

Self-portrait as Ruth

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Also by Jasmine Donahaye

POETRY

Misappropriations (Parthian)

Self-portrait as Ruth

JASMINE DONAHAYE



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*For JK
in honour of difficult friendship
and for his family*

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Self-portrait as Ruth

Self-portrait as Ruth

. . . loneliness, meaning
the ache of thwarted desire, of, in a word, beauty.

—B.H. FAIRCHILD, *The Art of the Lathe*

In every wheatfield after the harvest
you wait for me to undress.
Five men are getting ready to go:
the last round bale has been hoisted
onto the trailer, and the prongs of the forklift rest
on the newly cut ground. A quad bike engine shuts
off; the tractor has not yet been turned on. One heavy farmworker,
hands still on the lever, turns in his seat to watch
as the gulls begin to drift inland and I pull down the straps of my dress
and step out of its little silk collapse at my feet.

Will they talk about it later—
the tired farmer in his loose jeans,
driving his wife to town for Herceptin every third week;
or the shirtless adolescent son on his quad bike,
a collie between the handlebars—
how a woman came into the field
and undressed? At night in their quiet beds
invoking my nakedness
glistening in the late afternoon sun,
will each one think it was done for him alone?

This morning I got up to wash;
I oiled my thighs and buttocks and belly, my
stupendous dark arms. My mother-in-law
instructed me—this is the seduction:
I am ready to submit,
so I adorned myself with earrings and bracelets and anklets,
with the Yemenite choker she took
into exile.

The gulls wheel, wait as you wait: for the light,
for the right shot, and the men watch, suspended—
like you, they are about to pass out of my life a little
troubled, changed, because when I straighten up,
stalks of bearded, bristled wheat scratching my bare skin,
and I glance over to see if you're looking,
and you are
then for one instant I will know what I am—
the ache of desire

thwarted. Behind me, the windmills' slow revolutions
change pace; chaff blows into the air
and the men stir. Any moment, there will be nudges,
laughter . . . but it doesn't come. One
clears his throat, looks down; another reaches
to turn the ignition, heaving himself
in the seat, which bounces and squeaks.
The boy on the quad bike tells his dog *tyrd 'ma*,
though she's done nothing more than cock her ears
and wait.

I'd have said it if you'd let me say it—*where you go,
there shall I go; where you are buried there let me die.*
But you got what you wanted, and you retreat
as the gulls arrive and begin their descent,
lining up at the edge of the field. Already they,
like the men looking over their shoulders,
expressionless, almost hostile,
are waiting for me, a trespasser, to leave.

Thirst

Atash, thirst, *tzamah*: in any language
an open mouth, a plea; and in *syched*, fluid
sucks out; the tongue—clammy and then coated
and then furred—cracks and cleaves
to the ribbed roof of the mouth, soul
contracted to a longing for the purely physical;
not because it's a parched place
but because the distance between one well
and another, from one spring to the next,
is a pilgrimage.

You, Moshe, *Mashiach*, with your macho
promise; you, *chayal*, with your sullen refusals,
raising a slow thumb from that gunmetal chest;
you, poet, still believing
your language can be something absolute,
that it can absolve you—
violate me, let me love
absolutely.

What you say about us is untrue. It begins with
thirst, when you shout *all right, you want water,*
I'll give you water, and you strike the rock.
We're near the salt impossibility of that fake respite—
can you blame us? From the rock a thousand streams
ejaculate. Yes, it starts with our thirst
and resentment, and then your disgust, and for such
petty rage, your right of return
has been revoked, so why blame us
for the exile?

It's you I want, *chayal*, in your *Tzahal* shirt;
you, Moshe, in your angry dismissal;
you, poet, grieving for your lover on Gilboa.
With all my heart and all my soul
and all my strength I will worship you:
your mouth, with its little heroic twist
from which my angry language
comes. You — poet, soldier, road-builder —
love me absolutely: violate me;
absolve me.

Palestina

*My heart is in the east
and I am at the edge of the west.*

— JEHUDA HALEVY (11th–12th century)

Eagle, eagle, over your mountains . . .

— SAUL TCHERNIKHOVSKY

She slipped past
when the border guard
had fallen asleep at his post.
She smelled of sweat
and olivewood. One finger
pressed against my mouth, she whispered:
'Here's where it began—your words,
a thousand years ago, claiming,
my heart is in the east.'

She took off her dress.
Her body was a map of
my body; where she had scars,
I had scars. I traced her terrain:
the ruined watchtowers
where the gunmen had lain,
the wadi where I'd watched a short-toed eagle
soar above the rusted vans, and in my heart I
butchered Tchernikhovsky's
glorifying refrain, claiming
my mountains, mine.

I knew she'd never let me alone
again. 'My womb
is not your womb,' she said;
'I give birth to blood
and shards of bone.'

She lay down,
the length of her body
against my body,
and kissed me
with my mouth, telling me
in my voice: 'Here's
where the Catastrophe began—
your words, your claim,
my heart is in the east.'

Fetishes

The cock, rearing up
trembling and twitching
nubbing towards home

and the anus with its little deceit
that it wants out
when it really wants in.

The *mechitza*, which you can
see through, but through which
you may not be seen,

and the wet redness of the cunt
with its retreat upon retreat
into itself.

At the Western Wall:
should I
should I not
touch it?

Sheba before Solomon

Not that dark temptress, that beauty
pacing across the polished floor, lifting her skirts
from what she thought water, so that you,
seated at the end of the cedar hall, observing her
approach, marked for eternity
silk rising above her shins, revealing
fine dark hair. But it's not true, what you put about—
that she'd forgotten. It was deliberate, as
I am deliberate: for you, god's gift,
setting your trap, here it is, this
flawed body; but with your licentious mouth,
what do you think you're going to trick me out of,
playboy, drug smuggler, temple builder?
Go back to your thousand delights,
but you won't go back the same:
I have marked you; I have made
my own mental scratch.

Israel v. Palestine : a sonnet

Hot, flushed, talking feverishly
about 1967 and 1917, about dignity
and the loss of self-respect, the first Intifada
and the Warsaw Ghetto, we watch each other
across a table, sharing roast pistachios,
scattering shells, our fingers
occasionally arriving at the same time—
and two old Quakers are eagerly listening in
but there's nothing to say to them
because this is the private conversation:
a glimpse of your tongue, my body
empty with want, as you stand over me,
your hand on my throat, holding me down,
everything I care about gone.

The seamline

How we desired her,
and now we have her, how we

love her. We followed Rilke's advice,
patrolling the borders of her solitude.

In private she takes off the scarf, the snood,
the clumsy wig. We touch her lustrous hair that only

we may see. She undresses for us alone,
revealing her secret places and pleasures,

her wound. The scar won't ever fully heal,
but it had to be done, this stitched seam from pubis

to breastbone. Caressing the weal with the ball
of the thumb, we forget so easily how the join was made,

forty years ago, clumsily, hastily, without
thought, without anaesthetic, by an army doctor

still in his boots after a short sleep on the tent floor
on the seventh day of the six-day war.

Harry Potter goes on sale in the Beit She'an valley

Yeshiva boys, the Book imprinted on their hearts,
are wandering through the hottest hours in the wilderness,
without a map, without water, in black hats and kippot,
scuffling their sandals, stumbling
towards the border. By midday, lost, betrayed
by their pale bodies and the land they

own, they lie down, helpless, and weep.
In Beit She'an, the shaded walkway of the mall
pulses with shish kebab and ancient frying oil.
Behind the falafel stand a man lifts his chin
at the next customer, prying apart a pita
with one thumb as he waits for the order,
and my heart is peeling open

for you. The report at noon whispers through
the bookshop, and the dyed Russian woman
shifts her heavy glasses and her weight,
looking beyond us, beyond the falafel stand,
the empty carpark. How far—as far as the black road,
does she see it? Yes, yes, she knows the brown sign
to the ruin of Scythopolis, the bilingual sign
for the museum, the Hebrew sign for the swimming pool—

but the rubble and gravestones, from the broken
town, habibi, lying among the prickly pear?
She sighs, looks down at my money on the counter,
drops in my palm a handful of coins, passes over
The Deathly Hallows and so my daughter
spends the heat of the day on her stomach,
on her back, chewing her hair,
drifting down to the water, carrying before her
the heavy book like a prayer, oblivious

of the yeshiva students, the border incident,
the boys with martyr haircuts dancing the *dabka* on the far shore,
silver phone in one hand, arms across each others' shoulders,
dancing and shouting and peeling off to begin again
while women not so much swimming as walking
immerse themselves in the Sahna as though it were a *mikveh*,
their dark embroidered clothing
floating up from hidden, forbidden bodies.

Habibi, you have been beside me all this time.
Look, look—even the helpless yeshiva boys,
the old woman raising her hand, cursing
her grandchildren under the date palms;
even Beysan instead of Beit She'an,
if that's what it takes. It can never
be the same, so for whom is my heart
emptying itself of love, but you?

Water

Sweating, dusty,
I step into a shop on Sderot Yerushalayim
to buy water. The man behind his counter smiles
and says, *yes it's hot; I'm thirsty too.*
I could stop for a while in the refreshment
of his company, in the cooler shade.
I could stand here and drink, and drink
and for a moment
it might be enough:
he an Arab and I a Jew,
and water simply water.

Gaza, summer 2006

But still I'll return, and this time
I'll bring a mourning stone
according to the proper form.
I'll start with their graves:
my grandparents, and their parents,
and my sister whose grave is unknown;
one sharp stone every pilgrimage—
for Manos with his bottlebrush moustache; for Yair,
who made this peaceful garden,
the whole commune his garden now gone;
for Rahel a piece of slate from Blaenau Ffestiniog, that
stony landscape of labour; for my unnamed sister
a handful of sea shale to scatter along the northern border.
Each time I return I'll bring a stone according to the proper form,
which till now I'd failed to learn,
and one by one the graves' chiselled words will disappear:
may they be gathered . . . the collective life . . . 1914 . . . becoming
fragments, small windows, and then single letters—*aleph* and *gimel*
and finally only HaLevy's Moorish crescent moon,
the letter *yod*. On every tomb I'll build a cairn,
and soon the whole graveyard will become a mound,
and then a hill, and ten thousand mourners
will bring their little stones—from Odessa and Baghdad,
from Granada and Seville. Over the field where the dead are waiting,
and the kibbutz, the nearest towns, Afula and Beit She'an,
and finally Nazareth, the stones will rise and rise—
in the Jewish quarter and in the Arab quarter,
piling up around the bell-towers and minarets,
until the bell-tongues are stilled,
the crowd chanting *shema Yisrael* will forget
what it was they were called to mourn, and the muezzin will sing

Allahu—and choke, but still they'll come, the mourners,
until Mount Gilboa itself becomes a tomb,
its rare black irises, its iridescent insects undone,
and lop-eared goats will roam along a dusty track from ruined Gaza
to Sidon, from Tiberias to the scattered remnants of Sdot Yam,
so that once again there's nothing to fight over
but stony ground,
as the only thing ever to fight over
was stony ground.