Poems by Janet Kirchheimer

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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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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.

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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.
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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.