

Howard

I. How

The question might be asked
to confirm the degree or amount
of something like, *How old was he?*
or, *How long was this going on?*

It could be used to ask about
the condition of a person or thing: *How*
did your meeting go with the police?

Maybe it shows surprise:
How awful. How
I wish I'd known.

It asks, *In what way or manner.*
By what means. How did he do it?

How? can be answered, unlike *Why?*,
with straight-forward facts
about traffic videos and timestamps,
four scribbled notes and three paintings
of cherries found in a wayward blue SUV
with Illinois plates, ditched
on a cantilever truss bridge
over a river flowing westward.

How is the first word
of the book of Lamentations,
as in *How is it possible a city,*
a person, can sit so deserted?,
like the kid in solitary,
whitecoats glimpsed through
the shatterproof pane,

ticking off all
those usages: surprise
and a desire to know degree,
condition, and in what way.

II. Ward

-ward, a suffix, denoting direction in space or time, like *downward* or *afterward*. If you go *forward*, *onward* or *backward*, it can be either temporal or spatial, but *downward*, *outward*, *toward*, *eastward*, are all in relationship to something in place. *Awkward*, and you don't recognize your own body in space. *Skyward*, and you feel yourself taller. *Rightward*, and your friends question your values. *Seaward*, and you begin to smell salt water long before you arrive.

I Am Not Descended from Stoics Like Jackie O.

After JFK's boyish grin was wiped
from that convertible in Dealey Plaza,
my father came home early
from his store, leaving the mops
and hammers to fend for themselves,
so he could hug my mother, me,
and my sister. I registered the grief
of two adults in front of a Zenith console,
as they tiptoed across the gravel
in Walter Cronkite's voice, rocking
my sister and cooing platitudes
that assured no one of safety.

I was three, but remember their naked
display, as shocking as if they were making
love right there on the tufted rug
of our living room. When I was eleven,
my grandfather died on my birthday,
binding me to him in ironic perpetuity.
My father, aged fifty-one, stood
red-faced in the funeral home's foyer,
his hands fisted, and hit his head
rhythmically against its floral blue
wallpaper, bawling for his father,
a spectacle as open as the casket
where my grandfather lay.

For my bat mitzvah two years later,
my maternal grandmother begged me
for a death more attractive
than the diapers and wheelchairs
that had welcomed her to The Jewish Home.
I knew then from whom I was descended:
stock of Eastern European Jews,
who ever turned their prayers
towards a Wailing Wall that echoed back
at them, wailing, wailing, because the danger
and despair are everywhere and eternal,
and what else did they know to do.

3 Things

*This mess is so big. And so deep and so tall,
We cannot pick it up. There is no way at all.*
— Dr. Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat*

Before Thing 3, before Thing 2,
I—Thing 1—was released
from the box by the cat
in the hat with a scalpel.
In the house, we never flew
kites, but we played with fire,
at least I did, jumped
on the bed, until the lamp
overturned, burned
through the mattress.
The fireman lifted me high
to pound his hat, hard,
and tell him all I'd learned
from this near hazard,
No more jumping!
the lesson meant for Thing 3,
I think now, still in his cradle
then, or maybe still in the box,
I don't remember.
Decades later, Thing 3 bought
Thing t-shirts for all
three of us Things,
singing his love for older
sisterly sibs. Reduced
to that other thing
with teeth in his brain,
that he could neither tame,
that we, Things 1 and 2,
also didn't dare name,
Thing 3 jumped from a bridge
not long after gifting
those gifts, leaving
two sisterly things, two kids,
a husband, a village.
And we did not like it.
Not one little bit.

Approaching Zeal: A Run-On Abecedarian

Alacrity—not my middle name—
boldly lays siege, item by item, to a miasmic to-do
catalog approaching zeal. That’s someone else’s
doppelgänger, not mine. I’m more
easy-going (except when I’m not), a laissez-
faire drop-by-whenever,
give-what-you-can kind of gal, list-less.
However you slice it, whatever its name,
I gave up on musts and have-to’s
just after my brother jumped from a bridge,
knocking us from fixed
latitudes and longitudes like so
many pick-up sticks or dominoes, cascading
nihilistically toward a place
our eyes are still adjusting to three years later.
Perhaps it’s relevant that my middle name,
quixotically, is Joy—claimed, lost, now
reclaimed anew, a virtue
so mismatched to my guilt
that I gathered it, stick by fucking plastic colored stick,
until it resembled a structure,
vulnerable but still standing—a cairn
wobbling ever so slightly at the
x-roads of a trailhead, aching to dance.
You can choose this route or that, bla-
zing in possibility, open to the winds,
 amid parting seas and timbrels or
 battle your brother at the Jabbok
 circa: the rest of your God-given
 days. I choose both shores.

Day of Atonement

If, on the Sabbath of Sabbaths,
you were absent from kindergarten,
the only Jew in your class,

let alone the whole school,
you might be invited by Mrs. Budz
when you returned, to stand

tall, project like a shofar to the back
of the room, and tell all
about your holy day.

All I knew then was Moses
in the bulrushes where I wanted
to be hiding, the mimeograph

I colored in Sunday school—a baby
adrift in an ark waterproofed
with pine tar and pitch, a mother's last

prayer—hanging on the refrigerator
at home. There was no room
yet for contrition or repentance

in this basket floating down the Nile
toward accountability. I knew
how to say, *She did it*

of my younger sister, *It's his
fault*, of a brother too young
to walk or talk, but not, *I'm sorry*.

I pressed my patent leather
heels together to keep my knees
from quaking and gave my first

sermon, ad-libbed, about a baby
who had to fast until he found
the breast of his mother down

the river. He wasn't sorry,
just hungry. And now, more
than fifty years later, I taste

the truth of it. My brother
was just hungry for a mother
down the river from where he landed

face down, and I'm left rueful
I wasn't she, the guilt inky
as resin, sticking to everything.

How to Bring Him Back

*I will attach tendons to you and make flesh
come upon you and cover you with skin;
I will put breath in you, and you will come to life.*
—Ezekiel 37:6

Swarms of maggots and flies feed
off him, a kaleidoscope of changing
colors—red, blue, yellow, black. His body
ballooned, rotting, unaccounted for.
Eyes popped out of their sockets. The man
lays on the bank of the Calumet, broken-
boned. He rises floppy like a scarecrow.
Airborne, he is a kite catching the wind.
He mutters, a teeter-totter on the trusses
of the bridge overhead. The ring he'd flung
boomerangs back to his open hand.
He tugs it onto his finger, steps down
to the tollway into his blue Highlander.
Through the pre-dawn streets of Chicago
backwards, until he turns into the drive
of a brick house in the suburbs, wet-eyed.
He lifts three wrapped paintings
and four hand-written notes from the back
of the car, one of each meant for me.
He stashes them in a cabinet behind jars
of tomato sauce and soups. He places his keys
on the counter by the fishbowl, picks
them up, puts them down. His email sending
regrets for that night's gala at the club
disappears from the screen, letter by letter,
as does his text to the babysitter, cancelling.
He paces. The pen he raises shudders
as he jots *Going for a run* on a notepad,
before the ink is sucked back up through the nib.
Upstairs, he stares from a doorway at a girl and boy,
twins, asleep. Across the hall, he tiptoes backwards
into the master bedroom, slides beneath a green-
and-blue duvet beside a sleeping man who sports
a ring identical to his own. He is wide-eyed,
wired, wakeful as an owl.

Nuit et brouillard, Resnais, 1956

I was only ten when I first saw *Night and Fog*, incriminated by all that nakedness—
jumbled bodies littered in camps,
ribs poking through threadbare flesh.

At twelve, at sleepaway camp,
I dressed under cover of night
or in the bathroom to not expose my nakedness,
too hairy, too guilty-fleshy,

or later, too timid to divulge
the nighttime stirrings that encamped
in my kindling flesh—
to be wholly naked

even to my budding sense of self. Flesh
now saggy, scarred, a mind guilt-full
of qualms, but bold as night
as I approach my sixties, I'm willfully naked

to the world. I prance without a stitch
before open windows, at night,
backlit, when my guilt takes a form
other than flesh. I mix it with naked rage

because *never again* is pitched capriciously
in the ominous night tent of the world,
where I bite almost guiltless on sunny days
into the waiting flesh of a peach.

Nacre

I am the remnant for my mother's
cousin Pearl, a totem standing
in the shoes she had worn

in my mother's affections.
I'm not sure anymore how, of what
she died, or why her life justified

my mother's firstborn. There's no
one left to ask. All I know
is that my Hebrew name,

Penina, means pearl. So what kind
of legacy am I for her except
that I wear pearls and wax lyrical

over this name I carry
because of a dead woman
I never knew, and how it is only

now after mourning so many
of my own people, that I can claim
the name—not for its beauty,

but for its grit, turning months
of brooding on an irritant intruder
into iridescent treasure, a revenge

upon misfortune, writing layer
upon layer more lustrous,
to catch the changing light.