

Author's comment: *Every year on Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur I am once again moved by the prayer-poem (piyyut) known as Unitaneh Kotef. It begins: On Rosh Hashonah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed . . . and goes on: who shall live and who shall die . . . However, the lines that speak most personally and profoundly to me are those that read: (It is written) who shall be secure and who shall be driven; who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled . . . We may constrain our more destructive urges and nurture our positive impulses, but in the end, we are who we are, some of us secure, some driven, some tranquil and some troubled. The Unitaneh Kotef, with its rich understanding of, and compassion for, the human condition has informed my poem and given it its title, It is Written. . . . Rhoda Rabinowitz Green*

It is Written

*Who shall be tranquil . . . who shall be
troubled . . .*

“Your mother went peaceably in the night,”
I heard her say over the phone.

How’s that?
Neither living nor leaving was ever serene
my quiet caller surely must mean:
to everything there is a season.

“You’ll want to view her remains,” she presumed.
I don’t know, why would I?
Why would anyone?
She is after all, dead
and the dead don’t care who is there.

3 a.m. my body aches
to rest
sleep.

When the sun has risen;
after brushing teeth and hair,
after coffee
will be time enough.

In darkened room I see she's gone where I can't follow.
Died from fright, at least it seems,
stunned into silence
dumbed mid-thought
freeze-framed
Polaroid.

Eyelids shuttered,
slitted gaze devoid of sight
stares down at
nothing

Her mouth an open silent scream
black saliva caught midstream:
congealed threads string parted lips.

Jaundiced, her skin lies stretched
deprived of movement
deprived of breath
Botoxed

Before death shocked she lay comatose
body frail, legs and feet small intrusions
beneath the sheet.
Trembling hands rattled padded rail
tore at gown and chest, then came to rest
but not for long.

Arms floated, hovered there
spread-winged seraph soared through air,
gliding downward
up again, again again
searching for a calmer realm.

A rolled towel supports her neck
I suppose to keep the head in place
a blessing, should I unwittingly disturb the space
as fingers stroke her hardened hair —
matted, stiff, the scalp shows through;
caress her brow, then draw back
bewildered.

Indifferent, ungiving touch.

Stone Angel

She died at last
organs intact, heart still strong
consequence of her life-long habit of walking;
walking the malls —
alone
she used to say.

She died, at last.
No food, no water
starvation and thirst
her choice
nothing in, nothing out.

Sweet cloying smell of death
replaced with talc;
yellow pallor disguised with powder:
instant health achieved with cosmetic.

They've given her a prostitute's blush
slashed her eyebrows angry-brown
rouged her lips harsh blood-red

This is what happens once you're dead.

Someone's coiffed her head of white
curled it, fluffed it, sprayed it, splayed it
against the satin; plumped her cheeks —
How? With cotton?

Porcelain painted doll.

No sign of life
None of the struggle
preserved.

There was one sign:
purple-black bruises tattooing her arms
exposed by the short-sleeved dress she had on.
One that I chose.
What was I thinking?
They said:
“Bring her clothes like she’s dressed for a party.”
Brazen denial
Grand illusion

I do not know this manikin.