

MAXWELL STREET

ADAM GOTTLIEB

HOME

BASED ON ADAM GOTTLIEB'S "MAXWELL STREET"

This is the poem the blood in my hands has been waiting to write since my last Yiddish-speaking grandparent died.

My dad says
when he was too little to see above a deli stand,
his dad would take a quarter from that day's earnings
and let him make his way
through the stampede
of brown-eyed brownian motion
that was Jewish Maxwell Street.
He'd lift his arm to the invisible vendor,
the quarter would transform into a hot dog.
No ketchup.

But now
my dad's people are receding north
as fast as his hairline.
Maxwell Street became Rogers Park,
Rogers Park became Devon,
became Arthur,
became North Shore,
became
the North Shore.

And it seems to me
that this is the way we Jews have always lived –
always leaving our homes,
wandering through the world as if through deserts,
crossing from one place to another.
Even for all that Pesach prattle about the glory of freedom,
Jews are still among those
who cross the street from a dark face,
apparently honoring our ancestors
who escaped from Africans by walking the length of a sea.

And while my grandma struggled as an immigrant,
I think she at least was free,
a Jew who understood that in America
being Jewish is not as hard as being black,
that the two don't even compare,
that the bible goes so far back
that they don't even really have slavery in common,
just Maxwell Street.

And even if I never called my grandma bubbe,
I want to write this poem in the spirit of remembrance.
When I was on the SkoMor soccer team,
I was the only Jew,
the kids asked me if I picked pennies from the ground,
teased me about going to hell,
and I only wondered where all the Jews
who were supposed to be in Skokie actually were.

From Egypt to Israel,
from Israel to Russia,
from Russia to New York,
to Maxwell Street,
to Devon, to Skokie,
to wherever the hair on my dad's head will go
by the time he is buried in the soil from the Mount of Olives,
I hope for these Hebrews who can't seem to stay in one place
an exodus only from the same mistakes.

And grandma,
who never hated anyone unless they hated someone for no reason –
you were Maxwell Street,
your heart a place that anyone could call home –
where crossing the street meant saying hello, *merhaba*,
or Evanston chanting *STEINMETZ!*
or doing anything that brought you closer to someone else,
and all I wanted to ask you before you died
was how I could find God as clearly as you did,
so that I could be a prophet,
and bring your love to the chosen people,
deemed such by their meeting your standard
of having a heartbeat.