

An aerial photograph of a dense evergreen forest. A dark, winding river or stream flows through the center of the forest, creating a path that meanders from the top towards the bottom. The trees are a mix of dark green and lighter, yellowish-green, suggesting different species or perhaps the effect of sunlight filtering through the canopy. The overall tone is somber and contemplative.

I AM LEFT TO FIND MY OWN ANSWERS, EYES
BLINKING LIKE A CURSOR ON A VACANT SCREEN.

THE BOOK
OF QUESTIONS

ALAN TOLTZIS

The Book Of Questions

Poems by Alan Toltzis



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And the Lord God called to the man
and said to him, “Where are you?”

Genesis 3:9

Questions Answered Here

But nothing has changed. Truth
is, I'm not that gullible.
Creases line my skin, cut
closer to bone, etch
into my core.

Climate woes replace
chit chat about weather.
Ordinary winter storms
aren't dramatic enough now.
I am deluged by weeks
of atmospheric rivers
punctuated by bomb cyclones
that leave my back yard
a soggy mess. Water laps
the pool's coping.

On my walk to the library,
I try to remember dreams
I forgot the last three nights.
All I come up with are fragments:
two mothers,
pull toys,
an unclimbable staircase.

I approach a sign:
QUESTIONS ANSWERED HERE.
Both semicircular counters
at the reference desk are unstaffed,
their surfaces wiped clean,
computer monitors blank.

I am left to find
my own answers, eyes blinking
like a cursor on a vacant screen.

I Have Important Things to Do

I wait for deliveries
and track their arrival on my phone.
I scroll through Instas
and await new posts.
I busy myself
out of existence.

Who has time for simple things,
like radishes early in the growing season?
Grief takes time to germinate.
Are there still wise men
with late-season tomato foresight?
Where are the sweet corn shamans?
It's too much hassle to wait
for silky tassels or worry
about the shriveling disappointment of earworms.
There's hardly time for one-click checkout
or patience for one-hour delivery.

I can't even think about drawing a narrow groove
in the damp and crumbly soil with my finger
then spacing out a line of pebbly seeds.
If I got that far, would I have time
to delicately brush an eighth inch of soil back over them,
sprinkle handfuls of water to darken
and moisten the earth, without washing
them away?

One day,
my roots will wend
through the dank rubble of dirt,
and get a grip.
One day,
I will plump into a red and spicy nugget.
One day,
I will become visible again.

Expectations

Some years, clusters of pendulous fruit—
sweeter than I deserve—
cram the yellow grapefruit tree.
Other years, there's hardly any. Midsummer
and pink grapefruit overwhelms
a smaller tree. How can it withstand
the weight of itself?

The lime tree puzzles me too.
For the past few years, an explosion of blossoms
but no fruit. So I make excuses for nature:

A windstorm at the wrong time
blew the blossoms off.

Before they had a chance to form,
hail froze the promise of limes.

The sun was too hot.
The sun was not hot enough.

I prayed at the wrong time
or prayed the wrong prayer.

What can and cannot ever be known?

Labor

You see them on the highways,
like day laborers riding open trucks,
all mumble and drowse,
until they're set out in humble white boxes
at the edges of fields, ready to work.

Hived and inhaling
the sweet fragrance that is apple orchard,
bees concoct their thin elixir
of nectar, saliva, and enzyme,
from endless mounds of blossoms,
each by each. Their legs bristle,
fecund with pollen. Incidental
or purposeful, who knows?

Workers transfer their sweet burden
to a grinding conveyor of churning
drones—deposit, fan, seal, repeat—
condensing their bounty into a syrupy mass:
the sweet collective dance
of labor and servitude.

And somehow, months later,
the miracle of apple ripens.

Small Salvations

Furiously spinning on its axis,
frenzied survival shrank the bee's world
to the center of a small, green, backyard pond.

Without understanding its place
in the universe, that algae-filled water
might as well stretch lightyears wide.

The bee's demise started with an unselfish act:
When it's hot, bring back water, not nectar.
Cool the hive. Be part of the community.

I've rescued bees from drowning before,
careful they didn't sting me and die
from their suicidal instinct to survive.

My instinct today? Intercede.
Scoop the bee from the water,
let it dry on the grass and fly home.

But I didn't. Whether from weariness,
heartlessness, indifference, who knows?
I left it to exhaust itself,

growing smaller and smaller until nothing
remained, no trace of our infinite insignificance
withering under the unforgiving sun.

The Paradox of the House Spider

At 3 AM, the bathroom bulb exposes
a black house spider,
crossing the beige marble floor. Alternating
two pairs up and two pairs down,
its spindly, robot-like legs
wind down like a child's wind-up toy.

Spider killing falls on me. Wavering
between death and catch and release,
I consider the spider's paradox: helpfully
consuming 10% of its weight in insects each day,
versus, the culturally gratuitous creep factor.

They manage to do good
in an elegantly repugnant way.
Just look at the disgusting demise of their prey—
a paralyzed blob waiting to be sucked dry, smack
in the middle of that ethereal lace doily of a deathtrap.

Humbly, the spider awaits judgement.
Does it think I don't see it?

It's simply too much bother
in the middle of the night.
I let it be.
Pee.
Return to bed.

Enlightenment

After we discussed this world,
the world to come,
and wondered about the wonders
of unending, post-messianic bliss,
I waited for my Lyft, studying
a cluster of cars crawling
along the illuminated screen.

Two, 2-inch long cockroaches,
encased in exoskeletons, brown and shiny as dates,
alive with curiosity, antennae waving, wandered
stiffly, each on its own square of pavement.
A streetlight glistened, moon-white,
off their winged backs: flexing, vestigial.

One moved into a concrete slab's expansion joint,
upending, head first:
Grip. Push. Contract. Wriggle. Submerge.
Protected beneath crusts of pavement,
scuttling through dirt, decay, darkly twisted roots,
unseen, where life seems its most unseemly.

In this or some unearthly
world to come, what
but hinged reflexes,
like a carapace connected by love and purpose
—spreading, flexing—
can deliver me,
scurrying soulless to the other side of night?

Mere Words So Useless

Hands-to-glass, eye-to-eye, smiling,
the woman stalked the public side
of Bokito's glass enclosure.
Mistaking animosity for amiability,
she obsessively fostered
their "special bond."

Of course,
genetically speaking,
we are 98% alike. Besides,
gorillas can't scale sheer 10-ft walls.
There's a moat. Gorillas fear water.

In primal language—
part innocence, part inhumanity—
Bokito resorted to pleas,
replete with grunt, thump,
strut, glare.

Was that a smile? Good gorilla. . .

. . .Groggy but back safe in his enclosure,
after 100 bites and fracturing
her bones, Bokito lay on his back,
cleansing alien blood from his fur.
The offensive rusty scent
permeated his soul. A leaf
drifted through the afternoon.
Two sparrows landed nearby,
pecked at seeds.

Birthmarks and Lifemarks

Port wine stains, café au lait spots,
salmon patches, stork bites, moles.
To soften their stigma, birthmarks
sport intriguing or fanciful names.

I grew up with a friend who was born
with the map of Africa on his hand.
Complete with Madagascar, it grew
into a source of pride.

But what about lifemarks? Insidious,
they work inside out—the slight
that festers into grudge; deep aches
that scar vulnerable heart to stone.

And so we go about each day,
avoiding trouble spots along the way.

DayMinder

I always left my calendar blank,
never thinking to record my blizzard of meetings,
projects, presentations, appointments, phone calls.
No matter how deeply deadlines deepened,
I knew what needed to get done, when to do it,
how to connect my days to the days of others.

Sometimes, I grew self-conscious. What if
someone saw my pristine calendar
filled with cloudless, blue-sky days?
I filled in blank weeks,
weeks or months later.

Now that my snowpack of self-importance
has long since melted away and the urgency
of deadlines has all gone dead,

I asked my daughter to help me set
two reminders on my phone—

9 am:
I am capable.

7 pm:
Keep going.

Every day. Every day. Every day.

The Art of Giving

For Claudia

What are you learning?

About charity.

If it's better to give a single large sum
or small amounts daily.

What does it say about poor people?

I don't think it says anything about them.

The mitzvah belongs to the giver.

But without poverty, can there be charity?

I thought about the poor—their unseen
and unseemly sacrifices for the benefit of the giver
and the Godly light sparked at their expense.

Turning towards the solace that shines
from your face every day, I tried to learn
to give charity the way lovers give love—
without condition, without measure.

What Are the Odds?

I've grown spoiled.
I only bother
with Powerball tickets
for jackpots over half a billion.
Why waste 2 bucks on anything less?

With careful thought
and detailed plans in place,
it could only be an egregious glitch
in the universe when I lose
to some undeserving Portlander
a thousand miles from here
who will, no doubt, squander most,
lose track of the rest.

This same week—half
a solar eclipse bestows
wonderment upon me, effortlessly
spins straw, air and everything
it touches to pure gold
in quantities more vast than the miller,
his daughter, or the king could imagine.

The Portland forecast? Clouds.

Lightning Bugs

Certain things I've come to miss.
Tonight, it's lightning bugs,
floating over the front lawn
in constellations of yellow-green
luminescence. Random on.
Random off.

We stalked them at twilight,
the buzz of wings
tickling my cupped palms.
Mostly, we let them go, trapping
a few in empty jars scattered
with the naive kindness
of bits of grass and leaves.

How could we know
insects drank nectar,
ate small bugs and slugs,
or lit up looking for sex?

In a flash of compassion,
someone poked holes in the lids.
Lightning bugs must breathe, too.

We carried our makeshift lanterns
until the light died out
leaving them on the front steps
or under the lilac bushes
with their heart-shaped leaves—

mixed flickers of voice and light
from a TV set, breezing
through the screen door.

Elementary School Class Photo

Gleaming rows of girls
sleeveless and summery.

A few loose bows
demure over yoking.

Some zipped up the front
hemline to neck.

And the boys?
The unruly flock of us

lined up, beaming,
smiles overreaching,

locked in a perpetual joke,
ready to burst.

Suits, blazers, madras jackets,
skinny ties.

I was tallest that year,
top row left, between Artie and Neal—

one destined for the disconsolate
jerk of suicide

the other, the ache
of half-baked regret.

And I swear, none of us saw
(or foresaw) misery

lurking wide-grinned
and easy

standing shoulder to shoulder
with us

on that black and white
day in May.

Inheritance

A deck of cards, my father, me sprawled
on the wool, shag, wall-to-wall, imprinting
twisty shapes into our arms and palms,
like strands of DNA or chromosomes.
We played casino or built houses of cards.
Off and on, he dozed while I waited
for his card trick, the one where he shuffled,
dealt a 5 x 5 grid, face-up. Row or column
didn't seem to matter. Scoop, deal, discard,
replace, scoop again. The process unfolded,
passing down what he managed to save
from his childhood full of lack and loss .
Winding and random, it entwines me,
enduring as heredity. *Is this your card?*

Sabbath Blessings for My Daughter

*May the Lord bless you and watch over you.
May the Lord cause His countenance to shine
over you and be gracious to you. May the Lord
turn His face toward you and grant you peace.*

Numbers 6: 24-26

A child, you stood before me, head bowed.
My hands touched your temples or crown.
Through your wild curls, I tried to sense
whatever hurts life hurled your way
that week, before imparting love
through ancient ritual and sacred word.

To this day, you still phone on Friday nights,
“Can I have a blessing?” By rote, I recite
the three verses our faith requires, before
continuing with our personal ritual. Speaking
modern words for modern times, I offer up
the insight and instinct of bespoke blessings
for the coming week that only you will need,
revealing unshakable belief in each other.

The Reluctant Hostess and the Fermi Paradox

*"But, where is everybody?" Enrico Fermi, Summer 1950
Asked over lunch, while discussing extraterrestrial life,
as billions of stars with planets would support the likelihood
of encountering other lifeforms or evidence that they had
once visited earth.*

We all know that feeling—
the anxious emptiness before
a straggle of earlycomers
like first blossoms bewildered
by spring, poke their heads through the door,
awkwardly root themselves in a corner,
sip their drinks. You can breathe again —yes,
they will arrive; yes, this is actually happening!
Soon, guests invade your space. Like doubt,
they continue to creep in. Everywhere.

After what seems like lightyears
they're gone but evidence of their visit
remains. You wander the house, glance down,
discover the splotch of spinach-artichoke dip
on your best blouse. Nebulous clusters
of crumbs, confetti, and glitter litter
the galaxy-blue velvet sofa.
(Of course I saw that, Amy.) On the coffee table,
Saturn-like rings encircle a half-eaten meatball.
(Doesn't anyone use coasters?)
Splatter and smear from an exploded
cola can—like blood-spatter patterns
above the baseboards—will forever haunt you.

Alone on the front porch, clearing your head,
you shiver and realize the hyacinths won't be up
for weeks and pray your faith in the unseen
lasts that long, inundated beneath the slushy doubt
of winter's longest days.

Next-door Neighbors

With little more
than rusty chain link
and irrepressible hedges
between us,
it's hard not to eavesdrop.

A muffled word. . . another.
Deep flash of rippled laughter
from her husband.
Was it forced?

From the end
of their driveway,
a car door shuts. Not the Tesla.
Another caregiver's shift starts.

On my walk next morning,
my dog circles, squats, strains.
Footsteps overtake me.
He waves and laughs
into his phone.

I'm left to fumble
with the plastic bag, humbling
myself to the ground.

A Final Visit Before Moving

Cemetery groundskeepers, laid off or lazy,
ignore our family's perpetual care contract.
Plots stumble into disarray, secrets intact
under blankets of crumbling leaves and debris.
Unfeeling is the only feeling I'll allow.
Enriched by forgotten generations, unseemly
weeds encroach past the edge of decency.
God full of mercy, what's left to hold onto now?

I don't know how customs like this matter
but I stoop at each marker and drop pebbles.
Dormant tufts of grass scratch my ankles,
my cuffs full of seeds, ready to scatter.
Having sought neither blessing nor closure,
I leave with everything I came for.

Answers From the Afterlife

After the predawn hospital call,
I began evolving: Son. Mourner. Executor.
Over the next months, I sorted
piles of numbed confusion
and wished for 3 phone calls
so my father (meticulous
in every detail except his own death)
could answer from the world to come—
a risky miracle to wish from a man
who squeezed his eyes shut
before starting daily phone calls with his 3 sisters,
each the same way, “What’s new, nothing?”

Q: Where did you leave the safe deposit key?

A: You didn’t really need it, did you.

*Q: Why did you leave mom’s name on everything
after she died?*

A: She was the only part of me I couldn’t part with.

Q: After all this time, I can’t remember the third question.

A: What’s new, nothing?

Restoration

Did I wear you out?
Did I leave you spent,
tattered, cut, bruised?

And when,
O weary, weary soul,
you left me again last night,

barely able to fill
and empty my lungs,
I waited for morning,

my body
and my heart
awash with you again.

Today will be different.
Today will be pure.

Today will be
a waxing crescent
moon at dawn.

Coffee and *Chassidus* in the Garden

This is not an ordinary place.
—Targum Onkelos
on Genesis 28:17

Soon after sunrise
when the light is good,
the air dry and cool,
I learn over Zoom.
Sometimes, I focus.
Sometimes, I drift.
Friday morning, the sky
glows eternally white
beyond the tile roof's
scalloped edge.
On my screen, I stare
at bougainvillea behind me.
No beginning or end,
thin and thorny branches
weave through a thicket of figs,
a crown of papery red petals trembles
in this unordinary place,
as I devise another question.

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Alan Toltzis is the author of two poetry collections, *49 Aspects of Human Emotion* and *The Last Commandment* as well as three chapbooks, *Earth Bound* (Red Wolf Editions), *Mercy*, and *Nature Lessons*. His poem, “The Torpor of Everyday Life” was runner up for the Thomas Merton Poetry Prize for Poetry of the Sacred. After a lifetime in Philadelphia, he now lives in Los Angeles. Find him online at alantoltzis.com.