

# **After Voices: A Chapbook**



**Jane Rosenberg LaForge**

# *After Voices:*

A chapbook by  
Jane Rosenberg LaForge

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“Lye Drinkers and Lotus Eaters”

*La Petite Zine*

“Lemons”

*Burnside Review*

“Highway 5 Stockyard”

*Bateau*

“Allenwood”

*Makeout Creek*

“The Deer of Fire Island”

*Ottawa Arts Review*

“You (were) Andrew Marvel Too”

*Noun Versus Verb*

“Fire Island Orthodoxy”

*Noun Versus Verb*

• *After Voices* •

After voices, after the sun,  
after the last dunning edges  
of the moon have been removed,  
what will be left of sound?  
Bastard syllables, the work of  
insects on wires and houses,  
the balm of everyday existence  
from the radio, the citrus fields  
fanning their smudge pots, the thaws  
and the frosts that are the rancher's  
unwanted suspense, the balance  
of rust in brake pads and wheels.  
In the language of immigrants,  
in the kitchens on High Holy Days,  
in the decrees of Old Country gets,  
who will re create the colors of  
arguments? Pewter and quicksilver  
gray, a fog laid down as if to confuse  
the investment. By a bomb, by a bell,  
my father's hearing was cut off in  
mid-sentence, at mid -century so he  
was left speculating on the worth of  
a trainload of oranges, or a bushel  
of good intentions. This is how he  
lost everything, his mind cooing itself  
to sleep against a gentle static. As if speech  
was a solar flare breaking the skin  
of a star, and he answers back with the  
frustration of silence.

In 2003, my father was diagnosed with throat cancer. His diagnosis was not that unusual, given his age and the fact that he spent a good deal of my lifetime smoking cigars. He also managed to recover much as the doctors predicted, probably due to the current state of cancer treatment. But the arc of his illness was anything but average. It began with the loss of his voice, which for both of us was traumatic. For my father is extraordinarily dependent on his voice, and it is a voice to behold.

His is not just the voice that meted out the punishments of my childhood, but one that forecloses any possibility of a private telephone conversation, whether it is penetrating my cell phone on a busy New York City sidewalk or my landline in my apartment on a Saturday morning. My father's voice isn't just loud, but voluminous, plunging through a room with all the aplomb of a rock hurled toward a window. He yells when he's upset over the latest Republican-sponsored malfeasance, and he yells when he asks after his granddaughter and waxes affectionate. In conversational battle, opponents eventually choose surrender, so that my father may carry on with his monologue. My father's voice is how he makes a way in the world, forging a swath so vast and so deep that no other force could possibly navigate through it.

My father is probably loud because he is deaf. Some deaf people are supposedly loud so they might hear themselves. My father speaks at the highest possible decibel to ensure that he is the only one who can be heard. I don't know how large a proportion his deafness plays in his strategy, just as I have never been certain as to the nature and cause of his hearing loss. He once told me that as a teenager he fiddled with an explosive device meant to alert railroad workers to oncoming trains. When it went off, he went deaf. He also once told me that this story was nonsense. As a child I was advised to speak

softly and clearly because my father couldn't hear my piercing staccato. Now he struggles to hold a conversation with his high-pitched granddaughter, who is scared off by his mixture of rage and enthusiasm.

What is beyond dispute is that he has a habit of immediately apologizing to anyone he meets that he is "hard of hearing;" it has been his salutation of choice since before he married my mother fifty years ago. He was attracted to her, he explained during one dissection of his failed marriage, because she had the only voice that could tear through the bells and whistles which otherwise preoccupy his eardrums. After my parents' divorce, his hearing did not necessarily worsen, but his impatience with it did. He was through not only with my mother's interests in musicals and the stage, but most other relationships he might need to remain a decent member of civilization. He eventually dated another woman on and off; she did not look my mother, but she shared her cosmopolitan background and cool tone of modulation. He outlived her, his voice carrying him through, as it has through decades of spurning hearing aids, cochlear implants, sign language and quite possibly whatever he retained of the lip reading courses my mother had him take when I was a child.

Overall, for a deaf man in denial he did fairly well in the hearing world, bulldozing his way through most of his interpersonal contacts. He finished college, briefly taught public school, attended graduate school in education and various Real Estate courses, occasionally volunteered on political campaigns, started and shuttered a few businesses, and ran the wholesale produce operation he inherited from his father. My mother was drafted into the role of translator on his annual business trips, but I know he missed some of the ambient nuances about him. I can cite one such instance, which occurred while we watched Woody Allen's "Manhattan" together. One scene revolved

around a joke about the elusive female orgasm. As the audience pitched into a fit of laughter, my father turned to me for an explanation. I was seventeen, and promised my mother could explain it so much better.

He insisted he was unconcerned when he first contracted a case of laryngitis one winter; he would only admit to bemusement when it would not relent. I was seriously frightened by his gurgle and whisper, as agonizing to listen to as it must have been for him to produce. He maintained he felt great. But three months into this condition, he confessed sensing the extra effort his lungs and diaphragm had to make to get any sound beyond whatever was bulging in his throat. The gerontologist responded by prescribing glorified antacids (usually used for acid reflux; my father has suffered from a stomach ulcer since I was two-years-old) and a strategy the medical community calls "watchful waiting." I call it healthcare rationing. By the time the diagnosis of cancer was made, six months into his case, his best option was said to be the removal of his voice box. The destruction of his voice would be completed.

These developments set off what can most honestly be described as a wave of hysteria on my part, heightened by my father's nonchalant, or in my opinion, bad attitude about everything. No, he did not want any nursing services or social workers contacted. Under no circumstances was I to visit. Any discussion of his getting email, a telephone answering machine, or a TTY or TDD device (a Text Telephone or Telecommunications Device for the Deaf, which are also used by the speech impaired) was forbidden. Then we argued over who would administer whatever protocol he would so graciously consent to undergo, how it would be paid for, and whether he would even be treated at all. For someone who could barely speak, he mounted a valiant effort through telephone conversations at

frustrating the little rationality I was able to launch against him. For many weeks, my aim was lousy.

For reasons I am not able to accurately report now--one year on top of the five-year remission he earned, five years being the longest remission most cancer treatments will promise--he finally submitted himself to surgery to remove the tumor, chemotherapy, and radiation. There were many debates, accusations, harangues, grievances, and recriminations aired during this period, all to no satisfactory resolution--unless you count his recovery. He emerged from his retinue of torture late that summer so much thinner that he no longer required insulin for his diabetes. One ear, he claims, was completely drained of all hearing. His voice, however, returned to him with the same vigor, with more remembrances of FDR, recitations of famous movie scripts, and more opinions than it had ever before compiled.

Perhaps because he was raised in the era before television, or because he is, despite his protests, so acutely aware of his impairment, my father has been particularly attuned to voices. His deafness made him an expert on their diction, enunciation and pacing: who had it right and why (because he could hear them); and who could not even fake it. Few could match the performers of his childhood, whom he actually heard without interference, although he was willing to concede some British actors were eminently hearable. But listening to those he called mumblers, like Brando, De Niro, and James Dean (all known as American Masters on the only T.V. channel he watches religiously, public television), is for him a trial with Kafkaesque significance. After Paul Robeson--a radio hero from his childhood--died in 1976, my father took to a nightly deconstruction of Robeson's aural achievements in "Old Man River" and "Ballad for Americans." Out of nostalgia, my mother tolerated this, but my sister, an aspiring musician, was mortified down to her auditory nerve. Just imagine a deaf

man with no musical education beyond watching MGM musicals forty years earlier trying to imitate the luxurious and learned vibrato of a preternaturally gifted singer. His performances have not necessarily improved with age, or so others maintain, although I have made peace with these episodes of subjugation.

Yet this rejection of his circumstances must have passed something onto me, something that I was not truly conscious of until my father's voice was mauled. The disappearance of the bulk of his voice had me paying closer attention to the details I was ignoring all around me: lavishly rolled consonants from bi- and trilingual speakers, and the length and strength of vowels; nasal importations from Southern dialects, meaty inflections from the Northeast, and the clear margins between syllables that scat singers relish, but too many of us rarely invest a second thought. Losing my father's voice prompted me to re-learn these seeds of language, the stuff that comes before words. Mortality, cancer, and all of its metaphors have long been inspiring subject matter for writers; the potential loss of a parent, combined with my father's paradoxical relationship with sound itself, provided more than fertile ground for me. They finally gave me a subject, a focus for my speculations. But the form in which this subject was delivered required special attention be paid to the origins of human sound. Like many I had experimented with poetry. But it was an extravagance, something I would dip my fingers into for a taste of what was too rich, too expertly and tightly wound, in large measures. With my father's illness, poetry became a necessity; for these thoughts, indeed, the only appropriate form.

The former national poet laureate, Donald Hall, has been quoted saying that poetry is the most efficient use of the language. It would be beyond grandiose for me to claim such an efficacy for these poems. They are intuitive, if not desperate attempts to preserve a time

and a place seemingly confronted with extinction when my father's voice was threatened. There are other inspirations here, naturally, but they all share a connection to the romance and imagination wrought by my father's voice. For now, I want to celebrate these thoughts and fables, the sounds from which they are constructed, and images they are meant to summon. If a curmudgeon is someone who looks at the gift of long life as though it were some higher being's revenge, my father snugly fits this definition. Still his next protracted silence, I know, is likely to be far more enduring than any he has known. Before that begins, I would rather commemorate what he has given me, ungainly and glorious, with the hope that it might last beyond him, beyond all of us who can listen.

• *On the Day My Father Lost His Hearing* •

On the day my father lost his hearing, it was eighty degrees in Los Angeles: the most precise articulation available between equinoxes, since the city lacks expressed seasons. Air could have been combed free of smudge and frost, fire and disfigurement. The rail yard must have been stacked and motionless so boys could play bulls versus hobos, Father Serra versus the Indians, Cholos versus Southern Pacific agents. Just as long as the agents won in the end, for the elements were too delicately balanced then to adjudicate beyond history's bonding. Who held the nail, who held the knife, who drove in what, no longer mattered when he did not see stars after the explosion, but spikes. The size of oil derricks, they pumped and flushed over with heavy water and other juvenile toxins. Through the damaged parts of his speech I know how much more he must have taken in: the difference between mercury and lead in industrial accidents. The first swaddles and balls up as if a founding sworn in on a doorstep, the second fluid in potential for accumulation in kidneys and lungs. No more recounting of his own heartbeat, of culling stems supporting curtailed yellow centerpieces, harvesting seeds there and in the abandoned fields around downtown, hunting for anise and rabbits. Had he written a map of that day, a black and white legend, he might have kept his nose above sea water, an existence above

iodine, silent but destabilizing,  
like the other halogens of his life,  
and be able to inventory the number  
of pilgrims dancing on a pin-head.

• *Beyond the Sound Barrier* •

In the first universe, an address that remains standing in name if not intent, the speed of sound echoed like the clash of generations. Bombers from Edwards. Jets from Burbank. Parents against children. For the sake of decency, could you please keep your God forsaken hands out of the ash cans, my mother screamed. The air had become too full of dimension, cliffs and depressions that seagulls had to navigate yet they lacked the vision. In those days, before burning was banned, the oxygen we thought we breathed was actually composed of smudge and mountains. There was only one element on the periodic table: aluminum. We collected it from the garbage, where it grew without light or water, fertilization or electric catalysts. By day we ran a ruinous path to nickels and bee stings; at night we sat in the dark with our winnings and re-calibrated our radio receivers away from the air and toward the sea, where the deejays held séances for Jim Morrison. They promised we could walk on hot coals, write new national anthems, if only we could reach across the sound barrier somewhere beyond our antennas.

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Around the corner, a linguist catalogued clicks and gurgles he collected on a reel-to-reel he toted all the way back from Africa. This man did not speak; he articulated; the Queen's tongue, as it was technically rendered. My father adored it and all the linguist represented. In the neighborhood my father was the deaf man, living in a kind of vacancy, a negative ambiance. No echoes or phantom sensations for him, although the voices of children and television sitcoms drove him to a kind of airy distraction. It was as though he lived on the scar-free side of his mother's belly button, adoring music and languages and understanding perhaps a dime's worth of what was said to him. If only he could have lived the linguist's life; from his imagination he had constructed his pre-American existence:

The man was a Fabian. He attended rallies. His life was a scandal of open marriages and vegetarianism. Now, he was at work, a love's labor of intricacies of conjugation and declension; the length of breaths between thoughts and exclamations. My father explained all this with his thumbs and palms: dead languages from the sub-continent would be resurrected and taught. The deaf would be the ones to interpret these foreign tongues, from the depth of cheeks, the distension of neck muscles and vocal cords, the baying of flags and the afterbirth of rockets. The wedges of our sky injured in the marriage of speed, metal, and untested aerodynamics will be healed, and the hearing will only remember the blemishes. It will be up to the next generation to devise a map pinpointing the locales of these accidents, where sound was forced into spaces it did not belong, and then extracted.

• *Lye Drinkers and Lotus Eaters* •

I speak as though hanging  
tree lights, rearranging groceries,  
honing too much for small shelves.  
I could be looking for the snakebite  
kit, a tourniquet, the marriage license,  
or birth certificate. It's remarkable  
I can say so much, so quickly;  
that I can say anything at all.  
In a railway station, under a scaffold  
I can pass where thoughts  
are overshadowed by big sounds.  
There are no scars, no disfiguring  
embarrassments. I could appear in films.  
There might be subtitles, or more lines  
for the actors. They would enunciate  
my gestures, how I seem  
to be sorting something, figures  
on an imaginary abacus,  
or arguing with the air.  
Can you tell that I expected  
to be beautiful, to wear castanets  
and cymbals, manicure myself  
in golds and reds? From my mouth  
I anticipated mists and perfumes,  
and my eyes the ether that supported  
the match—the torch—the wand Picasso  
held as the time-elapsed photography began.  
I've been told to think in pictures  
but the emulsion has been stripped  
from my throat, and lungs.  
Watch me: I refuse directions.  
If lost, I am a foreigner  
without language.  
If I ask, I am a stranger feted  
with a crying child.  
I pluck as though harvesting fruit,  
doing piecework, paid by the pound.  
The foreman is looking.  
If I lose this job, I'll starve.

• *From the Palisades* •

Even the Campfire Girls know the ocean rests  
west of where the citrus grows, and the sky  
disappears precisely where Columbus saw  
ships trip o? the flat edge of the planet.  
On the long drive north, the peach in your eyes  
dims as if a fire that requires no oxygen,  
a model improbably big for its stock  
and gloss, a miracle scientists are no longer  
interested in re-enacting. I am not acting now.  
I am even wearing my glasses. I want to die,  
not to be famous or even dead, but for the view,  
to see the salt and claw of the shore below,  
the mucus and terror I know live in your lungs,  
to fling them into the water. There is no other way  
to measure you beside the sinuous line, to re-trace  
your footprints that dissolved in the muddy luster.  
A legend will last only as long as the film stock,  
or perhaps only as long as the Library of Congress.  
On other coasts, they've stilled the march  
of progress by building boardwalks. They are  
meant not to burn, but smolder, a green beat  
of embalmed lumber. Here we have only the curb  
before the tumble into grief, a gulf  
some would have made infinite because  
the sea and memory are private.  
I might have vowels, serifs, the oscillations  
of a flat screen and the pulse of my fingertips  
to conjure the chaparral and orchards,  
the rolls and stances, you by the ocean and the sky  
no longer for the living. You were the first  
to notice it had been drained, released from its  
pressures and sprains, the arc of the earth,  
and the mind's eye of the horizon.

• *Allenwood* •

If I take this picture in black and white,  
would it be easier to conceal the crimes  
committed against the sky, the dimensions  
of the sun finally unfolding, the beaks  
of competing Birds of Paradise  
contending for a last sip before the land  
trips, the ocean stumbles, and the cryogenics  
thaw. I wish that I had been gone longer;  
that I had forgotten you and the yucca  
that grew at the end of our road, and all  
the neighborhood's colors: the annular  
yellow like dust or captured antigens;  
or the blue that seemed to come from  
the end of a pestle, how it covered  
the cactus rounds emerging from  
beneath the stucco crawl spaces.  
They say you've created an entire universe  
out of this singular location: a system  
of government, elections, other-loathing  
and self-knowledge. Then what have I  
created, but the taste of a few trees after  
fire, their trunks pocked with statistics.  
I miss those trees, shedding needles  
and skin as if they were mammals, sentient  
and superior. They survive by keeping  
the best of their anatomy as unknowable  
as the true locations of stars' homes,  
not those listed on maps for sale  
on our street corner. In the freshly poured  
driveway I used to stand barefoot  
on a dazzling black depth and dared  
anyone to cross the property line,  
into the tar I said reflected the constellations  
and myths, directly beneath us. The sheets  
of my bed were pinked pricked through  
with Niagara starch, a diamond crispness,  
and at night I opened the shutters of my  
picture window onto a gray compression.  
Travel by light years had been rendered  
anemic and su?ocated by the day's chemical

processes. Once you left, I would fall asleep  
to the beige vibrations of ivy and mice,  
and when the sun rose again, it rose flawless;  
without the raw marks we now gasp to admire,  
but refuse to recognize as righteous indignation.

• *Lemons* •

My mother believed in the transformative power of lemons. In the produce section of the Food Giant, she rolled them between her fingers like rude jewels, ostentatious with vitamins. Lemons cleaned. They shined. They fought infections. How lemons came to the New World, after they put down Eastern European pogroms: Warrior lemons swam across the Atlantic, planted themselves in favorable conditions. Come-uppance for Jew-haters and other bums. No human ever truly possesses a lemon. One merely borrows its force on occasion. They are not beheld so much as balanced between the palms, like a raft of light hurled down by the authorities in the Bible. In the yard she planted lemon trees as if they were totems, calendars, lost coats of arms. Lemons would preserve and protect us. In her dreams she counted lemons as though they were gold bars harvested from sacred mines in the Andes. When the trees did not flower, we were told lemons had no adolescence. They emerged fully-formed, swollen and bracing like lips preparing insults. Our great bombs of citrus would blind pests, neuter enemies, dispatch the neighbors with their armies of Mexicans, dousing cars, excavating pools, minding gardens. When the trees remained bare through summer she grafted their branches with stu?ed animals, tigers and lions. We danced around our feckless lemon trees as if they were May poles, took black and white snapshots with an Instamatic. Our crop would never su?er frost, turn mildewed, go rancid. For our mother the stu?ed animals were camouflage enough, like the rats living in neighbors' palms trees, disguising themselves as coconuts.

• *Highway 5 Stockyard* •

In the stockyard o? Highway 5  
cows go on for miles. By February  
the ground has turned to hay  
and hide; the air is earth, molten  
and crust. In the city where  
the best of these cows are headed  
is the greatness of a generation  
imagined. No generation can know  
itself if its greatness is too soon  
detected. The cows wait, their archives  
stored in milk crates and other  
agricultural refuge. They moan  
strolling in the fog, frosting  
their breath with what passes  
for sentences. I suppose everyone  
moans at one time or another,  
if not for recognition,  
then for calories and lost digressions.

A poet once said there's no reason  
a green fuse cannot drive a mango.  
This is, of course, only possible  
if there are eaters of its flesh,  
drinkers of its blood; if a mango  
sacrifices itself for the good, vanity,  
or comfort of others. If not, this herd's  
winter pelts might swim beneath  
a ranch hand's hardened fingers  
as if bolts of green velvet.  
In the service they rehearse  
in infinite measures, the route  
to sheds and houses, the branding  
and inspection of hind quarters,  
shoulders and heads, the stock  
is docile and undignified.  
The mud patterns inserted by their hooves  
and massive, triple-time stomachs  
harden, much like children's castles  
at the shore, disposable from  
season to season.

Yet sand turns to glass, not sugar,  
and straw cannot substitute for grass,  
with roots sweet and white as an infant's  
fingers in his mother's mouth.

The stockyard smells heavy, burdened  
by the years, the cars, the children  
inside who insist on mooing to the cows,  
a song they are born bored of already.

Even the deaf can dance to echoes  
of bells, trinkets, and drums.

They can learn to speak and forestall  
a numbness in their canals, a drought  
in their throats. The cows on Highway 5  
churn their cud like coins, in possession  
of dexterous gamblers. They are next  
on this road, dipping into the pine valleys,  
beating a path they pray someday  
will lead them to the mountains.

• *The Deer of Fire Island* •

The deer of Fire Island range  
in random mating patterns  
and in hide; from dollops of ruddy  
drunkenness to the dimensionless  
auburn women coax into their  
hair when gray threatens.  
In chicken wire the locals wrap  
their trash and second sanctuaries,  
as if that would discourage  
this invasive species. But they  
are as right on time as rain  
at night, without the vestigial  
requirement to remain as still  
as glass, to successfully forage  
through our unnatural growing  
seasons. The does do well  
maintaining the white of their asses,  
bellies and breasts; they are the same  
pure grade I remember from  
junior high, when the new girl  
from France by way of Morocco  
wanted to hold my hand. My parents  
had to explain to me she wasn't  
a lesbian. So lives on the difference  
between Europeans and provincials.  
She was a fast, lean specimen,  
with black eyes sumptuous  
in all the graceful lexicons.

The bucks here, meanwhile, suffer  
through swarms and perennial  
battle scars that come with the  
construction of their male hierarchies.  
By the 4<sup>th</sup> of July the upstarts come  
to resemble mink stoles denied  
a summer's worth of mothballs.  
How would Whittaker Chambers  
translate this tale of co-existence,  
where supervised dogs roam  
illicitly on the beach, pining for  
for instincts unnecessary in a  
kingdom of cement and snow fences.

One summer, I must have been  
my daughter's age; I read again  
and again a story of a girl who  
dreamed of deer lovers for herself  
in her English orphanage; the fabric  
of their antlers taut and pubescent  
in candelabra edifices. In the  
morning, tears on her pillow  
only confirmed fealty to her  
intelligence. My daughter does not  
quite associate deer with disease,  
with the looting of bamboo tracks  
and vegetable gardens, crimes  
against garbage bags and lilacs,  
but how much longer will it take,  
when she already senses the dignity  
they have lost, in the balance of hooves  
and stilted legs?

• *Fire Island Orthodoxy* •

This Sabbath I was an observant  
Jew. I went to the synagogue,  
and I observed. Religion is all  
that the dead have left us:  
instructions for washing up,  
counting days, writing calendars;  
singing, slaughtering, and surviving  
the club that doesn't want us, all  
the critics' inevitable savageness.  
I understand why people listen  
to critics, they who understand  
for us. I understand how insignificant  
are the cuts and burrs my heart has  
chosen to communicate through,  
these last anticipatory months.  
Yet I had believed I had given  
my heart to understanding,  
apparently to the wrong icons:  
Elvis, naturally, and Ambrose,  
who said no act of fiction could  
be sustained for more than  
twenty pages. They should  
be rolling over in their graves,  
although Elvis is still alive  
and Ambrose does not have one.  
The critics' words do not apply  
when the only offense of the dead  
is one timing and style; for the living  
such errors are worthy of death,  
damnation and exile. Which  
should come first, when they've  
also said that forgiveness is all?  
And yet we have more dead,  
and more dead, sculpted into  
our language and lodged into  
our walls. Before the women arrive,  
the voices of the minion sound  
like mouth music, individualistic  
mutter and hum, Australian aboriginals.  
So perhaps there is a god who sorts  
through each need, each bend

and bow, or perhaps here is the  
inconvertible proof that the dead  
decide only in unison. They argue  
over legends and real estate, who  
will split the oceans next year and  
who will be resurrected; and in this  
synagogue improvised out of pampas  
grass and fog, whether the stained-glass  
lighthouse atop the ark is a worthy  
metaphor for dispelling the darkness.

• *You (were) Andrew Marvel Too* •

When I had the chance to watch  
your face age, to divine the direction  
your eyes and skin might take—  
as if this decision was mine to make:  
as if culverts might leach cement,  
and sand could compile an oath  
against blood; sod would feed  
the arrow-edged leaves cupping  
dandelions that stud the creek  
in annular pronouncements;  
the flow could only lead to the  
beach, and the exponential production  
of warped gums and rogue proteins:

Because it was on the shore, after  
the movie we didn't see because  
of the riot; first you grabbed me  
out of the way of the last battered  
fan laying siege to the ticket line,  
along with the drunks and trolls  
who could not be distinguished  
one from the other. Then the ocean  
dotted and dashed through a  
vicuna night, its foam subtracting  
through kelp and bottles of  
rot gut; and my glance against  
your shoulders became the only  
brush of your compass.

Do you know how long it has taken me  
to distill these images, as if the past  
could be petrified into ones, zeroes,  
and primary colors? Do you know how  
long I have been holding this night  
in place to perfect it, to grab it back  
into the present guilty and blighting?  
*Wieviel Jahrzeit hat passiert* , how many  
candles and prayers have I dismissed?  
Because I have no other way to recuse myself  
from counting, at long last, in all my  
devout consummation and pidgin languages.

• *For Phillip Roth, Victor Greenberg (the Honorable), and me* •

In forty years I'll write you both a poem to celebrate the aging of an adolescent nation, but right now that isn't too fashionable, so you're stuck with this one. For five thousand, seven hundred and some odd-odd years, the world has been stuck with us, as well as the knowledge one is only human when one experiences forgiveness. I guess this makes us as a people sub, anti, recalcitrant and theoretical. How else should we behave on diets of oak apples and sardines? Imagine if the skin of Jews had been white as lime during their time in the wilderness, the possibilities they would have overcome; the burial rituals in rock and cement would have been redundant. Yet instead they were beady-hearted and mathematical; their eyes shaped like olives. They stick out in death as they do in life, like freeways wide and garish in the gentle suburbs. Sure, I know all about the Holocaust, but the Red Sea parting is definitely a myth. How do I know, you ask? Don't the Jews control Hollywood? On the Internet there is a list of British Jews. Who do you suppose compiled it? I bet David Brooks wishes he was included. I'm not talking about Disraeli but the first wife of the lead singer of Jethro Tull, who wrote point five zero zero zero zero one percent of the lyrics to "Aqualung," and that's not counting the inspiration. Leslie Howard: also guilty. I looked it up for my father on a bet. As for Stephen Fry, I didn't have to look up a thing. I felt it in his productivity and suffering. Although he identifies himself only as a person of Jewish extraction; as if Judaism could be extracted like a cool blue isotope when it is more like a red scheme preying upon tungsten. To a Jew like me, what's the difference? Obama's chief strategist is a Jew, but we all know that doesn't make the cut. No Jewish boy would ever date me. Well, there was one who, when I asked him to spend the night, considered it

too much of a commitment. In the land of Israel,  
where we have undone the divorce from our  
agricultural roots, the sunsets still roil and distend  
like a Talmudic argument, so let's stick to the American  
Jewish experience, known in my time as Jew C L A;  
or college. The gra?ti in the philosophy building  
had it right: "What kind of an ass created humanity?"  
Isn't the answer obvious?

• *Onions* •

I.

Onions run as if a seamless muscle: no sling, no detaching, an assortment of rhythms and filaments. The world should be so organized.

The world might re-conceptualize itself as an onion, if we succeed in our current task of dicing and defiling it. The hands of gods or goddesses or whoever still wishes to superintend will string its broken layers together in an approximation of their own hands, unfolding finger movements in incantatory dance. A hollow world they will build next time. Neither fire nor stone to balance its components, like the knowledge nesting dolls must keep to themselves. All their carving and painting for an exchange of icons, meticulous miniaturization of a *tabla rasa*, a child.

Children are resilient in the face of such disappointments and children are prophetic. This is my prediction. The cities are ready for dissection. They've hoisted facades onto their municipal buildings, sca?oldings onto their sidewalks. Soon we'll be walking on ground floors that have become basements, and basements will become archaeological propositions. When future generations arrive, will they dig or drill for their explanations? Into mansions and tenements, the best pews o?ered by the churches or

through the skylights of  
libraries? Will they find theories,  
evidence, or something  
flammable and joyous?  
The only truth is everything  
that has been consumed once  
will be consumed again,  
a process that eventually  
turns soundless, just like  
when the local radio station  
flickered o? the other day  
without announcement.  
Instead the DJ spun “Green  
Onions’’ and left the channel  
open. A last message burning  
through the universe  
without punctuation.

## II.

Our lives began among onions,  
along with parents, grandparents,  
younger aunts and one older uncle.  
Our palms ran over the skins of onions  
as if they were the pages of books,  
or seeds for bean stocks that would  
bring us riches. Sharp or sticky,  
rose or russet, the color of blood  
once depleted of oxygen. In the warehouse:  
it was our favorite field trip. Spanish  
onions crumbled like carbon paper  
our mother used to type up orders.  
Creamers like our own faces,  
powdered with playground dirt;  
boilers and finally the dry onions.  
They all looked injured,  
punctured vessels and traumatized  
tissue. Don’t touch the onions!  
our father instructed. They were  
filthy, pulled from the sediment  
a few feet above where oil and water  
wrestled. Onions were all skin and

no flesh, just as oil is all flesh  
but no shale. In no time at all,  
these onions would be forced  
into translucence, because the identity  
of an onion is transmutable. See  
how they insinuate themselves  
into the meat and carrots.  
My father did not want to merely  
sell onions. He wanted to grow  
them, rescue their tails and heads  
before they su?ocated, stock them  
into wooden crates, for a brief  
and reversible death. He loved  
their fragile gloss and patterns,  
insisted this was the only way  
to protect their oils and juices.  
I thought there should be an  
underground railroad for onions,  
liberating them from servitude  
in Bakersfield to freedom in  
Los Angeles. Otherwise the onion  
spores would have to fasten themselves  
to giant utility poles, and mimic the path  
of electrical wires that girded the air  
before we breathed and bequeathed  
it, second hand, to the plants and animals.

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### III.

In the summers we peeled  
our uncle from his shoulders  
to his elbows, in columns.  
We raced to see who would  
finish first, as if to find the source  
of his sunburn. Because of  
our uncle, we had no cousins.  
He took his punishment well,  
cooing: "My little Elsa Koches."  
Had Sylvia Plath still been  
alive, she would have immortalized  
us. Instead we were monkeys,  
our social skills evolving from  
ordinary grooming rituals.

Our uncle called us hogs.  
He did not like Americans,  
especially their children. His nieces  
were not exempt. Why not raise  
livestock, he told our father.  
At least livestock can be sold  
or slaughtered. At least there was  
profit involved, and no sentiment.  
His skin bubbled and whorled  
like compromised onions endured  
in our father's warehouse.  
Yet beneath the damage, the new  
skin was delicate and slick, a gloaming  
on his flesh. Just as I imagined the blood  
of onions might be, moisture  
from the last given to the first.

#### IV.

In upstate New York the mud  
is fibrous and landscape picaresque.  
A veritable paradise for cultivating  
arrangements of sulfur and carbon  
that supposedly fight cancers and  
fulfill promises of life extension.  
Yet the seagulls are frustrated  
by the landfills here, where liquid  
is the only escapee, the only carcass.  
It rises through the ground, and has  
a scientific name, a besmirched  
compound, like tears from a grimace.  
To feed the onions here, there are no  
streams or tributaries. They have  
their own word for such bodies,  
"kills," constructed from the refuge  
of the old Dutch heritage. Kills are  
what sputter and refuse to evaporate.  
They inch their way to the mighty  
Hudson, above the salt line.  
Once a seal from the ocean crossed  
this boundary and we bet on his life

as if he were a celebrity. The kills  
know no limits themselves, mixing  
with the discharge from the landfills,  
an alliance made holy by campaign  
contributions and government sanction.  
Into this place our uncle was born, in a  
jewel on the river that has since  
been shorn of its setting. I found  
myself plucking my way through  
onions here while our uncle was dying.  
We did not know the disease  
until the bed sheet was released  
and we saw the scar, from heart  
to rib to abdomen.

V.

Tear an onion too soon from  
its hibernation and it becomes  
a pearl. An onion completed,  
solid to the embryonic center.  
A perfect onion, from a bulb  
that is no longer mistaken  
for money, as tulips once were.  
The Dutch must have detested  
onions, to grow them  
in this environment. They  
abandoned them as if they  
were weeds, or children  
who thwart their families' intentions.  
The onions flourished despite  
their orphanage. This makes them  
ripe for literary exploitation.

We can no longer smell,  
taste, or touch onions since  
the dismemberment of the family  
business, our childhood home  
and all of our possessions:  
all the stu? we thought of  
as our soul because we lacked  
the strength to envision anything  
with more precision. We could be

reptiles, our uncle surmised,  
since we can repair our own  
skin, but we cannot generate  
new limbs, or new interests.  
I tried to dress myself in the voices  
and vegetables that once swaddled  
me, as if they were the protective  
layers in an onion infant.  
The sun is now said to be so strong  
that it drives right through these  
skins, into our organs, illuminating  
what was once indecipherable,  
or what is human:  
the lining of mouths, throats,  
the path to the essential kernel  
we must not depict in life,  
in art; that must be remain  
humble and nameless.  
Otherwise it could collapse,  
like an onion giving in to translation,  
or a body given over to the surgeons.

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## VI.

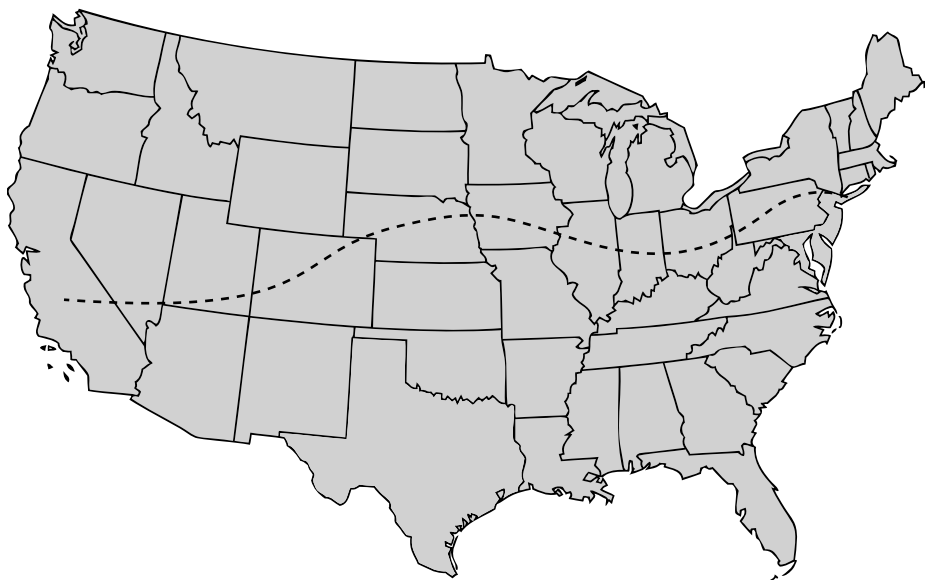
If there is no middle to an onion  
where is the artist to begin?  
He swears to take us inside  
with his chisels and metaphors  
as if then we could comprehend  
the crimes he has committed:  
dabbling in the wrong art, arguing  
over the wrong religion, fighting  
on the wrong side of the world war.  
The only thing he didn't screw up  
was submitting to a particular type  
of imprisonment. There he was permitted  
to starve, as if a hunger artist,  
a spectacle once forgotten but since  
reinvented. He inspired my uncle, living  
high on imported calves and black  
market chickens. From the dregs  
of that country's blasted monuments,  
my uncle reinvented his citizenship

and enthusiasms: opera, the German language, the anatomy of humans and Mercedes Benzes. He operated on both, monitored pressures and mixtures, their sleeping and exchange of gases. The garage looked like an operating room on weekends, and his home office could have been a factory foreman's. He was the only one among us who had a job. He should have outlived us. So were these details his shell or his essence? We would never know the difference. In him, as there is in certain plants and mammals, there existed only a compilation of questions both flagrant and inconspicuous. My father points to supermarkets where his onions were once deposited. The artist has his figures, documents, the equivalent of icons preserved and imprinted on something he insists is mere onion skin, although we all know the difference. My uncle should be able to point to pairs of hearts and lungs, kidneys and digestive systems, appendices or lymph nodes quelled or rescued. Every soldier, every airman, because for my uncle, there were other wars, made possible by the one the artist lost: 1967, 1973, the Longest War no one still cares to count; the on-going urban warfare of AIDS versus gunshots, although my uncle would say it was not a real war, more of a competition, to see which could kill the most. Only his hands

were clean enough to stick  
in all its victims unharmed.  
But a hero is not a hero without  
a heart, a stone, a storyteller,  
someone to mine and shape  
the combinations of what we  
used to think of his organs,  
his molecules, always  
something smaller, more  
enigmatic; his proteins, pasted  
together like an alphabet.  
It is all so unfair, how the artist  
carries on about guilt and luck,  
all in public, and my uncle rests  
anonymously somewhere  
Evelyn Waugh made fun of.  
It is all so unfair, but that is  
only a child's response to  
an implacable fact of the soil  
that bore us with the onions.



Jane Rosenberg LaForge's work has previously appeared in Ottawa Arts Review, Makeout Creek, Bateau, and La Petite Zine, among others. Two pieces of hers were included in Burning River's 2009 Noun Vs. Verb Literary Annual and while raised in Los Angeles, California, she now lives in New York City with her husband and daughter.



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