

From *In Between The Charges*

1

1928 - New York

Under, the winter moonlight we went up on the roof.  
The creaking door spooked you, but just a little.  
You were with me so you were safe.  
Blue and green pieces from a broken bottle  
sparkled and I knew you would like it: our own  
festival of lights. You laughed through your missing front teeth  
when I said the glass was the crowned jewels of Solomon.  
Then we went downstairs and read the book I got you. Faith  
kept a hand in everything. We flew together  
with the hoopoe bird, giggling at how he got his golden crown.  
I thought I could savor that moment forever,  
that, no matter what, we would never be alone.  
I sat, reading to you, as you drifted into the night  
dreaming of riches glistening in the bleached, pale light.

3

1925 – New York

Stained, yellow, the alef bet book bound together  
through glue and tape on its spine, lay open with a sliver  
of candy across each enlarged Hebrew letter.  
Because each of the letters was a treasure,  
you ate a sweet as you pronounced each one  
pretending nobody could hear me whisper  
the last few to you. We applauded when you were done.  
You clambered off your chair and bowed down to me, your sister,  
then Mama and Papa, then our brother. Candles flickering,  
you grabbed the bag of candies and ran  
and we chased you, laughing, the poverty and bickering  
so constant in our apartment, for a moment, gone,  
tumbling on the couch into our smiling parents' laps,  
that image frozen as they buckled me in the chair and tightened the straps.

6

1932 – New York

We barely had money growing up. Childhood ends soon  
when the hallway bathroom's pipes freeze for weeks  
and the landlord takes vacations. The magical moon  
loses its magic. The roof is for sex  
and cigarettes for older teens, for getting even,  
for fighting, for arguments, to cry when no one's looking,  
or, God forbid, to pray. Once, when you were eleven,  
those years Mama and I weren't speaking,  
you found me there standing at the edge  
looking down where the trash is thrown into the alley.  
I was singing. You sat beside me, feet dangling from the ledge,  
and listened, my baby brother, my one, true ally.  
I could see the glistening moistness in your eyes.  
With you there, I could feel my song take wing and rise.

18

1953 – New York

I didn't speak because I was my brother's keeper  
and you were mine. We make our sacrifices  
throughout our suffering lives, getting in deeper  
than we ever think, based on our bitter choices.  
In the photograph, Julius and I lie side by side  
in our coffins, white handkerchiefs covering  
the burn spots on our foreheads. Outside,  
the first day of beautiful summer. Hovering  
above the world are the angels, each a letter  
joining together in the story of the universe.  
Only in dreams do they spell out the answer  
we all seek, and I don't know which is worse:  
that the answer is a dream I can't recall  
or that the answer I seek never existed at all.