

"(with bows)"

I have too many fingers today
to count those times I heard
"I love you"
because they fell from my own lips
like blood diamonds
scratching my throat
on the way out.
I was 11 years old
I passed a mirror and noticed –
I noticed!
I was built by bones,
not by shame.

There was a well of water
in my sixth grade classroom
shaped like a chrysanthemum
named Bracha
who kept her father
in a locket.
They cornered her,
demanded that she find Kibbud Av
in the cemetery.
The Rebbetzin
gave me detention for being
her hero.

I soaked my siddur for a home
where a tomato was a tolerable thing,
questions were Godly
and magic was more real
than the genocide
waiting in my basement
with a burning patience.
I learned that "family" was
an elastic term,
that my mind was a threat.
My teacher forgot

to give my pencil back.

Daddy pawned my silence
for chocolate currency
wrapped (with bows) to mimic
Parenting.
It tasted like cowardice
like kites made of shirts
and neatly packaged racism.
Suzanne was my Momma
whispering kindness and Trinidad
between the pages
of my
Chumash homework.
Chani was my other mother.
She was good to me.

"Good" wasn't on my wash care label so
I kissed her favorite daughter,
bought a
Pepsi
for the girl
whose skirt was only two inches
below her knees.
She told me to unbutton her blouse.
I named my panic: Tznius
while I ran.

When you ask me where I'm from –
I falter.