

## Waiting · Shirley Kaufman

After the fervor  
of fists on the breast and fasting,  
after the last plea slips through the heavenly gates  
as they close and we've run out of things  
to atone for, I want to start over.  
The way my grandmother purified her heart  
in the woman's section.  
But the rains are late, we're not forgiven,  
and autumn won't come.  
A few gentle showers in the north,  
not in Jerusalem. No loosening.  
No green rinsing of the trees.

We can't do anything  
but wait. Fear sticks to our minds  
like the black lice of newsprint.

The dead are so light, they don't wait,  
don't have to consider what might happen.  
The wind simply lifts them over.  
Michael was edging off all summer,  
week by week he grew lighter  
until he left hardly anything behind.  
A man grows small in the distance  
as he unwillingly walks away, walks backwards  
so we can see the little twist  
of his smile. His face already taut as a mask  
from which his breath trickled out.

Last week clouds came, a dark insensible mass  
above the hills, but nothing fell. We wait  
in front of an empty screen  
when the movie is over and the next one hasn't begun.  
Too dull or dazed to get out of our seats.  
Someone is sweeping the refuse  
in the aisles. Someone is torching  
a car in the next block. Someone  
is shooting into a gang of boys.  
Someone is slashing open a woman with a knife.

Students at the vocational high school are printing  
a book of poems. In celebration, they tell me.  
Will you give us a poem?

We walked to his grave on the mountain  
in a dry wind, our backs to the sun,  
crossing an endless grid, hundreds  
of empty plots evenly bordered with cement,  
mingy homes for the homeless  
waiting to be assigned.  
"He will make peace . . . for us . . ."  
When they finished the *Kaddish*  
the men took turns and shoveled the soil back.

Autumn won't come, but the days are shorter  
leaving us suddenly.  
The heat never closes its eyes.  
Staying up with the moths  
and the souls of the lost ones  
we're not really stranded. We just have to  
lie here in the dark, soothed after love,  
getting used to how it is.

There are black rubber masks in our closet.  
When you tighten the buckles  
and smooth the rubber snugly over your face  
and attach the filter according to the printed instructions,  
you can breathe fresh air  
for about six hours. That's what they tell us.

Celebration. A poem. One of the birds  
that woke me up today sang three notes  
over and over. We stood on the balcony  
watching them fly from the roof  
and the eaves next door  
in and out of the pines with their flawless wings.  
It has to be one of the common birds,  
you said, a bulbul or green finch.  
It can't be a jay. They mostly screech.  
Maybe a blackbird. Quick, on the branch.  
Flicking its yellow beak,  
it took off. One sunbird  
dangled below us giving off sparks.  
There were high-pitched calls  
and a steady twitter. Most likely  
it was a crested lark, you said,  
but I can't tell you how any of them sing.

*November, 1990*  
*Jerusalem*