing, rising,

its ascent suddening, surging,

a booming climb of quickening wing,

cumulating upwards, crowding the skies,

filling the yawning cosmic plate

that turns and serves back all earthly excrescence,

coolly returning the earthborn booming

until the beating of the skin

tires and slows, contains

itself again, thinning to a local
thickness, an earthly disturbance

reduced to near fury, though it can
never become less than

skin touched by wing.

A far scraping.

Inchoate.

return

red dust lingers

fingers the air

hovering on a twisting

river's flight

years will have passed—

yet now

there is no image

but desire

there is no echo

but desire

there is no return

but desire

History

Will history note that at noon of the ninth day
of the ninth month, an old man hijacked
a tour bus? The tour guide was just speaking
about the gothic Barefooter Church, "Unused
since," he was saying when the old man
screamed—*My school was there. There,
behind the church!* The driver shook his head,
"No, sir. No school there." But the old man persisted
Keep straight to the end, then left, you'll see!
and the driver surrendered, moved the bus
past the church, left down an alley, wedged
the ten-wheeled behemoth alongside a plain
square building. Iron fenced. On the fence,
an historical plaque: "Once site of the Barefooter
School." The old man shouted *I remembered!*
"Shall we go inside now Mister?" *Certainly not.*
Now we must eat. So, the behemoth backed away.
And that thinning history of children at play,
their gothic laughter still hissing through
the gaps in the walls of a defunct church,
was left behind that day.

Walled City

You—

dearest friend,

bitterest foe—

remove your shoes.

For the place whereon

you battled, whereon

you mourned, this place—

walled and withdrawn—

is most my own.

Stranger in the City

The day the stranger returned to the city
currents froze in the innermost rivers.
“The buried past is at capacity,”
he explained. And since that day he lingers,
content to etch with skeletal fingers
his list of names and capital charges,
content to watch the hurried stevedores
arrange a new past on the stalled barges,
to know how near futility verges
on purposeful activity, to know
that place the buried past still submerges,
that place where rivers cannot ever flow.

Each day at twilight,
Herr Ruhe takes tea with his past
and ponders at great length how much
longer such strangeness can last.

Inside the Cathedral

Tenebrae. Inside the frozen cathedral
an old pilgrim shakes a bony fist

at a basket of miracles. A child
touches his arm—*je suis désolé*—

but the pilgrim is too far gone.
Tenebrae has already begun

its descent, and, within such shadows,
nothing thins. Nothing returns.

aged children

every evening the children return
to the station's echoing marble hall
from the outskirts of sepia memory
shadows shuttling on black-veined stone
under the masses making their way home
under the frenzied footfalls glimpses glances
the little ones emerge slowly slowly
untouched by the final truth of stations
this is your final boarding announcement
unnoticed in their timeworn hats and shawls
they join hands assemble in a circle
and mouth the words of their ancient chant
mute echoes of a long-forgotten fear
daily they return daily they recur

Herr Ruhe is ticketed for the train
that is never arriving and never departing.

Children's Song

Ring around the rosie, pockets full of fear—

listen and believe this though it happened here—

ashes. Ashes. Pray now. We are near.

Sing a song of sixpence until we've disappeared.

Listen and believe this, because it happened here.

It only seems to linger in those who linger here.

The Gossips

In that hour when even the eye peering
behind shuttered windows is gone
and faces have abandoned their owners,
slipping down to the cool cobblestone hum,
sliding together, blurring
laughter with anger with
grief inside stones wrenched from the hills
ages and ages ago to become city.
And the way of faces in that hour—
pressing skyward from their rain-glazed cells,
aping reliefs of jawless megalithic skulls,
each one mimicking another will to tell
secrets, under the justice of footfalls,
in the hour when the wanderer strolls.

Only then does Herr Ruhe remember—
a city of stone is a city of rumors.

In the Middle of the Night

And again the sudden onset of wordless dark in the middle of the night
reshaping an old man's sigh to a distant thunder in the middle of the night.

A memory of earrings, and lilacs, and the portraits faded by sunlight
grow older with all the other things that vanish in the middle of the night.

How were we then, before the flames devoured a thousand years of flight?
Did we have real faces then? Were we really so thin in the middle of the night?

Our handy illusions of death genuflect correctly in the twilight.
Elsewhere, shadows shift under stones in the middle of the night.

Vast mountains sprawl ahead and behind, obscuring from his sight
the faint glimmerings overhead in the middle of the night.

Lost

The slow shuffle of worn shoes
are serenaded under an open shutter.

They pause under a Mozart divertimento.

Old man, are you lost?

asks the composer from the window
turning back to his orchestra inside.

The old man hears only the music. Nods.

Ha! You are lost!

The divertimento suffuses the night air
and the man stands there amid the chords
of certitude. He looks ahead. Mozart shouts

These streets have fooled you, old man!

Your only hope...

and turns back inside to finish the concert.

The old man shuffles on. A cat runs across
his path, pauses to stare and then runs on.

If it is a crime to forget, reasons Herr Ruhe,
to remember is a crime of the same order.

By the Palace of the Law

Here, the law is not blind.

Only deaf. And mute. Here,

the law is spectacular, visible,

a perfection of gestures and pantomime.

Here, all verdicts—decided, undecided,

undecidable—are simple. Here,

the law is always seen but never

heard. Here the law is the perfect child.

But is it not the case, Herr Ruhe notes,

that the baby screams when it soils itself?

The Angler

Let the old shadows make room for the new!

The sun angles toward the jagged snow caps
where old shadows make room for the new,

and the angler pauses to gather his wraps,
and gazes at the gizzard shad huddled
just below the stem-river stones. Perhaps

their hard darkening reprieve has muddled
some latter day prospects for the gazer
above them. Around him: shadows, scuttled

by dusk, scowl and flee. Still, the angler
lingers a bit longer, to savor his view
of slowly fading fish, to remember

all the ancient lures he'd used to subdue
all the ancient schools. Even then, he scarcely knew
how the old shadows make room for the new.

RETURNING TO THE CITY OF HYPHENS

The Law of the Excluded Middle*To the birth mother*

The certificate is red. It reads:

Wednesday, 5 December 1956.

Mother (no name): blood Wasserman negative.

Only a few more weeks till the unnamed
tethered thing breaks free to name and rename
the open distance between then and then.

Her mood, turned by the news,
distracted by etiological necessity,

Mother (no name) smiles,
crosses her legs.

Here and not here.

We are in compliance.

Our beginning: certified.

And, so too our end will require
some formal certification
as to which of us will have
buried the other.

Carving from Leviticus

and so this too

shall be

yours

from the accidance of smoke

the ur storm of pronouns

in waves the dancers' whispered holy

holy holy

their words

from the fire

their complete sacrifice

in strict keeping with this

your law that governs

the plangent ballet

of the burnt offering

Hands

Promising flight on a frozen night, you sang to your foundling child.

He was your Life in Death. Is it his weight that strains my glassine hands?

Who else sees the past dissemble to chaos each and every night?

Under the sun? Nothing new—mere order restored by insane hands.

Why does the horseman pause—just to gaze at our grazing goats?

Nomads cannot divine the view from a height of sixteen hands.

Lines writ on rock. The record of some doomed reptile's clawing?

The honing of some new tool by prehensile Holocene hands?

Pebbles strike the window pane, tossed back again by wind or hands.

Only the clock answers. The regular gestures of obscene hands.

Ingeborg Bachmann Glosa

Already autumn, we turn to the hills
to flee the city, following our noses—
the accusing hour nears, hot on our heels
wherever we turn in the storm of roses.

Already too late—what every child knows is
too long besieged, then betrayed by blunder,
we want to flee now, while the watchman dozes,
while the night is lit by thorns and the thunder

shudders and quakes our temples asunder
raining rocks in pulsing crushes
of sanctum sanctorum and the thunder
of leaves, once so quiet in the bushes,

now wakens the flocks of hidden thrushes—
darkened sheets fly over us, headlong to the hills,
leaving us only these few burning bushes,
rumbling at our heels.

Bequest of the Sacrificial Son

Not really a faith
but some sense
of your own immanence
in things.

Also, the memory that only a part of you
was tangled in the thorns that morning
alone on the mountaintop.

The other part held the knife.

And, the certain knowledge that your
own problematic father was truly
spoken to on that day.

Old Memory

An old, unspeaking man
still sits
in the park, pen in hand,
smiling

vivid green smiles. Though his
digits
are blue with ink tatoo,
he smiles.

And when they taunt him
to tell,
he just smiles, green-blue un-
speaking.

"The old one is mad," I
tell them,
smiling.

Versailles—Faune, 1901

After a photograph by Eugene Atget

With muscled torso, half bare in a field
where gusts, naïve light, and hibernal trees
glance your brow, tensed forward and one eye wild
with song, you are paused. What did you see
with that far eye? Or hear with far ear?
Your hand clutches the pipes fast to your stone breast—
now wholly human, seized by some vague fear,
you've simmered your play to enigmatic rest.
But even now, in your most human hour,
your face is more than any man's.
Here in this field you still deny the dour
morality that swallows the fruits of chance.

Gazing ahead, beyond the edge of a new century,
like Lot's wife, you are numbed by possibility.

Collage for 1957

1.

The year Joseph McCarthy and Jean Sibelius die,

Spike Lee and Vanna White are born

(Katie Couric, Osama bin Laden too).

Dr. Seuss writes *The Cat in the Hat*,

the Nobel Prize goes to Camus,

Ingmar Bergman directs *Wild Strawberries*,

and *The Seventh Seal*. And Bogart bids adieu.

2.

The year the Soviets launch Sputnik into space,

the Klan launches Willie Edwards from a bridge,

Richard Wright publishes *White Man, Listen!*,

Ike apologizes to the finance minister of Ghana

who is refused service in a Delaware restaurant,

Orville Faubus mobilizes the national guard

to keep nine colored kids out of Central High,

and Althea Gibson champions Wimbledon.

3.

The year the old ones sit in Spring,
their wicker chairbacks pressing the lilacs,
trading quips and tales in their old-world tongues
so heavy with evening so heavied by the press
of winters, but suddenly revived like daisies
once the iced coffees are handed around.

And, by then, their own dreams are neither here nor there,
but are somewhere held fast to their lilac moments,
stalling under the lull and spell of clicking cubes,
thickening under the fury of a firefly's dance.

A Death in Queens

In memory, Rivka Guterman

Her last breath ended the dementia too:

eleven years of rambling monologue

running on in six languages in seventy-five years—

Częstochowa-Łódz-Paris-Lyons-Paris-Queens—

world-wide dissociation and no particular order at all.

Yet, on some silent cue, drawn to a close. And her arms,

once dense with scents of garlic and naphtha and cedar,

sinewed limbs yielding heaping platters of carp and *ris de veau*,

her arms now sallow with sepsis, suddenly drawn up

toward her chest in the shudder of that last

fish-eyed gulp, shaped like her

terminal comma

L'Éclipse, 17 Avril 1912

After Eugène Atget's photograph

They too are gone now,
that assembly of gazers,
their backs to the Bastille,
distracted by the spectacle
of celestial moment
from their Wednesday rituals.

All the scientists' predictions,
were accurately realized.
There remains but
the wonder of it.

One woman exclaimed
"It's an engagement ring!"
within earshot of a reporter
who duly repeated his found remark
in the next morning's *Le Figaro*
though, by then, the eclipse
had been trumped by first reports
of the sunken Titanic.

They too are gone now,
leaving us an inaccurate past,
a large legacy of Wednesdays.
But still for us, every now and then—*l'éclipse!*
The fleeting glimpse of a moon-darkened
star. An engagement ring in the heavens
above the undistracted gaze of a gazer.
The puncturing head-on moment
of a dark lady who wears
a white flower in her hair.

Dreamer on a Mountain Consumed in the Hayman Blaze

Somehow,
he scabbled up
the rubbled slope.

Beneath his dreaming
form: a short history
of unabridged urges—
the wind-hissed remnants
of all things fused, one
wild night, to this carbon
sculpture garden.

Whatever force gravity
might command at such
heights will not be enough
to bind particulate dreams
to rock. For now, only
the lichen adhere to rock,

and rock to lichen. Kept
by the terms of their
arranged marriage:
dreamless devotion,
unimagined urgency.

Fort Tryon Park, 1966

and the sobbing wall began again
 sending up its midnight transport of sounds
 stunted strangled sobs disowned by sadness
 slipping in like a tide of red balloons
 to hover and hiss throughout the unlit room
 that never had its fill of red balloons

No sobbing wall—next morning, the grandpa in
 Fort Tryon Park speaks through yellowed teeth,
 smelling like a clutch of old torah scrolls—
no, nothing like that at all,
just the jostlings on a ladder
to heaven. Thirty years

later, a day's hike through another park,
 and, circling back to the entrance, the child
 announced—*Our day was dreamed.* You mean
 wonderful? *No, daddy, and don't put words in my mouth!*
 Hours passed in silence. Later, she spoke again
 —*I meant the way it went. Too fast.*

Killeany Pentimento

Здесь никогда ничего не случится,—
 О, никогда!
 —Ахматова, 1911

I hate and love

the laying on of hands

was

an after-

thought a last resort of thought

the wind never lets up here

you may ask me how that is so

the wind never lets up here the ever repeating sea

unerring metronome of ire and crashing foam

silence is no option with stone

summon them now summon them by name

Enda Brendan

Finnian of Clonard

I hate and love

you may ask me how that is so

summon them wildly

gentle Ciaran (and his fox)

Carthach Elder of Lismore

Jervis of Glendalough Lonan Kerr

MaCreiche of Corcomore

Papeus Libeus Jarlath of Tuam

though for their own reasons they'll not come

(a) they're dead

(b) they don't really give a shit

(c) the wind never lets up here

yet silence is no option with stone and nothing will ever happen here

I'll say I don't know

and nothing will ever happen here

no ghosting of shadow on stone can sway
with sun so vague and stone so gray

the hollow tombs below (ah never) and so

the laying on of hands
fingernails curling into stone
and holding

I hate and love
you may ask me how that is so
I'll say I don't know
holding holding sl-
owing to stone to

but I feel and suffer it alone

here where nothing ever happens
but the dreams that stir below
slow as shadows under stone

I'll say I'll say
I don't know

To An Anonymous Poet

For K.A.W. (1968-1996)

your final act

tight and tidy

said the authorities

no exit wounds

they said

twelve-gauge

no exit wounds

in your wake

whispers hovered

kiting vivid dragons over

the angry the relieved

the emptied assembly

for whom you

already long before

had become the rumor

i said nothing then

about the poems at your wake

i said nothing about your poems

each one sealed hermetically

each one some borrowed nicety of colossal necessity

the re-choiring of hysterical reluctance

as fierce incandescence

about your poems

i said nothing

though i am lived

by those poems you burned

or never wrote inside your blue

lonely nights and suddenly abandoned

with all your other burdens

with piles of fuck-me stilettos and bloodied tissues

with boxes and boxes of ponderous books

with mirror with muzzle

and a need to explain

coalition of the willing

a purple eyelid

flickers and deflowers

the virgin violet

lips know hushed tones now

our warheads will free them

whispers follow

their booming desires

too much for lips too little

for monks on fire

a shut eye notes how

unwilling rememberers

whisper whisper now

Inside

After a sequence of interior photos at Paris' Church of Ste. Séverin by Eugène Atget

I.

Inside this cathedral mind,
 consciousness puddles,
 away from the hardened
 fixtures of memory—
 the empty pulpit,
 ranks of empty chairs,
 a stone man on a stone cross
 turning his head away
 dodging stray arcs of living thought
 inside his own cruciform loneliness.

II.

a far light beckons

here is desire here is distance

The earliest occupants of this place
 sanctified it, named it for a hermit
 but later named it for other
 good men with the same name,
 so that one could never really be sure

what was meant.

a far light beckons

let the darkness be light as well

Wander amid the odd relics of mind—

a bent wooden crutch a zinc kettle

a yellow-eyed puma some string

an eternal flame suspended in air

here is desire here is distance

and cages for the women

ornate windowed boxes for the saints

and filthy iron-barred boxes for the shaven

sluts on public display shrieking but

a far light beckons

only on the inside now

on public display now

a student string quartet

let the darkness be light as well

only on the inside now

III.

inside the things inside the light

is not an idea

inside

the little bone reliquary

things no bigger than

half your little finger

a baby's locks

flecks of dried blood

a lovely scent

or perhaps

a muzzled memory

inside the reliquary

inside the things inside the light

other shadows beckon

come inside again

where blindness begins

IV.

grope your way

inside the ambulatory

toward the cortex

the adverse spiral

rising rising

into flamboyant

gothic bloom

shoulders twisting

bending turning

inside another idea

that is the destruction
of the idea

V.

and inside the dark
you saw it was good

within the pulsant cortex
a perfection dozes

until, looking back,
its consciousness dims

and a clock on the far wall
moves its hands—before long

the stone cruciform man
bends away again

toward the fade of a
luminous hum

Scarf

Your scarf slipped away when you rose to leave,
and fell to the foot of our haphazard bed—
and then you left, not another word said.

That day, I draped the scarf on my sleeve
and memory lurched forward—surely you'd retrieve
the silken scarf soon enough in the days ahead.

But the scarf then revealed a long extruded thread—
a thinner future neared, barely perceived.

I chanced upon that scarf the other day,
buried in a cardboard box thirty years
before. But something close took my breath—
not the scarf, not memory, but the stray
silk thread. Always, a steeper future nears
like a stranger bearing news of a death.

Reconstitution

Just a bite of bread along the road,
but what a bite—the easy surrender
of thin-baked amber crusts, quickly
giving to the touch of lips, teeth,
and tongue, yielding up swells
of nimbus interiors. *Ah, bread!*
the traveler said, returning to the road.

And the morsel, it too resumed its travels
under an assumed name. Reconstituting
elsewhere. There, nothing will distinguish
the wheat from the chaff. Nothing
elsewhere to mark desire from desire.

One Fall Night

Now that we've run the edge of a perfect circle,
we become recurrence. From within its own absence,
the wind has picked up now—how sudden the advance
of this scheming season: doors shudder against the winds,
fields already lay bare but for those unharvested remains
still tendrilled to ideals of rotund abundance.

Once, we too were tethered to a timeless abundance,
an encompassing now which ruled our tightly drawn circle.
No movement beyond that present—nothing remained
from a yesterday, or for a tomorrow. Time's absence
removed us from the grief and hope that now wind
themselves tighter and tighter with each hour's advance.

Not yet free, could we have known in advance
just how our first unthinking grasp of the abundance
would instigate time? And evening. And morning. The four winds
carried us far from that primordial circle.

We drifted—evening, morning—and sculpted new absence
in our own image. Then, discarding the remains,

we fled. Never to return. For us, all that remained
was rootlessness. Never to advance
beyond our love of loving. We made absence
our god, and we lamented our emptied abundance.
And now, every circle is a vicious circle.
And now, autumn's hour is again. Grinning winds

gorge themselves on barren fields, and other winds
still wait in the hills to claim their share of our remains.
We are safe. Safe, we move within our warm circles,
bolstered and fortified against the winds' advance,
repeating ourselves and others, feigning abundance—
this too shall pass, we are safe now, you know, absence

makes the heart grow there but for the grace of absence—
repeating, cowering within our wind-
struck shelters, we lean and summon abundance
back from autumn's ambush, but find that nothing remains
after yet another thousand years' advance
and again we run the edge of a perfect circle.

And abundance is last night's grapes. Still chilled, they remain
in the bowl by the window, fending off dawn's advance.

You, I, and our absence. One fall night. Encircled.

Mystery Object Found in Supernova's Heart

(After an item in the YAHOO Science News)

At first glance, the object looked like the cold
densely packed stellar corpse one expects
to see inside a bimillennial supernova.

But the X-rays reveal an unprecedented enigma:
this object is far older than the heart it inhabits.

Tonight, under winter skies,
I tally all the things that have yet to come,
against the hard count of things gone,
doggedly tilting toward balance,
and thanking the stars their indulgence.

And it seems that I've always had the time
to become a substance older than myself.

"It is all one can do to remember"

It is all one can do to remember
the dark warmth that was immortality,
so much colder now. Abandoned forever

for this coil of möbius memory
that turns and twists away from the plane
and the sharp pull of flat reality,

turning and twisting to ever sustain
some urgent momentum to recover
delirious paths away from the pain

of the broken gods underfoot, after
the fall, after the immortality
that is all one can do to remember.

Waltz in the Present Tense

in the beginning of—

such untorqued grammar

suggests *rigor mortis*

when the word was return—

fo God make de wol an

de Wod been dey wid God—

venture forth again from

thy father's land return

ascend again those hills

where the shadow wolf steps

and the music begins

now seven stories up

from lupine city streets

the little kid can't sleep

this night he listens to

Verdi's *Massa Requiem*

hissing through his tiny

transistor radio,

Angus dei, qui tollis

peccata mundi—

small sins of omission

in the thinned transmission—

dona eis requiem.

Angus dei!—but the wolf
 steps again tensed yellow
 eyes watching observing
 each motion on the streets
 making and granting the
 dance to whomever would
 decide again to dance
 this subterranean
 heaven heaving bending
 under the spell of that
 insistent feral will—
 the wolf steps again
 from smoke on the mountain
 AND THE WORD WAS RETURN
 ten thin men in torn pants
 kneel in worship at their
 games—*craps seven you lose*—
 in the urine alley
 off forty-third and tenth
 —*Libera me, libera me!*—
 and the penumbral wolf
 arches his back to pounce

once again on the chance
ascent of the word a
return from the abyss
no one ever really owned
rising slowly from the
chthonic divinity
rising without effort
without error and with-
out the sloped grammar of
ascent that sheds away
a rising to the bays
where rivers meet the seas
rising to the mouth some-
thing was-less some of-less
thing the wolf gone returned
again to the chill mists
of dawn and you—alone
at last—risen to the
I-ification of
the rose—*dona eis*
lux—returned to a point
in the beginning of

The Law of Faces

In the commerce of faces,
one law: the image fades
from the outer parts in.
The end of the image
is eyes.

Willy-nilly strangers
begin, they transact the gaze
and are bound by its terms,
the border between them
negotiated down
to the thinnest filament
that would withstand

trespass. The end
is eyes.

Let us begin again.

Our terms already set,

let us now together tend

to the one task left.

Invent me.

MORITZ TANNENBAUM AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

iwysse
Mony aunterez here biforne
Haf fallen suche er bis

PART I

“\$1.50. A piece of matjes, rye toast with butter, and tea in a glass. \$1.50 in all.”

For Moritz Tannenbaum, this was just the beginning. “That’s too much, Kreindel,” he told her, “it’s just too much!”

“Too much? Ha! Every day, Mr. Tannenbaum, every single day it’s the same thing with you. Always too much. The same old dance. Every day you say it’s too much and every day I tell you tea in a glass is more tea. Mr. Tannenbaum, either you take tea in a cup or you pay extra for the glass. Too much? You’re lucky I don’t charge you for the butter!”

Kreindel Kvitki was telling the truth—every day it was the same thing. Even the speech she’d just made to Tannenbaum was the same one she delivered to him every weekday at a quarter before noon. There was absolutely nothing special about the day. Just like the one before it, just like the one to come. Only the date on the newspaper tucked under Tannenbaum’s arm had changed—13 Cheshvan 5735 (or, as they reckon the dates outside of Kalman Kvitki’s Dairy Emporium on Flatbush Avenue: 30 October 1974). A Monday had become a Tuesday which would soon enough become a Wednesday. Of course, the dates had changed on all the newspapers tucked under the

arms of all the old men lined up at Kvitki's, so even the changing of dates was really nothing special. To be precise, nothing had changed in the eight years since Kvitki's had moved to Brooklyn, just as nothing had changed during the 20 years Kvitki's had been on Mott Street (back then it was called Kalman Kvitki's Kosher Cafeteria). Nearly 30 years and nothing had changed but the dates on the newspapers. And Kvitki's prices, but only every now and then, and even then, not by very much.

"Kreindel, I need to speak with Kvitki," Tannenbaum said. "Kvitki's busy," Kreindel said. "Kvitki's busy!" Tannenbaum said, rolling his eyes as he did every day at this juncture in the negotiations. "Kvitki's busy in the kitchen," Kreindel said, rolling her eyes as well.

"Mr. Tannenbaum?"

Moritz Tannenbaum had been preparing to respond to Kreindel when someone behind him called him by name. He turned toward the voice. There, just behind him in line, stood a tall, well-built man with wild hair and a long beard. The man's neck and chest were thick; his legs were long and very muscular. He was attired in the manner of a wealthy medieval knight, from his ermine lined mantle to the gems on his belt. In his left hand, the knight carried an immense battle axe, and in his right, a tray with a double portion of Kvitki's kasha. And, from head to toe, this knight and all his gear were green as green could be.

"Do I know you?" Tannenbaum asked the Green Knight.

"Cut my head off," said the knight.

Tannenbaum glanced at the knight's axe, then at the tray, and once again at his green cheeks. "Oy mister, you need a doctor," Tannenbaum sighed, "no one eats Kvitki's kasha."

Moritz Tannenbaum was telling the truth about the kasha. Long-standing murmuring among the old men had established that Kvitki was still selling Mott Street kasha. But the knight seemed to know nothing of this and just stared back at Tannenbaum.

"\$1.50 please Mr. Tannenbaum!" Kreindel interjected. Tannenbaum turned toward her, "Tell me Kreindel, do you not see me speaking with this, er ... gentleman here?" Then, returning his gaze to the Green Knight, Tannenbaum continued, "Look, mister, I can recommend a good man, my son-in-law's cousin in Canarsie... "

"Cut my head off," repeated the knight. He stretched his left arm toward Tannenbaum, offering the old man his battle axe.

"What? Why should I cut off your head?" Tannenbaum asked.

"It's a game," said the Green Knight.

"A game? I see. Well where is it written that you should go first? Punch me in the stomach!"

"I'll do you one better," said the Green Knight, "if you hold up your end of the bargain, I get to take a shot at you. In three days time, I'll return the blow. You'll need to find me here in Kvitki's. But first you must agree to the game."

"Find you?" asked Tannenbaum. But just then he noticed the catcalls and clamor from the old men behind the Green Knight. "A shoyn genug, Tannenbaum, enough already!" and "Let's move it Tannenbaum!" and so on. Tannenbaum excused himself

momentarily to the Green Knight and tossed a rude gesture of his own into the clamor:

“May you please all go to hell, God forbid!”

“Nu, Mr. Tannenbaum? Will you cut off my head?” With that, the Green Knight placed the battle axe in Tannenbaum’s hand. The axe was heavy and it fell against the counter, pulling Tannenbaum with it.

“When will I see my \$1.50, Mr. Tannenbaum?” asked Kreindel.

Tannenbaum growled in her general direction and turned back to the Green Knight who asked again, “Will you agree to the game? In three days time, I will return your blow.”

“What’s so important about three days?” asked Tannenbaum because it was the only thing he could think of saying.

“Today’s Tuesday,” began the knight, “and tomorrow I’m very busy and will probably need some extra time on Thursday to sleep off my overtime tomorrow. In four days is *shabbes*—I don’t work on *shabbes*. So Friday works best for me. So you will agree to the game, nu?”

Tannenbaum was silent which, inside Kvitki’s, was a sure indication of consent. The Green Knight noted Tannenbaum’s consent, placed his tray down on the counter behind Tannenbaum’s, and proceeded to lay his own head down on his food tray. But a medallion around the Green Knight’s neck was striking the edge of Kvitki’s cafeteria counter, and the jarring clang of metal on metal was so distracting that Tannenbaum and the Green Knight found it very difficult to proceed with their business. So the Green Knight stood up again, took off his medallion—a circumscribed pentagram, as it turned out—and put it around Tannenbaum’s neck. “Would you hold that for me?” he told

Tannenbaum. Then, the Green Knight placed his head on the tray next to his kasha again, taking great care to bare his neck. With his head down, he took the axe and placed it in the old man's hands, guiding the blade right up to his own neck. "Here, Mr. Tannenbaum, I've helped you as much as I can. You must do the rest. We agreed. You gave me your word."

More catcalls rang from the old men back of the line: "I was hoping to squeeze some lunch in before my appointment with the messiah, Tannenbaum!" and "Now, Tannenbaum, now!" and even much worse than that. As he held the axe next to the Green Knight's neck, Tannenbaum's hands began to shake. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that Kreindel was motioning the other old men to move around him and the Green Knight. This irritated Tannenbaum even more, so before long his hands were trembling wildly. Then came the voice of the knight: "Now, Mr. Tannenbaum, we agreed. It's time for you to cut off my head!"

With that, Tannenbaum's entire body began to tremble uncontrollably. Seized by a vague but unrelenting temptation, he lurched forward toward the knight's tray and the force of that movement, the weight of the axe, and the sharpness of the blade worked together to move the blade cleanly through the Green Knight's neck. Tannenbaum let the axe clatter to the counter and stepped back abruptly as the Green Knight's head tumbled off the tray and onto the floor of Kvitki's Dairy Emporium. Tannenbaum had stopped trembling and just stood there, frozen, staring at the Green Knight's head on the ground and the feet of the old men inside Kvitki's grazing the Green Knight's head as they shuffled around Tannenbaum to pay Kreindel for their food. It seemed like an eternity before Tannenbaum began to move toward the head, perhaps to pick it up.

But he didn't get too far before the torso of the Green Knight interceded and deftly picked up the head. The Green Knight's torso held the head facing Tannenbaum and the head began to speak: "Well done, Tannenbaum. Now don't forget our agreement: in three days I will take my turn at your head." The torso then picked up the axe with its left hand and offered it again to the old man. But Tannenbaum, who at this point, could no longer tell whether he was standing in the middle of Kvitki's or a subordinate clause, did not move. "Oh yes," said the Green Knight's head, "sorry—I know it's a bit heavy. Sorry..." and the torso leaned the axe against the counter and picked up the bowl of kasha, extending it toward Tannenbaum.

Acting on instinct, still not quite knowing what or where he was, Tannenbaum took hold of the bowl. Once the torso and Tannenbaum were both holding the bowl of kasha, the head of the Green Knight said "*Kabboles kinyen!*" Instinctively, Tannenbaum's lips responded: "*Kabboles kinyen.*"

The Green Knight then left the kasha in Tannenbaum's hand, took up the axe, and, holding his head in his other hand, left Kvitki's without another word.

After a time, Tannenbaum noticed himself again. He put the kasha on his tray and proceeded toward Kreindel.

"\$2.50 with the kasha, Mr. Tannenbaum."

Tannenbaum handed her a five-dollar bill and walked out of Kvitki's, without his lunch. And without his change.

Once outside Kvitki's, Tannenbaum headed down Flatbush Avenue and turned down Linden Boulevard toward his building. He didn't wait for the lift and instead walked up the three flights to his room. Once inside, he relaxed a moment before picking

up the phone to call Miriam. She was his daughter and, though everyone in her Morristown, New Jersey circle called her Margie, Tannenbaum always called her by the name he and his late wife had given her.

“Miriam!”

“Oh, hello Papa. You’re calling a bit early. Is everything...”

“Something terrible has happened, Miriam!”

“Oh no, Papa, what is it?”

“Well today in Kvitki’s I met a Green Knight...”

“Oh God! Thank you Papa for reminding me. I need to get Brad a Halloween costume. I almost..”

“Shah Miriam! Listen to me. I killed this Green Knight.”

“WHAT?”

“Well, maybe I didn’t kill him. I cut off his head...”

“WHAT?”

“...but only because he asked me to. And I think maybe he didn’t die. The head was talking to me while he held it in his hand.”

There ensued a long pause. Tannenbaum continued, “You see I agreed with him that this was the right thing to do. I cut off his head and he was only half dead as you see. He told me that he and his head would return the blow on Friday.”

There ensued a longer pause. Tannenbaum continued, more soberly, “So you see, Miriam, that come Friday I’m a dead man. Once I find him, the Green Knight will cut off my head. You see why I’m worried?”

There ensued the longest possible pause. Eventually, Miriam broke the silence: “I do see. Papa tell me, are your shoes too tight again? You know what the doctor said...”

“ACH!” Tannenbaum slammed the phone down and made for the door. Soon, his phone began to ring again and again. But Tannenbaum was already gone.

PART II

Once outside, the old man wandered back to Flatbush Avenue, turned south, and wandered southward for some hours, before turning northward again. He kept walking past Church Avenue and a block before Kvitki's he crossed the street. He stood there next to the bus stop for quite some time, observing the diminishing stream of old souls exiting, one by one, from Kvitki's. The B44 bus had come and gone several times and the sun was preparing to set, when Tannenbaum decided to move on. He continued northward and, after a time, reached Prospect Park.

The sun was, by now, very low in the sky, and the wind was picking up a bit. Tannenbaum made his way into the park, found a picnic table under a shelter by the lake. He sat down. From there he could view the remnant ducks on their little island, the ones who'd forgotten they had better places to be when the cold came. He pulled his overcoat around him. He watched the ducks and the last rays of the sun glinting across the lake. Eventually, his head tilted forward onto the table and, in that manner, he slept the night in Prospect Park.

He was awakened early the next morning by someone shaking his arm and asking "Mister, mister—are you OK?" The old man opened his eyes, sat up, looked around, and then assessed the man who was trying to wake him up. He was a groundskeeper. He wore a gray uniform, with his name—*Bert*—stitched in red script on a white patch sewn

to his shirt. In one hand he held a spear, the kind that groundskeepers use to stab at trash. In the other he held Tannenbaum's arm, shaking it and repeating: "Are you OK?"

The old man shrugged off the groundskeeper's grip. "I'm fine."

But the groundskeeper persisted, "You sure you're OK? You slept here. Maybe I can call someone for you, some family..."

"No. I said I'm fine."

The groundskeeper took the hint, and left, saying only, "Well, OK mister. Have it your way." And, with that, he returned to picking up trash in Prospect Park.

Tannenbaum watched the groundskeeper for a while, and then turned his attention to other things. He began watching the ducks on the island in the lake again. It seemed their numbers had dwindled from the day before. But Tannenbaum couldn't really tell. When he looked again for the groundskeeper, the man was nowhere in sight.

Tannenbaum sat at the table through the morning, staring at the ducks, and thinking about the Green Knight he had beheaded at Kvitki's a day earlier and whom he would meet again soon when the knight would return for his own head.

By early afternoon, Tannenbaum could sit no longer. So he got up and walked around the park. It had warmed up considerably from the night, but he was still glad for his overcoat. He walked on the path along the curving lines of the lake. Toward mid-afternoon, children came walking on their way home from school with their moms. They were dressed in Halloween costumes and carried little plastic jack-o-lantern pails containing candy. But Tannenbaum barely noticed the children and their happy holiday chatter. He was lost in his own thoughts. *I have killed a man*, he thought, *and now he will come to kill me.*

The sun was once again low in the sky when Tannenbaum turned back toward his bench in the shelter by the lake. It was already past sunset when he neared the spot. It was then he noticed two young men watching him. He paused, and then walked toward the bench. But the men started moving more quickly toward him until they intercepted the old man.

“Hey old man—got any money?” the shorter of the two demanded.

Tannenbaum reached into his pocket, found his wallet, and tossed it to the taller one. “Take it all,” he told them and began walking toward the men. As he drew closer, he fingered the necklace the Green Knight had given him and asked the men: “Do you know what the hell this is?” Tannenbaum had thought to give them the necklace too, but the men took one look at the circumscribed pentagram, then looked at each other, and ran off into the park with Tannenbaum’s wallet.

This made barely any impression on the old man who returned to the picnic table by the lake and noticed that someone had left a bottle of water behind. Normally, Tannenbaum wouldn’t partake of found foods and beverages, but the bottle was sealed and, more importantly, he noticed that his throat was dry. He sat down, opened the bottle and gulped down its contents. When he had finished, he recapped the bottle and placed it on the table. He began to gaze at the ducks on the island again. He convinced himself that indeed there were fewer ducks that day than a day before. Why did they stay? His thoughts about the ducks dissolved in with the Green Knight. Before long, Tannenbaum had fallen asleep at the picnic table again.

Early the next morning, the old man awoke to the sound of his name. “Mr. Tannenbaum? Mr. Tannenbaum? Are you OK, Mr. Tannenbaum?” The old man

opened his eyes and found the same groundskeeper shaking his arm as he had the morning before.

“Do you know me?” the old man asked, sitting up abruptly and moving away from the groundskeeper’s grip.

“No, Mr. Tannenbaum, I don’t, but yesterday I saw you here”

“How do you know my name is Tannenbaum?”

The groundskeeper fished into his pocket and pulled out something black. “I don’t know your name,” he told the old man, “it’s just that cleaning up this morning, I found this in a pile of leaves, and well, seeing as you’re the only one who slept the night here, I thought it might be yours. Inside it says ‘Moritz Tannenbaum’.” He then extended the object towards Tannenbaum who recognized it at once as the wallet he had surrendered to the men the evening before. The old man took it and returned it to his pocket.

“Aren’t you going to check it, to see if there’s any money in it?” the groundskeeper asked. “It doesn’t matter,” Tannenbaum replied without looking at the man. “Well, there isn’t. I already checked,” the groundskeeper responded, quickly adding, “It’s not like I would’ve kept anything you know.”

Tannenbaum stared ahead at the ducks. After some minutes, the groundskeeper broke the silence, “Mr. Tannenbaum, I think you’re not well. Who sleeps in Prospect Park? Surely you have someone I can call.”

“Leave me alone,” Tannenbaum told him without turning.

And so, that second morning, the groundskeeper slowly returned to his tasks and by the time Tannenbaum turned away from the ducks to see where the man had gone, the groundskeeper was nowhere to be seen.

The rest of Thursday went much the same as had gone the day before. Tannenbaum wandered around the park. This day was a bit cooler than the day before, but Tannenbaum barely noticed. In fact, he noticed nothing except that time was running out on his deal with the Green Knight. *What am I supposed to do?* he kept asking himself. *I've agreed to the Green Knight's request and cannot renege on his claim for my head. I gave him my word. But what am I to do, even if I wanted to find him?* So it went for the old man that day. He did not notice that the school kids were no longer wearing their Halloween costumes. He did not even notice the occasional flight of ducks leaving Prospect Park.

It was only when he returned to his picnic table at sunset that he noticed he hadn't eaten in a while. In his youth, Tannenbaum was no stranger to hunger. But an old man must eat. As he approached the shelter, he noticed a dark object on the table. He drew closer and realized, not without considerable joy, that the object was an apple that someone had left behind. He sat down, immediately picked up the apple, and devoured it quickly, core and all.

He was somewhat satisfied, then, when he gazed across the lake at the island and noticed that only a few ducks remained. He pulled his overcoat around him and kept his eyes on the forms of the remnant ducks until they became indistinguishable in the darkness. He swooned and fell asleep for the third night at the picnic table in Prospect Park.

It was the groundskeeper again who shook Tannenbaum's arm on Friday morning, this time a bit after nine. "Mr. Tannenbaum—you must let me take you somewhere, or get you something to eat. You can't go on sleeping in Prospect Park. Believe me, Mr. Tannenbaum, I'm ready to call the cops for help."

Tannenbaum sat up with a start, but, due to his having eaten nothing over the past two days, began to swoon again. The groundskeeper sat down next to the old man and took his arm. "Please, Mr. Tannenbaum, you must believe me. I'll not let you sleep in the park another night."

The old man retrieved his senses somewhat and told the groundskeeper, "Really mister, I appreciate it. But last night was my last night. Today, the Green Knight is coming for my head."

"What?"

"Trust me," returned Tannenbaum, "it's a long story."

When some time had passed without the old man speaking again, the groundkeeper said, "So, you like stories?"

Tannenbaum smiled in the manner of condemned men and said, "Sure. Who doesn't like a good story?"

"Well I've got a good story," the groundskeeper said, "but it's more a joke than a story. An old joke really. A joke about Korach—"

Mention of the biblical renegade startled Tannenbaum. He turned to face the groundskeeper. "So you're Jewish?"

“Sure. Who isn’t?”

Tannenbaum shook his head and said nothing. The groundskeeper began again, “You want to hear the Korach joke?”

“No, no, I already know the Korach joke,” Tannenbaum said, “I want to know who you are.”

The groundskeeper pointed at the name on his breast, “I’m Bert.”

“I’ll call you Bert then?”

“Of course. What else would anyone call me?”

“OK, look Bert. I’m leaving the park today. This very morning, as a matter of fact. But right now I’m tired and somewhat hungry.”

From his pocket, Bert produced an apple. Tannenbaum took the apple and bit into it. Before long, he had finished this one too. When he had, he turned to the groundskeeper and asked, “Bert, tell me what it is you really want from me?”

“Mr. Tannenbaum, I want to know that you’re well. What can you tell me?”

“I’ll tell you one thing: this day is my last.”

“Mr. Tannenbaum, I think you’re not well.”

“And, I’ll tell you another thing: my name’s not Tannenbaum.”

Tannenbaum and Bert stared at each other in silence. After some moments, Tannenbaum looked away.

“I’m fine, Bert. Everyone calls me Tannenbaum, Kreindel, the Green Knight and now you call me Tannenbaum. Even my daughter Miriam calls me Tannenbaum. But my name’s not Tannenbaum.”

“But what is your name then?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know my name.”

Bert leaned in toward the old man, “Look, if it’s amnesia, Mr. Tannenbaum, let me take you to the hospital. We can...”

“Not amnesia, Bert! Not at all. And my name’s really not Tannenbaum!”

For some minutes, the old man stared again into the groundskeeper’s eyes. Not a word passed between them. Finally, the old man turned his gaze toward the ducks, and then quickly again down toward the table.

“Bert, I’ll tell you something else now, something I’ve never told another soul. This is my last day here, and I need to tell someone and you’re here. Not even my daughter Miriam knows what I’m telling you.”

Bert offered the old man another apple, but the old man shrugged it off with a smile.

“Bert, a long time ago, the greatest meal of my life was a rotten apple. Nothing since has ever tasted quite so good, even the apples you offer me today. But that rotten apple sure cost me. Because of that apple, I don’t know my name. Bert, I sold my *mitzvos* for that apple.”

The ducks on the island in the lake, noticeably fewer in number, edged together in a line near the edge of the island. But the old man did not notice.

“You know, Bert, I hadn’t planned on selling my *mitzvos*, but it just happened that way. To tell you the truth, it never would have occurred to me that my *mitzvos* had any value at all, at least not in this world. By that night long ago we figured out that we’d been in that camp for about three months. Not that time mattered in any way. It seemed like forever. Every night we went to our beds exhausted from the work we did all day.

Before dawn they woke us and our first task was to identify those who'd not woken up. We would carry their corpses outside the barracks and line them up on the edge of the camp where the pits were. The tractors would then plow the bodies into the pit and we would throw a layer of lime on those bodies. And only then, we'd go to work in the quarry. They'd take us on trucks in the morning and return us to the camp in the evening. All day we would break and heave the big stone blocks. It was back breaking work. Our only food was some salty water they called soup and, if we were lucky, a chunk of stale moldy bread. We'd work on the rocks almost until sundown when they'd splash us with buckets of river water. Our shower. Then, back to the trucks, back to the camp, back to the barracks. Back to the beds."

Bert listened raptly to the old man.

"I hadn't meant to sell my *mitzvos*. It just worked out that way. I and two others in the barracks had developed a plan to escape from the camp. We'd hidden some flat rocks we found in the quarry. Our barracks was in a dark corner of the camp. Just beyond the fence was a field and beyond that a forest. The forest was our freedom. Our plan was to use the stones to knock out Ivan who guarded the gate behind our barracks. Most nights, Ivan got drunk on the crude vodka that he and the other guards made from potatoes. To the guards we were just walking skeletons, so they would never expect us to overpower them. Certainly not Ivan! He was a huge man, maybe six feet five tall or so. Anyway, he would get drunk and sing his Ukrainian songs loudly. At some point he would tire himself out singing and fall asleep. Our plan was to hit him on the head with one of the stones at that point, so no one could tell that he was sleeping a little more deeply than usual. We didn't want to kill him, God forbid, just knock him out long

enough for us to depart unnoticed. Anyway, that was our plan. We were waiting for the right night, a moonless night, and a warm one.”

The old man traced out some random figure on the picnic table and continued.

“Well, as I tell you Bert, that night finally arrived. It was perfect. I and my two partners had decided to not let anyone else in on our escape plan—we were the youngest and strongest men in that barracks and knew we had enough strength to cross that field to the forest on the run without endangering others. So, we had agreed we would signal to each other at the quarry, without divulging our secret in the barracks where others might hear.”

“That night, we would lie down to bed with the others and pretend to sleep. At midnight we’d get up and wait for Ivan to fall asleep behind the barracks. Then, we’d go. There was always plenty of noise inside the barracks at night. Most of it came from the dying Musselmanner, who were moaning and groaning without letup. So that’s what we figured: we could make it out of the barracks without attracting any attention.”

The ducks on the island in the lake across from the two men were still. The old man continued.

“I lay on my mat, pretending to sleep, listening to the moans of the starving. Suddenly I heard a voice: ‘Do you want to live?’ I ignored it—perhaps it was just my own anxiety. But then it came again: ‘I know your plan. Do you want to live?’ I moved quickly toward the sound. He was an old man, as old as I now appear to you Bert. He said: ‘So you think you will escape? Do you want to live?’ I shushed him quiet.”

“Of course, I was absolutely furious. How had he found out? I asked him what he wanted. He said, ‘The world to come beckons to me and I am not long for this world.

Do you want to live?’ I asked him again what he wanted. ‘Your *mitzvos*,’ he said, ‘I want your *mitzvos*.’ I asked him why. He said, ‘I am certain to not live through this night. Before dawn I will face the judgments of my maker and, for all my years in this dirty place, I have nothing to show in my own defense. I have no *mitzvos* and the Prosecutor will make a quick case against me. I need to have your *mitzvos* before the night is out so I can make a case for myself.’”

“Now, Bert, I must admit that I had long before then given up on the idea of God and judgment. But who was I to argue with a man in death’s grip? I tried to tell him that I too had no *mitzvos*, that I would be cheating him if I had him believe otherwise. But that old coot wouldn’t believe me. He refused to believe that I had no *mitzvos*.

‘Whatever *mitzvos* you have will help me. And, you are young. If you sell me your *mitzvos* you will live your years in a safer place than I have. You will have your entire life to accumulate more *mitzvos*!’”

A few of the ducks fluttered their wings on the island. The old man looked at them, and then looked at Bert. Bert met his gaze. The old man continued.

“To tell the truth, Bert, I was concerned that he was going to give up our plan and ruin our escape. So that’s why I agreed to sell him my *mitzvos*. He asked me to name a couple, just in case the Judge wanted to test him. I told him a few. I had honored my parents. I had been kind to the sick and the poor. And, I had never killed a man and never would.”

The old man began to tremble. Bert put his hand on his arm, telling him “Go on, Mr. Tannenbaum. Please go on.”

“Well it turned out that was good enough for him. I felt better too, convinced that he had calmed down and would not give our plan away. I began to move away from him, but before I was free of him he grabbed my forearm with a steel grip. ‘It’s not yet a proper deal. I must pay you. What price would your *mitzvos* command in the open market?’ What a ridiculous idea—I told him that I had no clue, that this was a concentration camp not an open market and, in any case, who carried anything of value in a place like that? I told him it would be OK, that I would simply donate my *mitzvos* to him, but he became agitated and began to raise his voice and tighten his grip on my forearm. More than anything, I wanted him to quiet down so I told him ‘Ok, ok, I’ll take whatever payment you offer.’ Then, from somewhere in his clutter, he pulls out this apple. My eyes nearly popped out of my head—how long had it been since I had seen such a beautiful fruit! I asked him where he’d found it but he told me ‘Never mind. Just put your hand here on mine and we’ll hold the apple together.’ I did as he told me to. He then said ‘Our contract is not official without proper witnesses.’”

“Can you believe that Bert? He wanted witnesses! There were plenty of us there, to be sure, but proper witnesses would be hard to come by in the camp. No one there was in their right mind. So after I argued a bit with him, he settled for a moaning Musselmann and another man two steps behind him at death’s door as an acceptable pair of witnesses in the eyes of the law. I can’t tell you, Bert, how eager I was to get the deal over and done with—midnight was coming on fast—but he was insisting that everything be done in strict accordance with the law. So with the witnesses near us, this old man and I held the apple together. He instructed me to say my own name slowly and then my father’s name and then my father’s father’s name after that. I did so and he repeated the

names after I said them. We held the apple, looked at each other and declared *kabboles kinyen* to make it official.”

The old man stopped speaking. Bert prompted him, “What happened next?”

“Next thing, he releases my hand. I never heard him speak again. At about midnight, my buddies and I made our way to the door of the barracks. We opened the door slowly, and saw that the coast was clear. We crept toward the gate. Ivan was asleep. We hit Ivan on the head with the stones. Ivan responded only with groans and he slumped further into his guard’s chair. We went to the gate and, in a minute, had the latch open.”

“But suddenly an alarm bell went off and shouts were coming from the other guards. We three took off across the field, running as fast as we could in three different directions as we had planned if it came to this. Now, each of us was on our own.”

“I ran and ran until I heard gunshots. I dropped into the tall grass and waited. I heard the guards being spoken to in German and answering in Ukrainian. They were moving toward the opposite end of the field from where I lay in the grass. I thought the best thing I could do was wait.”

A few of the ducks suddenly took to the air. The old man looked up and then resumed his tale.

“I cannot tell you, Bert, exactly how long I lay there, but I cannot have lived as long or as well outside that field as I did on that night, alone and waiting in the field. I had made my decision and now it was no longer up to me. I waited. The guards continued searching the field, but they seemed to be moving away from me.”

“At some point, I remembered the apple. I pulled it out and bit into it. It was rotting but I didn’t care. Juices flowed from the fruit down the side of my face. It was a rotten apple, but for me, on that night, I was in heaven. I ate every part of the apple, the fruit, the core, even the stem. Then I licked the juices off my fingers.”

“From across the field, I heard the guards getting excited. Soon shots were fired. That was my cue. I took off like a bolt of lightning, running toward the forest. As I ran, I felt my life in that place slowly peeling away from me. My parents, their smells and sounds were leaving me. My brothers, their children, my nephews and nieces, their sounds, their personalities, their smells were, one by one, departing from me as I raced across the field. By the time I’d reached the forest, I had forgotten even my own name.”

Bert leaned in and asked: “So, how did you remember your name again?”

“I never did, Bert. And I never saw my buddies again either. After a day or two in the forest, I joined some partisans. I took another name, one I thought could make me fit better in the outside world, this name Tannenbaum, you’ve been using with me. I stayed with them, fighting till the war was over. I came here and made a new life with my new name.”

“Do you remember any other names?” asked Bert.

“No. I cannot remember a thing. Not my parents’ names, not my brothers or their wives or their children. And not even my own name.”

All the ducks on the island took to the air. The old man and Bert watched them fly off. After a long while, the two men got up, and the groundskeeper escorted the old man back toward Flatbush Avenue. At the edge of the park, the groundskeeper told the old man, “I cannot take you any further.”

“To tell you the truth, Bert, I’m still a little worried about the Green Knight.”

The groundskeeper smiled and clasped the old man’s hand tightly. “Good bye, Mr. Tannenbaum,” he said.

The old man slowly crossed the street, walked a block and turned south on Flatbush Avenue toward Kvitki’s. He managed to get there a few minutes before the appointed time. He stood outside for some moments before pulling open the door and leaning his head inside. He stepped inside Kvitki's.