

Jewish Poetry Reading by Washington, D.C. Area Poets
*Julie R. Enszer, Merrill Leffler, Kim Roberts, Myra Sklarew,
and Yermiyahu Ahron Taub*

Description: The Washington, D.C. area is home to a vibrant poetry scene, including the Split This Rock Festival, numerous poetry journals, countless readings, and several Busboys & Poets cafes across the city and in the suburbs, including U Street, Brookland, Chinatown, Takoma, Arlington, Va., and Hyattsville, Md., with additional locations in development. By hosting readings and building poetry collections, libraries and librarians play an important role in the nurturing of poetic culture. This session will bring together D.C. area poets in a group reading and discussion. Poets will read poems on Jewish themes and discuss the role of Jewish culture in their work.

Julie R. Enszer, Ph.D., is the author of *Sisterhood* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2013) and *Handmade Love* (A Midsummer Night's Press, 2010). She is editor of *Milk & Honey: A Celebration of Jewish Lesbian Poetry* (A Midsummer Night's Press, 2011). *Milk & Honey* was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Lesbian Poetry. She has her M.F.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Maryland. She is the editor of *Sinister Wisdom*, a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal, and a regular book reviewer for the *Lambda Book Report* and *Calyx*. You can read more of her work at www.JulieREnszer.com.

Merrill Leffler's recent book of poetry is *Mark the Music*. The publisher of Dryad Press (www.dryadpress.com), he guest edited *The Changing Orders: Poetry from Israel for Poet Lore*; *Sources of Jewish Poetry: A Thirty-Year Retrospective of SHIRIM, A Jewish Poetry Journal*; and with Moshe Dor, translated and edited *The Poetry of Eytan*, also for *SHIRIM*. A former Professor of English Literature at the U.S. Naval Academy, for more than twenty years, he wrote about Chesapeake Bay science and policy at the University of Maryland Sea Grant College Program.

Kim Roberts is the author of four books of poems, most recently *Fortune's Favor: Scott in the Antarctic*, a connected series of blank verse sonnets based on the journal of explorer Robert Falcon Scott (Poetry Mutual, 2015). She is editor of the literary journal *Beltway Poetry Quarterly* and the anthology *Full Moon on K Street: Poems About Washington, D.C.* (Plan B Press, 2010), and co-edits the web exhibit D.C. Writers' Homes. Roberts has been featured in 31 anthologies, including *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Contemporary Jewish Poetry*. Her website is <http://www.kimroberts.org>.

Myra Sklarew is the author of eleven collections of poetry, including *From the Backyard of the Diaspora* (National Jewish Book Council Award in Poetry); *Lithuania: New & Selected Poems* (Anna Davidson Rosenberg Award from the Judah Magnes Museum); *Eating the White Earth* (tr. to Hebrew); *The Witness Trees* (in English and Yiddish); *Harmless*; and collections of essays and fiction. *A Survivor Named Trauma: Holocaust and Memory* is forthcoming from SUNY Press.

Aaron Taub is the Head of the Israel and Judaica Section in the Asian and Middle Eastern Division of the Library of Congress, the Chairperson of the AJL Awards Committee, and the Co-Chairperson of Yovel/Jubilee: Celebrating 50 years of AJL! Under the name **Yermiyahu Ahron Taub**, he is the author of four books of poetry, including most recently *Prayers of a Heretic/Tfiles fun an apikoyres* (2013). *Tsugreyndik zikh tsu tantsn: naye Yidishe lider/Preparing to Dance: New Yiddish songs*, a CD of nine of his Yiddish poems set to music by Michał Górczyński was released on the Multikulti Project label (www.multikulti.com) in 2014. Taub was honored by the Museum of Jewish Heritage as one of New York's best emerging Jewish artists and has been nominated four times for a Pushcart Prize and twice for a Best of the Net award. He completed an artist's residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (VCCA) in 2014. Please visit his web site at www.yataub.net.

Reading by Julie R. Enszer

YOU ARE NOT LIKE THEM

mother speaks these words
with punishing derision

you do not just go to work
take care of the dogs
mow the lawn

you're filthy lesbians
you are not like them

but what if we were?
what if we were exactly like them?

my best friend Michael
fears this
all the homos living in the suburbs

working
gardening
tending to the neighborhood

he visits our home
he says he likes it

but he tells me

urgently
defiantly
he tells me

you are not like them

Published in *Handmade Love* (A Midsummer Night's Press, 2010) © Julie R. Enszer

PLUMBING

When the regulator valve
springs a leak after Thanksgiving,
I turn off the water main
and the hot-water heat.
My wife and I buy gallon jugs
of water, a bushel of wood
to bunker down.

In the chill of our house,
she learns new things about me:
I can wash dishes in a pot
with only a half gallon
of water, heated on the stove,
and wait until we're out
in public for restrooms.

I, too, learn a thing or two.
With small pieces of wood,
large logs, newspaper,
a stack of New Mexican
pinyon, she can stroke
the fire's flames all day long
until I become jealous.

For two days, we cook
elaborate dinners for the benefit
of oven heat. Then, Sunday
evening, amid steaming
vegetables, basting meat,
rising bread, baking brownies,
she looks at me and says,

I miss my mother.
The household chill reminds
her of the world's warmth
when mother was alive.
Now, orphaned at forty-one,
she is in alone our frigid house.
I was just enjoying

this time, waiting
for Monday morning when

the plumber will arrive.
He fixes everything.
For an entire week, our house
smells: pinyon and grief,
the many ways we make love.

Published in *Handmade Love* (A Midsummer Night's Press, 2010) © Julie R. Enszer

MOON

At forty, my menses
settle on twenty-eight
days, unmoved by my
wife's cycle, unaffected
by time with other
women. I always bleed on
Passover, Sukkot, Purim.
My blood, bathed in light.
My body, regular, certain,
pulled not by my sisters
but by the lunar cycle.
The moon and I wax
and wane synchronously.
At menarche, my mother
told me about the curse,
welcomed me to a tribe
of bitterness, unhappiness,
lost ambitions. She said
I would never get what
I wanted. I could feel
dreams seeping out
between my legs, wiped
away with cheap cotton,
flushed into a river
of despair. She told me
one day this curse
would be a gift:
I would make babies.
From feminists, I learned
the mystical power
of menstrual blood—
womantime, womptime—
how nuns and lesbians
in land communities
menstruated together,
sloughing off life
unfulfilled. I want to live
among the devout.
Our periodic blood
a sign of piety, communal
autonomy. My menses never
conjured magic. My body
never bore children.

The most mystical I
become is the moment
before Seder, tired
from cooking, cleaning,
I sit on the lanai, hungry,
crampy. I imagine
the moon. Sister-witness.
Long after I stop
bleeding, the moon will rise.
This is my burden.
This, my joy.

Published in *Sisterhood* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2013) © Julie R. Enszer

MY NAME IS ETHYL

My father wanted to name
his daughters Ethyl, Methyl, and Propyl;
I would have been Ethyl, the eldest.
Perhaps that explains my affinity
for another Ethel—Rosenberg—
who I saw again this weekend
at the refurbished American Art Museum.
First, a photograph of her with Julius
in a paddy wagon during their trials—
it's trying to remember the pain
of Ethel, so young and so beautiful
in that hard-working way of socialist women.
Then, a sketch in the portrait gallery:
Ethel's disembodied head—no neck—
adapted from a snapshot for a protest
poster; the artist captured
her jaw set with purpose,
her clear eyes so certainly innocent,
her frizzy hair, a utilitarian halo
around her determined head, oh, yes,
Ethel ... but my father would not
have named me for you, Ethel, rather
for those basic organic molecules—
all grown, you are as basic to me
as ethyl to a student of chemistry.
Although when I was younger,
I wanted to be my sister, heir to the name
Propyl. I imagined us calling
her Iso for short and my other sister Di,
but the joke would have been
only in our family—it would never
have translated to the hard-scrabble
streets of Saginaw. For that reason
and many others, my mother resisted
my father's chemical compounds;
we have bland names, we blend in
until you meet us, until we speak.
Then you can imagine Ethel,
her grey coat, sturdy shoes, curly hair,
that look of defiance in our eyes.

Published in *Sisterhood* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2013) © Julie R. Enszer

Merrill Leffler: Poems at AJL Meeting

What I Want of It

Stories

Failure

Resemblances

Beginning and Ends

What I Want of It

I want it to graze like gazelles and soar with the aplomb of hawks.

I want it to rise like a palace out of syllables of breath.

I want it to open locked gates with obscure incantations.

I want it to kick down locked doors and lead me into meadows of starlight.

I want it to light up the night with meteors of radiance and desire.

I want it to inflame the coldness of my heart and set passion on fire.

I want it to waken the mountain gods and startle the dead from boredom.

I want it to revive my ancestors and ask for their blessings.

I want it to guide me through the deserts year after year and lead me to water and wild fruit.

I want it to open my eyes and reveal angels ascending and descending in my own backyard.

Stories

The sun has hardly sent its light over
the horizon and they are at your door clamouring,
rousting you from a deep sleep. Open at your peril.
A riot could break out like men crazy
for what you've got and they'll take it
if they want — listen to them battering the air.

I am your birth story
one cries. I am your abandonment story cries another.
I am your adoption story shouts yet another wringing
its hands. I am the story of your youth shouts one.
And I the story of your dead parents, cries another.

I am your war story, the one you ran away from, another
shouts, though it is muffled by the lust story that is out there
raising hell. Up front, before me, weeping, is the marriage
story and the story of your children's departures.
Next to them, the nostalgia story is swooning in despair.
Beyond, dirtying the street are the stories of regret and revenge.
And near them, milling around, calling loudly, *Listen, Listen*
are the betrayal stories and the failure stories,
each desperate for attention. Whispering in torment
is the impotence story, and beside it the dementia story –
there too the stories of your cancer and the shrinking of the body.
Over at the side, huddled in a corner laughing hysterically
is the story of your former teeth and all those other
stories I've neglected, that I never had time for.
What a pandemonium of longing and rage.

But beyond them all
at the far edge of the crowd is another I can hardly make out.
at first. Silent, brooding, begins pushing through, slowly. Slowly.
It is the story that every other has been whispering of for years,
the one not spoken of aloud that strikes fear and now, here,
suddenly, stills all their wild clamoring.

Resemblances

*"It is one of the curses of modern man that many
people suffer from divided personality."*

– Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*

And here on the left hand
is what he is
and there on the right
is what he would be.

The left hand often
loses its way
falters where it would step
is continually in debt, misses
deadlines, apologizes too much, lies
like an alcoholic, worries
the dot over every i, must squint
to see clearly

wakes to a despair so deep down
light finally gives up
and goes home.

The right, on the other hand,
is impatient with such indirection
knows the value of money
pays its bills on time, owes
nothing to the government, never
gets fines, is as reliable
as death, has a clean house,
new furniture, gives *tzedakah*
each day, dresses well
and has plaques on its wall
for community service.

The left hand sometimes
fights with the right
not in street brawls
but as if over a word in midrash
or like a husband and wife
of long years or a shopkeeper and
customer over the price of
damaged goods. This is all right
I say for us out here:
it is good theater and gives
us something to gossip about or make art from.
Meanwhile the left hand sleeps
with the peace of mountains and
the right with the worry of storms.
Who can explain god's inexplicable ways?

Every so often calm descends
between mountain and storm, and it is then
you invite yourself in, a visitor
carrying candies and cakes. On such days
the right hand takes hold of the left,
and both sit over steaming steamy hot glasses of tea
dropping sugar cubes in. And like ancient
antagonists who have grown old together
they sip at the tart bitter sweetness until dark.

Beginnings and Ends

Here is the word
That divides the dark
And here is the word
That is filled with light

Here is the word
That severs the sea
And separates sky
And uncovers the earth

Here is the word
That revels in breath
And here is the word
That cleaves your soul

And here is the word
For singing your love
And here is another
For singing your grief

Here are the words
That will blind your eyes
That will freeze your tongue
That will strike you deaf

And here is the word
To open the dark
And here is another
To empty the light
And here is the last
To carry you home

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THE THING IN THE THING

Is the chimney a chute of air where grey smoke
clots and rises? Or is the chimney the bricks,

the mason's careful art? Is the car a box of metal,
a web of gauges and fuses, or the feeling of speed

gathering under your right foot? The tree waves its branches
and becomes, thanks to wind, more tree. The clouds

lend more meaning to the sky. Water maintains
its fluidity even while held in the confines of a glass:

a glass of water is a shape, not a nature. The true nature
of a thing, its essence, is something pure and focused

like a stone holding its hardness. A telephone holds its ring
as pure potentiality. Then it does ring, and it's Gwen,

and she's telling me a story about her sister in Knoxville,
or explaining the common root of a word in Italian

and a word in Hebrew. Not knowing the name of a thing
changes nothing, but when I can,

I like to know. The sky holds nothing back. Every time
the barometer drops, it makes some big confession.

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What is a Jewish Poem

Does it wear a yarmulka
and tallis? Does it live
in the diaspora
and yearn for homeland?

Does it wave the lulav
to and fro inside
a plastic sukkah
or recite
the seven benedictions
under the chupah?

I wonder,
what is a Jewish poem?
Does it only go to synagogue
one day a year
attaching the tfillin
like a tiny black stranger
to its left arm?

Does it open
the stiff skins
of the prayerbook
to reveal the letters
like blackened platelets
twisting within?

Little yeshiva bocher,
little Jewish poem
waving your sidecurls
whispering piyyut to me
in my sleep.

Little Jewish poem
in your shtreimel hat,
little grandfather
sing to me,
little Jewish poem
come sing to me

from *From the Backyard of the Diaspora*, Dryad Press (1976)

In 1980 I went to Morocco with a group of Jewish journalists. We traveled throughout the country, from the southern Sahara to the Atlas Mountains, to meet with the remaining Jewish communities there to offer help, to contact their relatives in the U.S. and Canada, to write articles in Jewish publications in the U.S. to bring attention to their needs and to highlight the history of this remarkable community.

Morocco, peopled with ancient tribes who speak in the tongues of each of the three sons of Noah: Berbers who use a Hamitic language; Jews and Arabs, their Semitic dialects; French and Spanish, the languages of Japhet. Looking up at an escarpment at women of the Blue People, one wonders if they are part of a world that is not yet visible to us. Or if they are shadows from a world that no longer exists. Through a doorway, I see great amphoras leaning, as they must have for centuries, against the earthen walls. Amphoras like those from the days before the exile in Babylonia.

From Ouarzazate—where civilians have been armed against the Polisario guerrillas roaming the desert roads at night—I pass through the oasis of Skoura, which once had seven Jewish quarters. I visit Tiliit, part of the only foreign Jewish group ever to have come to the Tiliit mellah. We are presented to a tall, imposing-looking man, Hasanin M'Barak, a Berber wearing a striped white and grayish brown jellaba and white turban. He surprises us by reciting in Hebrew the blessing over the wine. “When they left their homes, they kissed the mezuzot on the doorposts of their house,” he tells us, referring to the Jews who once lived there. “And where have they gone?” we ask. “Only God knows what has become of them,” he responds.

What Hasanin M'Barak Said

If you ask
how many are buried here,
I must ask you how many liters
of water are in the sea.

At their doorposts they kept
nailed a passage
in strange script which
they touched
with their fingers
and brought to their lips

whenever they entered.

They taught us
to say this blessing
over bread and this
over wine and this for the slaughter
of animals.
And why did you not recite
the blessing yourself
over the tea just then?

When they left us
we embraced them like brothers
for they had given us pleasure
as we had them.

We have taken their names
for our children.
When we call our sons,
our daughters, we carry
in our voices
a small song of their names.

We do not know
what became of them.
Have you seen them
on your way in
to this place?

from *Altamira*, Washington Writers Publishing House (1987)

AKEDAH

The Rock Speaks

Why do you bring the boy to my house, Abraham?
Has he come of his own free will?
How did you explain the fire and the wood, Old Man?
Is this what you prayed for all those years?
 A gift so recently given, to be given away?
 My country is hard, unrelenting.

Ask the boy if he wishes to stay.
Perhaps you could offer to take his place.
Am I only a fragment of stone from an ancient river
to color the pages of aggadah, some torn parchment
 of midrash to puzzle over, to place
 in the hands of those to come?

The Angel

The angel wept to see a boy, his limbs
gathered with ropes upon his unlikely bed.
The angel's tears fell into his eyes and dimmed his sight.
Though father lifted up his eyes on the third day,
 the son, from that day forward,
 could not see, in his mind's eye, that place.

The Healing of Isaac

How did Isaac heal? Some say
he entered Paradise for three years
to recover from the wounds
inflicted by his father. Whether wound
 of the flesh, or of the heart,
 it could not be erased.

Yet when we as a people
are diminished, as Abraham tells
of the diminishment of Isaac,
there upon the altar this father made,
 as a third were in the Shoah
 and a thousand at Masada,

and at Kishinev, in the Inquisition,
in countless villages and untold massacres,
may some of us go on, as Isaac
in the end did go on,
 that the generations could unfold
 and the promise be kept.

In the End

How it has come to haunt us. A small thing,
you might say. Imagine how many sons are killed
in war. One more death makes little difference.
Yes this request rolls down the ages like Sisyphus'
 stone. And then we must push
 the question back uphill on the mountain.

Thus we must leave him there, our Isaac,

bound on his altar at Moriah, his father Abraham
going about his work, the fire just beginning,
an angel coming nearer, certainty and its companion
uncertainty, the seamless tide of questions
flowing from that iconic place.

Jewish Quarterly Review 2011

As the sun stretched its legs around him,
he found that he too could make himself comfortable,
or at least aim for a scrap of snooze.

He could disarm the terror in Mother's final clutching.
He could erase the image of trickster Father
unable to meet his eye,
his flight to prank and magic and fancy clipped at last.
No rabbits or cards or ivory tipped canes that night;
they would not fit into the allotted luggage.
He could subdue the drone of the announcement,
with its recitation of names and hush and
confusion and pleading and enormity.

The faded animal smells felt so reassuring against
his still crisp herringbone wool suit,
as he remembered outings to the mountains,
and the swarms of goats nuzzling his hand with the ticklish tongue
of their acceptance and the country lady explaining their ways.
Not so very long ago, either,
all of that.
He bit into the rolls that Mother had packed
and was surprised by their freshness.
He realized he was losing track of time, the order of things.

He thought about his old pals. The gang.
Greta, who almost never spoke,
but whom he could always understand.
Didi, with his frog collection, his damp breath,
his habit of breaking suddenly into cartwheels.
Until they were no longer permitted to come,
until they stopped coming.
Until he had to leave school entirely,
until some big boys forced him to pull down his pants
and beat him there,
until he slipped into a fog of dread without end.

Imagine his surprise, then, when tonight,
after he had removed his clothes,
folding them on the hay, he looked down
and saw that a foreskin had spontaneously sprouted!
He touched himself, to be sure, and yes, it really was true.
But it's impossible, he kept whispering and rocking,
it's impossible, it's impossible. Whispering and rocking.
Only a mouse, equally unsettled, witnessed his insistence.

From *Uncle Feygele* (Plain View Press, 2011). Copyright by Yermiyahu Ahron Taub.

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub

Eros, Thanatos

(*Y., in memoriam*)

Even in death,
you remain in shadow,
cannot be named.
When others pronounce upon the new generation
coming up on *Will & Grace*,
free(er) of trauma,
I consider the resilience of the irrational, bigotry's will to endure
and my vow to not politicize your life and its end.
I think of you,

of our conversation on the August park bench
and your craving consuming uncontainable
and my fear and wanting so to shield you from danger
since you were only sixteen but looked much older
and had already had a go at self-annihilation.
There's plenty of time for that,
I groped, aiming for sensible tones, like a guidance counselor,
but succeeding only in clumsiness:
start small, get a degree and your own place, that's how I got out, you can do this

when all you sought was the shade of the lingering gaze, a confetti of
kisses
and then there was your phone call or two
and then the move to a yeshiva in Switzerland of all places
and then nothing
until I heard the news, a conversational aside really,
and comprehension failed, could not forge a path to realization.
How could it be, it couldn't be: you,
discovered dead at nineteen of an overdose in a Miami Beach hotel room,
as if this were a B noir film, or a segment of *48 Hours*,

but it really was you, you, whom my sister-in-law,
anchored in tradition and your shared community,
tried so hard to save, you,
whom I, in my exile,
tried to affect from afar,
tried to point to other options,
but didn't stay, didn't follow up,
never realizing I wouldn't have the time to get it right.
You eluded us both. You eluded us all.
Forgive me, forgive me.

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Yermiyahu Ahron Taub

Trains Passing in the Railroad Apartment

Once my father came to visit me,
the only family member ever to have done so
in the more than twenty years since my exodus.
He slipped past my Italian landlady sitting sentry without a second look.
Perhaps his long beard and black coat in summer scorch
set something ablaze in her, having to do with robes swishing
from rooms murky with moans for repentance
down alleyways into the piazza, pigeons rising in outrage,
stirring something altogether enormous and familiar,
despite the difference in tradition. Perhaps.
She, not given to reserve, never mentioned it. I'll never know now.

As he passed through my *mezuzah*-less doorway, I wondered whether
Father's purity would cleanse, or at least elevate, the impurity here.
Or would the reverse take place?
I so wanted him to feel, if not comfortable,
then at least not implausible in this setting.
I had debated for weeks which posters to take down for his visit.
Is Vermeer's *Girl Wearing Turban* as improper as the outline
of the nude woman on the Chez Panisse 1977 Garlic Festival?
The sages, after all, forbid glancing at even
the smallest finger of a woman.
Could the maiden of modesty be exempted?

What about the prohibition on graven images? I had considered hiding
some of the books, but ultimately decided against it.
There were simply too many, nearly all appalling in some way.
Where would I put the acres of them?
Besides, who did I think I was fooling?
Certainly not Father, who reclined on the green chair,
his back turned against both young ladies in question,
his fedora and coat on the ottoman
salvaged from the Housing Works Thrift Shop.
After he declined fruit and nuts, the food offerings
I had thought to be least affected by the laws of *kashrut*,

Father elaborated, with characteristic elegance,
on a passage in the weekly Torah portion. I wish I had taken notes.
Even then I knew this was an event worthy of documentation.
But for once the Torah seemed to have failed Father.
He soon asked to lie down.
I guided him to the windowless bedroom in my railroad apartment,
our roles momentarily reversed.
I landed in the front room, swaying by the window,
peering down on my landlady on the stoop,
my knuckles white from not-trembling,
my eyes red from not-weeping.

From *Prayers of a Heretic/Tfiles fun an apikoyres* (Plain View Press, 2013). Copyright by Yermiyahu Ahron Taub.

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub

Yermiyahu the Book Peddler

It could be a day cloudless, geometric to the touch.
It could be a day metallic, heavens dully closing in.
It does not matter.

The question of portent is of no relevance here.
You will see a figure pulling a wagon
stooped over the horizon.
First a dot and then coming into focus.
And the calls that grow louder:
“*Poetry! Poetry for sale! Poetry! Poetry for sale!*”

The housewives swing open their windows;
their bosoms dangle listlessly.
The children gather around the figure, his hat askew,
poking under the volumes,
rifling through his pockets for coins or lollipops.
When none materialize, a few tug at his pants.
One even kicks his shins,
if with little enthusiasm.
No rocks are thrown. At least that.

A dandy scans the jumble.
Something for my sweetie, he says,
dark locks veiling the skepticism beginning to coalesce.
Away he saunters, off to the flower vendor, no doubt.
(Or perhaps to the confectionary, where he will send the girls in pink
into peals of giggles with his impersonation of the book peddler.)
Mina, the mayor’s maiden aunt,
fingers the amulet tucked beneath her collar,
leafs to locate the lines that can encapsulate
the enormity of her inchoate desire.

It could be a night starless.
It could be a night ravaged by lightning.
It does not matter.
The question of tangibility is of no relevance here.
You will see a figure just below the horizon,
static in size and proportion,
skirts billowing about, crumpled on a silk blanket,
and a kerosene lamp swaying above the wagon.
You will hear the calls now murmured,
careening through the concerto of night birds:
“*Poetry! Poetry for sale! Poetry! Poetry for sale!*”

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