

Uncommon Prayer

Uncommon Prayer

Poems

by

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So Much Going on Inside

1.

I lie awake and freeze, filled like a knot.
I'm demanded of, but when I see who calls,
the words are absolutely open.
People vanish without satisfaction.

2.

The mind can't be sharpened like a pencil.
It's darker than account books,
more furious than bankruptcy.

The light bulb blinds it to abstraction,
where it should be set free,
the desk holds it responsible.

3.

I'm the certitude of a chameleon.
Who knows me? Against the one false move
I guard, any sudden change of heart.
I live behind chameleon eyes.
I watch myself as much as you.

4.

No flower closed up more deliberately
nor heart against the pull of human gravity.
These fingers seal like wrapping on a package
drawn up once again for lack of hope.

Lenny Koff

I. First, Like a Knot

Lenny Koff

I Turn My Head

1.

Her cremated body came in a tiny box
to the marble wall
where the identification plaque
had been unscrewed for the ceremony,
and although we stood there
reading poems by anonymous,
no ceremony fit.

 Only the box—
transformation hurried along by impatience—
slipped neatly into the square.

Where was her spirit now?
We never saw the slow descent
of the emptying body, where life had been.

Why wasn't she poured into ebbing tide
gently on a windless evening,
or scattered from a mountain top,
released?

 We stood there
on the mausoleum's white
before the curtain fell back into place,
longing for open ground
under our feet.

2.

Now she's confined to a vault,
unrecognizable as a shape,
waiting for a visitor to speak . . .

and when, after mourning,
we come to the airless place again,
resting against the sheer entablature,
straining to read her name,
calling out, naming her name,
it echoes through the hall.

But will her voice among the ashes
reach us through the infinite
thickness surrounding her,
polished marble on our side,
dimmed by one light?

3.

From the freeway, I always see her,
turn my head, my voice
moving through the windshield,
across lanes and the freeway wash beneath,
through flourishes of iron décor,
stars of David, to the house of tombs
on the small rise.

There tours are conducted
to see the Hollywood great,
and the tourists read and look and imagine . . .

She hasn't made the brochure,
and only I in passing
know she rests in public.

Lenny Koff

Today I'm going home
miles ahead, but circle a private square:
in the center a box
across the bottom of which
are grains of being.

The Urn

Within this urn are ashes racing to the finish.
Nothing there resembles anything.
No body parts, no holy pointers,
only waves that, like desire, keep repeating.
The urn holds nothing.

 But what if it *held* nothing,
contents emptied on the chamber floor,
accidentally perhaps, perhaps on purpose
like a joke the living play on those who've died—
a desperate joke, mockery itself.

Then where was he who carefully
secured the vase above the fireplace,
pausing when his heart
sought something here?

He would stretch his hand,
even as he approached, believing
human ties are never emptied.

We were empty, thinking faith
could not be touched with nothing.

Lenny Koff

The Community of Death

We are sitting in the chapel,
as visible as glass, on cool
metal backing that affirms our vigil.

We have transferred grip like legs to the floor.
Along the room, the light is dim,
white slats hanging,
or if they move, they move like skirts.
An orderly in green, his pliant cloth conforming to his body,
breaks the news . . .

*But the fir tree doesn't bend to sorrow.
It withstands the weighted heart, the towering cry,
not fleeing as the wind flees passed a solitude of fleeing . . .*

Severed in the waiting room
on thin brass chairs,
we will someday choose to be together.

Without our knowing it would take place now,
we saw ourselves transfigured.
Her body lay emotionless.

To Mrs. Hershman

She was my teacher since I can remember—
she knew me as a boy; she knew my parents,
then my wife.

She surrounded me
and took me in, my picture in her oval frame,
and when he died, she handed me
her husband's cufflinks,
oval stones in frames like pictures.

These I kept where I have always kept
family things, handed down to me,
as my own circle closed: in a dresser.

My mother died. My father.
This left furniture to fill and so
I took the dresser everywhere.
It always stood in the middle of my room,
finished front and back, fully dressed.
Craftsmanship revealed a self-sufficient piece
that kept up fashion just in case,
when men wore ties and cufflinks.

These remained where they'd been placed.
I never took them out.
I lied when Myrtle asked me
how her husband's cufflinks looked on me.
She was only looking back,
opening the dresser in my room,
which I kept shutting.

Lenny Koff

I never told her I'd been robbed,
his cufflinks stolen, gift unlinked,
her order moved . . . that from a window
near the dresser, opened wide to wind,
the thief came in and opened drawers,
taking objects from their resting place.
He was the angel of a second death,
a follow-on, whose sleeves had buttons.

And when he left, he left the front door
open, knowing we would follow.
Mrs. Hershman left me nothing else
for there was nothing else.

But when I spoke at her memorial,
I kept my secret closed.
She'd rest beside her husband
in a world of widows, believe her things
had been preserved, her arrangements put to use,
her world in order at the end.

I lied to keep her memory intact.
I couldn't take away her continuity,
her triumph over change.

I lied to everyone to seal myself
in a place I made
for continuity—my own refusal
against the separation of people and objects.

Lights and Darkness

There is sometimes life beyond the power of the mind
to catch it, swift as a racing car on an uphill stretch,
blinding in the way headlights suddenly appear
like rings that stop the erratic runner, the animal.

For a moment we can see the reading light
and the passenger sitting with the roadmap,
head down, missing nothing, intently following
with his finger the direction the driver is taking him.

We watch them disappear, then move forward,
our speed as lightless as a mole's.

Lenny Koff

II. Uncommon Prayer

Lenny Koff

Hymn 1

Here . . . my sudden home, the steps of the tomb
across the empty colonnade—
flutings of a gown—to a pool of sky and liquid,
the vast haven in which I sit.

I will write to you because the earth beneath is far away.
The floor has sealed it shut,
and so I run my hands along cold walls, cool, embracing.

These are your stones.
I've made them miraculously white,
like eggs, walking back and forth, a visitor.

Uncommon Prayer

Hymn 2

I stare at the incubator, the bread box,
heavy with famine, and the syllables of adoration,
silent.

Soon you will feed me with loaves and fishes,
riddling and scattering seeds,
I who have eaten your words, disbelief and hope.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 3

My hope for him—my nose pressed to the pane—
this child of enigma, smiling like dough,
is that he rise by the river, the yeast of millions,
burgeon like an evergreen, a forest of might,

that this righteous man, whose strength is fertile,
tower amid the wise, knowing them surely
as I know him now, my second chance.

I haven't held the baby yet, nor inhaled doughy breath.
The nurse has gone, looking for a mask,
and I can only push against the pane,
desperate to change my place for his, like a thief.

Hymn 4

He is your simulacrum, Father Christmas.
Not the red apparel, but perhaps the beard.
Done right, it won't give truth away until the first of the year
when there are no lights.

What a child thinks on the knees of this loving impostor
is the first mystery, for seeing
is believing, and he plays along
because he has a sense of play.

He worships the pretense of bounty—
the padded stomach, that full beard,
the questions that have answers.

This season of gifts
my stomach is empty.
I'd give anything to sit on your lap.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 5

At the table I held the cup I used each morning
uninterrupted. And it broke.
The handle split from the body.
The body floated out to sea.

Failure is proof of desire . . .

I've searched the house for glue,
the crazy kind that holds rock.
What I found held nothing,
so the cup will lie in ruins . . .

On a shelf near objects from another life,
I've tried to put away my aftershock,
denying it again a place at the table.

Hymn 6

Why do I drift away, white like gauze, unevenly?
I do not disappear with fire. That would make me burn.

My geography's no zone of difference,
sitting at the center of a world of seams,
and the puns come easily like ice.

From this surface, I glide into water, where there's still
everything
entangled in slow limbs.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 7

In moving boxes, I've saved notes with clips,
envelopes with changes of address.

Who will know to sort these out when I am emptied on the
bed
a heap of wishes, the partition of time
strewn on a quilt like a grab bag?

Who will reconstruct these ruins,
the monuments of Lebanon, this shock from the dead
who hang around after a funeral just in case,
their sarcophagi opened, stones cracked?
Will they overlook my plans, carefully laid out on the first
sheet,
my answers to questions, solutions to problems?

I will lie there on the shroud a broken egg,
haunted, possible, knowing everything.

Hymn 8

I've prayed to you nowhere worth remembering:
in a car, once driving to work,
not listening to radio talk anymore,
hardly audible amid the grinding of engines;

in the morning before work, suddenly
wanting to be at the computer, and making it
to my desk across the hall, half-dressed.

I had no words that seemed like anything.
What I typed was sure and certain like an index.
I lost my risk between speech and feeling,
having found the funnel that seized me at the sink.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 9: To My Talmud

Always looking down, my answers
building little rooms in the margins,
put off by text in the middle of the page,

Will I read them . . . not close the book,
not bang it on the table so pages are crushed?
Like a wrecking ball, or a pocket watch,
I have my work to do, and do it.

Now my bungalows are gone,
and all the fine powder never quite settles,
falling in a steady pattern unknown to me.

What is surely known is that the grains are there,
discrete. I only have to breathe them in
and let it them work unseen ways.

Hymn 10

To be as selfless as David,
dancing all night in a makeshift hall,
his home now, a collection of homeless.

I cried with everyone and thought
that poetry should speak for those
who cannot summon words,
who stutter with their bodies,
trying to speak what hearts tighten around.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 11: To the Cure

Closing windows, doors.
Not moving out, but rearranging furniture.

The table sitting in the sun, whose light has bleached it,
longs for richer corners.
That's why I've taken up my kind of recreation:
the fury of change.

On *that* day, when I walk outside,
nothing of me topples.
I will pull the blinds unequivocally
from the scurrings that live in wood,
a spindling in the corner,
pale against the color of day.

Uncommon Prayer

Hymn 12: A Random Event, Made Less Random

The rock set spinning accidentally by the wheels of the car
 ahead
flew at me like a shot.
I saw it coming for a second through the windshield—
my head flew back—
the sudden intervention of solid force.

It hit the passenger side, just below the rearview mirror,
radiating evenly like a fixed star,
miraculously perfect from its point of impact.

The indelible descends unannounced, uncalled-for,
and the sun illuminates the spot I stare at,
a point of contact sparkling on the shield of my car,
always equidistant from my hand on the wheel.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 13

I stepped up to the altar like everyone my age,
peered into the green, an innocent,
my face resting on the oversized binoculars.

Once my father came with me for shoes.
The light was soft. I wiggled freely.
These were someone else's toes.

I saw right through them, soundless bones,
staring . . . then lost my balance feet-first,
floated out of joint.

No step followed another.
I was a compass gone haywire in the radiation,
a child endangered by knives.

I stepped down. The ground's resistance
jarred my back and shoulders.
I was upright—not yet moving, a piece of wood.

Rescue came exclusively, intact.
An angel had withdrawn my feet, who saw,
with tender hands, the consequence for lambs.

Hymn 14

Not like a broken pot, the tree on its side
and water sizzling like batter on the hot cement,
a shower of ash raised like a cloud, and eyelids averted.

But like an angel. And I stood back, a coat on a hanger.
What I saw, I saw . . .
though memory fades as silken as a tent, waiting for a
second visit.

This . . . most holy confidence,
confirmed perhaps by a mistake,
slow as syrup, longing not to be mistaken.

So I set the table with fruit and cakes
placed at the seta of honor, whipped
by an inner wind,
because hope can sometimes
quiet the ferocious window.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 15: A Holy Place

Throwing something of yourself away
is a way of becoming, for the moment,
other people, other things.
Like rethinking your room.

Nothing is recognizable.
The table is shiny. The bowl there.
Soon grains will settle in new heights
on books leaning against each other,
and I'll find myself
in replanted forests, on inching roots.

The sun there filters through the canopy
as soft, original light, and I will speak for someone
who cannot speak for himself, but lives,
for the moment, as a bird
calling to the sky light,
a smooth fish circling a fish hook.

Hymn 16: Out of Body

I am walking to the phone from the other room,
waiting for a call, guaranteeing so much
before it happens, the distance here
present in my stomach.

Outside, the crowds are gathering before the podium,
entering the great quiet, the astrodome.
They won't give up—God knows,
they don't need much convincing.
Something like a voice should descend soon.

But something keeps him to himself,
which makes him appear absolutely necessary,
almost death-defying, like an acrobat.

We cannot shake his weight,
His disappearing acts tie us in knots,
random mumbling, and signals about to ring off the hook.

I know he'll climb down from his high place
when I least expect it,
our limbs aligning in a cord,
lightness meeting in the hall.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 17

The real intrudes. The phone rings.
I'm connected to his voice,
forget all dodges, strategies.
He's no idea. He's a window.

Even stalks pulled out at the roots, long and yellow,
return as if nothing happened.

Though I am bedrock on a silent mound,
blinded by the rush of ether,
I can see each corner of the room completely hung with light
and warm to the eye.

Hymn 18

I will grace a postage stamp, my after-death appearance
millions wait in line for, standing there
like flocks of birds, soaring for the moment
on off-line conversation.

The weather occupies them in the air-conditioned room,
the polished floors, the plastic barricades.
These will last a thousand years, survive recycling,
the last impressions of eternity.

Stepping forward, one by one, they ask for me.
I lie in wait, their painless disembodiment.
I cost an arm and a leg,
fixed to a card sent everyone at Christmas.

I'm their living wings . . .
and cousins, once together in a room,
are close at home, one by one,
the first impressions of eternity.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 19: To A Messiah

The host appears above the crowd of innocents,
speaking soundly to the camera, raising his voice
to get a rise, *that photos from the Moon*
weren't staged, that words from there, out there,
have reached us here.

The host couldn't make it to the floor.
The camera had to pan to him, he on his feet,
pointing in the dark, asked whether
anyone could doubt this . . .

The crowd below was thrown into a frenzy.
The world collapsed. Revelation broke.

We were in the dark before, condemned to think
that we were single atoms.
But if we get the chance, we are sudden stars
bringing down the house.

Hymn 20

Soup bowls are big. You can swim in them,
and the silverware is heavy.
You can grip it with your fists.

Look down: this space is left to swagger in.
Someone shouts, *Let's have potluck.*
I'll bring the luck.
And the sun sets and the spirit floats above the water,
demonstrating divinity.

Crowds watch from the shore,
clamoring to get on board, the object of riddles and magic
they can hardly believe in.

This sea change is the real thing—
once hidden in basements during the war, Dresden
now, out of danger, is set on the table for a king.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 21

From the other room, I saw you take the knife
and slice the heads of lettuce, balls of onions.
Something I said.
Transference belongs on the couch.
not at the table.

No wonder then, at the last barbecue of the season,
when everyone talked of morphine drips, the weapons of
aging—
your salad was a hit—I changed the subject.

We told one another how our virginity was lost.
Or found. Some said taken.
Some said, laughing, only given away.

Hymn 22

O my son, receive this precious egg,
a reassuring neighbor's gift.
It's your hope, inheritance.

You know it is alive, holding it
in both your hands, like water,
running to us as if on fire.

If you fall, seized by joy like a burn,
can God with an outstretched arm
make another egg, set it gently
in the fine grass where it was born?

Tears are the balm of accidents.
I would have reached for you to spare you anything . . .
He can.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 23

If it ends here, it begins again on another occasion,
when flowers are cut and water feeds them
as if through straws innocently like youth.

No one takes our place, sees what we have seen:
that filling up were transferable,
the whole occasion filmed.

This is where it occurs, not before or after—
not the empty vase waiting in the sun
nor the broken glass being swept away.

Uncommon Prayer

Hymn 24: To Beauty and Sorrow, Where He Is

Vision skims the surface of a lake.
Nothing cracks the water.
Like an insect whirling on the pane,
frantic beauty leaves the arc of day untouched.

Can we mourn so short a space?
Tears dry, too, dropping to the palm so easily.
The open hand expects them, busy over nothing.
Lemon peels. The flatness of the sun.

If I'm brave enough, I'll give you tears—
a lake, creation's arc, squeezed from peels,
evaporating on these folds of skin,
old age as tender as the eyes of elephants.

Lenny Koff

Hymn 25

From Adam's side, a womb,
you drew his wife as he lay sleeping,
the mother of wombs.

She appeared untouched, smiling at the threshold,
looking through it, veiled and singular.
She hasn't spoken yet, her silence an immense possibility,
more than hope, more like a first day,
conceiving everything beforehand,
then waiting like a breath.

Running to the window,
I've kicked over the oxygen tank.
I've found you out,
and the joy that wells inside me.

You tease eternally, like a god,
like a wedding ring.
The circle of my embrace is not mystery, but hymn.

III. The Possible

Lenny Koff

I turned my head, staring at the sun.

I feared nothing,
and the day was night, a lunatic terrain.

Angels lifted darkness,
passed me coming down the ladder
pausing only so I could see.

Who can speak of infinite steps,
of blind planks and railings, without imagining
how firmly I held my ground, mocking the elements?

Then angels danced with me
as they dance with stubborn visionaries
standing their ground, open to the solar wind
blowing through them, attenuated like gauze,
as if the heat were light around a skeleton of leaves,
plants impossible on the moon.

The sense of liberation when I saw the leaf
rising on the wind, on an otherwise calm day,
when I felt nothing move around me,
but saw just out of reach the leaf take off,
lifted out of gravity, not going
to any particular place, but rising against weight,
and although the leaf had the capacity to say
what it felt, it saw, in its abandonment
to sudden air, a joy I held out for myself,
an elevation attached to nothing else,
a reach that left the leaf as quickly as it came,
letting it settle down near my feet
as if it had never risen
and only I remembered that it had.

Lenny Koff

Like a diver on a cliff at Acapulco,
the mind takes off without warming,
a curved tongue, completely breathless
in the crowd's breath.

The undulating green for miles ...
embodied in a fish's voice,
and the sheer leap, like a gymnast's body,
or a boy in love, refuses the mind's
instinctive retrieval of forethought,
executing movement that defies its end.
In the end I want to . . .

To regain that first ground

where single drops gather
and flower like hands opening,
I'd have to move the current
upstream, the blood's rush.

Halfway up, I'd have to stop . . .
There's no assurance I can reach
the place I started from.
Upstream is the wrong direction.
If only I'd remember that . . .
I'm already down the tree of life
whose urges press each limb:
opening in the middle is all I'm given.

Know I cannot hug everyone.
The breadth of love
is confined to a single body.
Hugging leaves no impressions,
except if pressed
with arm-like strength.

Lenny Koff

Where is Paradise?

Outside the walled place, the garden,
with enough temptation for a lifetime . . .
And I chose it—knowledge and disobedience.

God, too, made a choice.
He came with me
closing the gate as He left,
setting an angel before the latch.

He kept me away from innocence
that wasn't like Him.
Who'd go back, if he could
and give up knowing this
to face Him, face to face?
What would He say?

Why did you return?
And I would only stand there,
lost, not myself,
not the image He'd grown to like
in the first place
when I turned our back on Him.

There is No Expulsion, Saith the Lord

I have heard you, back and forth, counting stones,
knowing something of the moment, giving up the rest.
And I've remained your shadow, like the sword that cut you
from the garden.

There I bound obedience, the childhood you refused.
You cut the hangman's tree and left for home,
carrying wood for which you had a private purpose.

There you built a house of crisscrossed planks.
It feels uneven, everything balancing the good.
The scale of it—doorjambs sticking — locks you in.

I still stand by the tree of life,
which shades the spot from which I can observe the rest.
This is peace that comes on Saturday afternoons
when you invite me outside to sit with you
as a kindness, playing hangman . . .

Then we hardly talk of former times, they seem so near,
and you remember with a kind of fondness
the temptation to be something not to the point.

What interrupts our touching are rough stones
you notice at a distance. How you run to them,
smoothing edges! I can only smile at your love, your
disobedience.

Lenny Koff

In Praise of Tombs

Why help oblivion? The search light catches the
vaudevillian.

No matter what our faith, cremation buries death,
a spot no one can sidestep freely.

Then bury me instead in tombs where angels stand up
to the weather,
discolored by the rain that rests in crevices,
along a wing that catches leaves in folds of stone.

Tombs mark the days where fragments rest
that cannot shake what they once stood for
on faces repeating the final turn.

Even sand, scattered along the shore, is used again,
wet with sea water, rising in a castle,
the bricks of play and insistence, an extraordinary sea wall.

Luck Has Its Own Permanence

If it ends well, the gods reclining to the left like free men,
the cards, all Queen of Hearts, no matter how the deck is
shuffled,
the house gathering across the room, lines streaming passed
animals
in the lobby and the men in sideboards selling lunch,

then it ends well, and the tears dry, and knots loosen,
the casino hanging with streamers, slot machines agape
as if their eyes were raised to heaven when the shout goes
up,
and the gods look down, because this moment is a lifetime.

Lenny Koff

Sometimes when the sun

has pieced a dark cloud,
I sing along: the triumph of intersection,
of presence, suddenly known to me,
a clearing up ahead,

and the person in the car on my left,
listening to the radio,
and staring straight ahead,
his hand on the wheel, white knuckled,
less bright than the rays
forcing their way here, sings along, too.

And if he looks over,
we both appear miraculously
in the same space,
connected by human pantomime,
thrust outside of vehicles
in directions that refuse
the concrete of the road,
carried forward
without lines in the pavement.

I know my feet have crossed
eternal sand where once I had
first nourishment.

I want to nourish back
with a sweet taste, new to heaven
from a worn world opened up.