



Rafaella Del Bourgo

On Spending Just One Night  
With a Very Young Rabbinical  
Student

Night rain the color of shale.  
I suggest something and he says  
*do people really do that?* And I say  
*they do. Come along, you're in no peril.*

And he comes along,  
but not too fast.

Fire in the bedroom.  
Once, we break for wine and chocolate,  
merlot stain on the pillowcase.  
Later, sheets in turmoil, he says  
*I could do this all night*  
and I say, *you're 18 and yes you can.*

Morning light strains in.  
Tender arrangement of limbs on bed  
where, briefly, we are bound.  
He says *maybe one more time*  
*then I've got to get back to school,*  
and I am underneath the hard-packed landscape  
of muscle,  
his skin smelling like fresh-baked bread.

Later, quiet in the bath,

he mentions the Hebrew word “chet,”  
meaning not “sin” but rather “missing the mark,”  
the archer having made a mistake  
through lack of experience or skill.

I towel him off,  
remember foot-washing rituals  
at a nearby Pentecostal church.

He leaves my door,  
crunches away on the gravel path.  
Underneath the yarmulke,  
new strands of sunshine  
woven into his hair.

### Swimming Lesson

*Hold your breath, hug your knees.*  
Father throws me into the deep end.

I bounce on the bottom, then settle.  
In my head, I sing a favorite song  
while suns dance on the surface.  
I am waiting to swim.

Then, air is gone and  
bubbles no longer leak from my mouth.

Big splash and a neighbor grabs my arm,  
hauls me up and out of the water.

In my father’s shadow, I shiver on a towel,  
spit out chlorinated water.  
I am five and refuse to let the others  
see me cry.

*She’s so smart, my father blurts out.*  
*I thought she would*  
*just swim.*

He shakes his head, brushes his hand  
across his eyes, picks me up  
so I can console him.

His kisses on my cheek bristle  
like points on a star.

See? Those are my tears  
dripping down his face.

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Rafaella Del Bourgo has won many awards for her poetry, including the Lullwater Prize for Poetry and the New River Poets Award. Her work has appeared in magazine, journals and anthologies in the United States, Canada, and Australia. She lives in Berkeley, California.