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Janet R. Kirchheimer, a member of our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, is the author of How to Spot One of Us, and she is currently producing AFTER, a documentary of poetry about the Holocaust. Janet is a teaching fellow at Clal-The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.

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Published in Mimaamakim

The Nature of Things

I was eleven the spring my father singed his eyebrows off while burning down pear trees.

Anne Carson says dirt is a minor thing.

This is not true.

Perhaps she has not seen a string bean pushing its way up through the dirt.

The Rabbis say that Adam gave names to all the animals, but do not say who named the trees.

These are some of the plant names I love: Joseph's coat, Persian shield, Silver shrub, African mallow.

Once in January, my father woke me at four o'clock in the morning to help cover the parsley in our garden with blankets. Frost was on the ground.

Stars, so bright at that time of the year, lit the garden.

In June, I call home to ask my father about the gladiolas. He says some are coming, some are going.

The Talmud says occasionally rain falls because of the merit of one man, the merit of one blade of grass, of one field.

Published in The Arty Semite - Forward.com

You Think This May Be How It Happens

You're sitting in an armchair, it's your favorite, though beat up from years of use, and there is a tear in the fabric covering the seat cushion, and it's after noon, and you're taking your nap, and you

wake up and ask your daughter if anyone is there, you feel as if someone has been pulling at your arm, and she tells you no one is there, to go back to sleep, and you begin to wonder if someone was there,

perhaps the Angel of Death who comes to distract you for the slightest moment so he can take you, and if you concentrate on something, studying, praying, or performing a commandment, the Angel must pass you by but he is cunning, and will do everything

in his power to distract you, and you are tired these days and are having trouble concentrating and remembering things, and you know the Angel will not stop trying, and your daughter tells you, again, to go back to sleep, but you can't, you keep wondering if this may be how it will happen.

Published in The Arty Semite - Forward.com

One-Sixtieth Prophecy

Near the house, next to the woodpile, lies a dream

too weak to enter.

I hold my shadow down as it tries to escape, shut the windows, bar the doors, imagine myself bright and shiny.

I am Joseph in the bor, the pit, empty of water, but full of scorpions and serpents.

There is no one to listen

to my dreams, no one to interpret them but God. Or I am Pharaoh.
The interpretations do not satisfy me, I do not find any relief.

Who will interpret for me?

God will heal you with your own wounds, declares the prophet Jeremiah.