Poems from

Berkeley Youth Poet Laureate 2023



Berkeley Public Library

Berkeley, CA

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NOTE

This chapbook contains the work of poets who submitted applications to the Berkeley Youth Poet Laureate program in late 2023. Each applicant was given the opportunity to contribute a poem.

The inaugural Berkeley Youth Poet Laureate is Julia Segre, and the Vice Laureate is Serena Griffin. Serving throughout the calendar year of 2024, they have the opportunity to perform at Library and City functions, lead a community art project, participate in writing workshops, and will be eligible to represent Berkeley in the National Youth Poet Laureate Competition.

The 2023 Berkeley Youth Poet Laureate contest was judged by a panel of esteemed local poets, authors, and literary arts luminaries, including Rafael Casal, José Vadi, Maw Shein Win, Melanie Abrams, and Laura Woltag.

The Berkeley Youth Poet Laureate Program is a project to elevate and amplify Berkeley teens' voices through poetry. It was founded by Berkeley Public Library in 2023, in partnership with Urban Word (which facilitates youth poet laureate programs across the United States), and is supported by an alliance of community partners, including the City of Berkeley Civic Arts Commission, Berkeley Public Schools, and Friends of the Berkeley Public Library.









CONTENTS

WHEN THE SCENT SEEPS BY YANCY ALEGRE-PACHECO	6
[THE OTHER DAY, I STEPPED INTO A CATHEDRAL] BY SEQUOIA CRISTOBAL-MANDEL	8
SUNDAY TO SUNDAY BY KIRBY DUNCAN	13
SUNSHINE GIRL BY SUMAYYAH GREEN	15
WE ARE THE CHANGE BY SERENA GRIFFIN	16
TO MY GRANDMA BY LEA HIRECHE	18
BLACK JOY BY DA'SHEME HOSLEY	20
[LIKE NEON AURAS] BY EMMA KNISBACHER	22
ROBERT MCCLOSKEY 2023 BY ADELINE LEMIEUX	24
A(SEXUAL)TENSION BY OLIVIA NGUYEN	27
[I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE] BY FERANMI OLAWOYE	30
RED STRINGS BY WILLOW PIMADALY	31

BY JAMAICA RODRIGUEZ	34
THE CASCADE BY CLARA SCHNOLL	37
SMOKE MUFFLED WORDS BY SOLANA SCHWARZINGER REUTER	39
DIAMONDS ARE A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND BY JULIA SEGRE	43

WHEN THE SCENT SEEPS

Yancy Alegre-Pacheco

- When the aroma of my mom's cooking reaches my nose, I perk up.
- Although she doesn't cook as much anymore when I hear the flicker of the stove and the opening and
- closing of the newly stocked fridge, and I know it is not of my own doing, I feel comforted.
- When I fully immerse myself in the scent, images of my mom, tall and strong, flash in my brain. As a kid,
- I looked up to her, I dreamed of being her, and more. As a teen who can still remember my childhood
- memories, when I look at my mom, I realize she was not as tall and only put on a strong face for my
- siblings and me. She was fighting quicksand that only pulled her down more; my dad.
- They were never married, and from the time I knew them, they were never in love either. I hoped that one
- day they would be like the moms and dads I saw on TV, but knew after the 3rd police call it was a waste
- of hope. Instead, I used that hope to have my mom's cooking.
- When the pot moves from the kitchen to the dining table, I watch the windows steam up. The steam
- billows into my bowl and collects as soup. My stuffy nose from the Autumn leaves falling immediately
- clears and the first thing I smell is the smell of smiles and giggles.

 Every time my mom brought out her

- magical cauldron of enchilada sauce or chicken soup the table would erupt in laughter. Whether the car
- didn't work or someone crashed into our gate, my mom's food was an elixir that would always take us out
- of the big picture and zoom into the small picture, focusing on the moment.
- Now that we live in Berkeley, my big sister is in college and my mom is focusing on her career, I am now
- that honorary holder of the ladle. Despite the fact that I could never cook anything as powerful as my
- mother, I have learned that being strong is all the power that I need.

[THE OTHER DAY, I STEPPED INTO A CATHEDRAL]

Seguoia Cristobal-Mandel

The other day, I stepped into a cathedral and with no pretense of religion, I was struck by an

Had the ceiling been lower than it was,

incomprehensible weight of worship

my nose would have grazed the brave dome of the painted stone with my neck broken in half in submission to the building.

For the first time, I felt, "Maybe it's all true"

The sacrifice and the holy resurrection

The immaculate conception

of me as a thing of religion, not circumstance

I understood

while breathing in the most impossibly carved rock into

liquid and prophecy

why thousands of knees knelt here before the same god.

And the cathedral told me, incubated in its cold womb,

"You are a child of some god, somewhere, even if you never have been before."

I believed it, and I thought it so miraculous,

then so juvenile, then so terrifying

that I was so easily won over by a building and the notion of history.

I tell you this while lying adjacent to you on your wooden floor

Our skin still salty, stinging, sticking swimsuits and faces taut as a drum.

You tell me something in response

And I look at you and think, "This is the meat of it. The meat of friendship."

Wanting to crawl inside of you and escape only if it means chewing my way out

Eating every tendril of fat and marrow inside of you

So that you might get a stomachache and look down

and think, "Oh, it's just you."

I told you this as a joke, to maybe try and make you laugh

but you looked at me like I was dying.

Anyways –

we talk about the sand that got into the sunscreen bottle.

I won't die for you, I'm too afraid of pain

I won't live for you, either,

my life is not nearly as important as that.

But I will feed you when you are not sick

I will carry you home

I will endure the unendurable things you say

I will never show you indifference.

If god were real/If you were god

my tongue would rot with how much of you I would drink.

I wish I knew what was real

so that I might stop praying

[10]

or seeing you

and it would be sin or sorrow,

not all this hunger and weirdness.

You look at me like I'm dying even though I've just tried to make you laugh,

and no hand has ever been more of a hand than mine dressing the floorboards underneath us in false modesty

It is kind of gleaming in leftover sun and it's stretched too tight like the skin of a drum.

If you peeled back the layers of my hand, and please don't touch my hand,

you would find tendons strung so tight that a bow against it would be music.

We're a foot apart, but I can feel you:

what you are about to say, the cadence of your sentences as your tongue gets drier

We are coexisting in the same millisecond and I can really feel it pulsating around us and our flesh.

And for a second, I look away to my hand on the ground and I imagine another pressed against it

SUNDAY TO SUNDAY

Kirby Duncan

Sunday
She tells me.
For being the day of sun,
It's very dark today.

Monday A pot shatters Blood spills Smoke plagues my lungs.

Tuesday
The orange air gets worse.
I see her again
And I'm sad.

Wednesday I doubt, I sit, I think.

Thursday is hopeful. It's numb But there's cookies And someone new.

Friday Laundry must be done To make spaghetti. I sit with a sandwich And disappointment.

Saturday
There's a chance
To dance.
I don't take it.

Sunday I'm still Sorry.

SUNSHINE GIRL

Sumayyah Green

Stare. It's all I can seem to do. I'm never at a loss for words around her but, I catch myself silently admiring her more often than we speak. Which Is a lot. Mostly because I'm confused. Confused how It's humanly possible to not be human at all. She's not, by the way. She's sunshine shaped as a girl. The most beautiful girl you've ever seen. She gives life without trying. Even on her darkest days. The world wouldn't spin without her. She doesn't know that though. Neither do the flowers that grow, or the waves that dance, or the sweet strawberries that we indulge in. She's like that. Strawberries remind me of her too. The way her complexion becomes red from exuding passionate energy. When she talks. Or puts every ounce of energy she has in the simplest dance move and exhausts herself till she's strawberry red. I love It. I could watch her dance all day. I'd cry if I missed a single step. During one of my silent admirations one day, I saw a yellow ring beaming around every inch of her body. I thought I could see auras. But I've never seen them on anyone else. Just her. I've come to the conclusion that it wasn't her aura, but her true form was revealing itself. Sunshine. Everyone who's ever felt the warmth of her presence relieve them, seen the beauty of her smile erase every anxiety in their brain, or felt the flower petal soft touch of her skin release the tension of their inner hurting heart. They should be thankful. Thankful that God (whether they believe in one or not) risked the anonymity of heaven to place an angel on earth.

WE ARE THE CHANGE

Serena Griffin

She walked for 1,037* days with no rest.

In preparation,

She plucked every star from her mind and compiled them until they formed suns.

She transformed them into seeds.

So, for 1,037 days, as her feet grazed every inch of the barren soil that blanketed Earth's surface,

The seeds, birthed from her clever mind, tumbled down into the soil.

As she traversed earth's surface, she kept her eyes forward.

But, On day 518 She took a look back.

As soon as her head turned Her eyes met buds transforming into bouquets, stretching out for miles

Girls and women all over basked in it

They adorned themselves with blooms Their clothes held stains of vibrant hues, Her seeds seeping through the petals into their skin. As she looked out on her creation, The glistening imprint of a tear stained her face, She thought to herself:

"I am the change."

She continued to trek on Dropping seeds for 518 more days

On day 1,037 she took a final look back.

Flowers had sprung up, covering land stretching for miles, And they flourished.

All thanks to the girls and women, Whose hands had graciously tilled the soil and poured the water.

Now, The world was rich with brilliance, Rich with ideas, Rich with beauty.

Her eyes gleaming with admiration, She looked out on the physical manifestation of girls and women, Filling Earth to the brim with buds of creativity and knowledge.

As she looked out on the creation, A tear glistening on her cheek,

She thought to herself:

"We are the change."

*1,037 is approximately the number of days it would take to walk around the entire circumference of the Earth (without rest and a speed of one mile per hour)

TO MY GRANDMA

Lea Hireche

6,545 miles,
Between my homes,
And when we have to come back here,
Travel back to our second home,
Travel those 6,545 miles,
We have to leave you time in time again,
In that airport,
In the broken yellow home,

And when we live in this second home, With a garden that grows and grows and grows, And a house that rots and groans,

Mama wishes she could go back to her home, To patch the cracks in your yellow home, Papa wants to stay here, Clean the rot and mold, That plagues this house with the garden that grows,

I want both,
I want a home like the broken yellow home,
With a garden that grows,
I want to walk one second,
Not fly 6,545 miles,
Between my homes,

I want both languages to fall off my tongue, With no broken spots, And no questions of "Does she actually speak..."

Or maybe i want a new home,
One farther than
6,545 miles,
One farther than a million,
One where the only language we'll speak is ours,
Theres no garden,
No rot,
No mold,

Theres no you,
Trapped in the airport,
And that broken yellow home,
No mama,
Wishing to go back to that yellow home,
And theres no papa,
Wanting to fix the home with the garden that grows,

Theres only me,
And you
With the perfect home,
With no groans,
That won't let us sleep,
Or rot that traps us in our feet,

No garden, Because i hate the dirt under my nails, And we can't eat all it reaps, And no broken yellow home,

Only you and me.

BLACK JOY

Da'Sheme Hosley

Black joy Nothing truly conquers black joy Black joy overcomes all obstacles Metamorphosing into art Art born from suffering Born from oppression Born from black pain Black joy will prevail regardless of circumstance A perfectly crafted sculpture through wreckage and debris A rose through concrete You hold it back Pressing your knees on its airways But black joy finds another way to breathe Breathe through hair Breathe through music Breathe through our melanin You block us from your music We make our own and fill it with soul You ban us from your clubs We congregate in mass and have a ball of our own You take us from our motherland The setting of which breathes and bleeds African art Still We take your title Your unspoken challenge Your standard 'American' Take it. Accept it.

It doesn't go down easy, but we endure it

A sedative we swallow But in reality, a placebo African, American, black An established title counteracting 'American' A tweak, or fix reminding us we will never truly be of your standard Black joy gets the better of your standard Your standard of beauty opposes our braids Your standard of fashion opposes our prints Your standards of 'American' contrasting our skin Your standard is not black And black joy bleeds Black joy bleeds through its heart Leaking soul, art, and culture despite it all Black joy is a force sought by many to be reckoned with But never taken down Never conquered Black joy, Cannot be stopped Cannot be conquered Nothing truly conquers black joy

[LIKE NEON AURAS]

Emma Knishacher

like neon auras

you rest on frozen california summer's night after rayen

after poem and shadow singlaughing, the night breaks a sweat—

moon becomes a heating vent, apartment shattered soul'd for rent, the night

is a blanket without blank, you kiss a streetlamp—like silk;

like salt & green paint, she is a ballad without wings:

she is

a MAN a MAN a MAN;

she is

a THREAT a THREAT—

she is a sailor,

transfeminist:

she scholar moonlit harmonist, she cobweb corsèt flutter dress: s h e / w e

ROBERT MCCLOSKEY 2023

Adeline Lemieux

My parents

Or at least my parent's parents

Must have loved

Robert McCloskey

Because

I remember

Sitting in the

Large

Brown

Rocking chair

(That used to be in my room),

Listening to my parents read the

opening lines

То

Blueberries for Sal

This memory could just be a figment of my imagination,

But the feeling is real.

The feeling of

Small

Smushed

Blueberries

Falling into a wicker basket

Kuplink

Kuplunk

Kuplunk

Just a few years later

I had to

Make way for ducklings

That book is now ruined

I guess you could say that

Bright colors now

Infest

The pages -

The colors spilling over the neat browns

That the book was printed in.

Next to that book

Sitting on the shelf

Broken

And

Bruised

From years of bedtime stories is

Time of Wonder

With it's painted pages

Showing the natural beauty of

The islands

That maine has claimed as its own

Makes it seem as if you were there

Feeling the

Soft fog

Weaving through the trees

Feeling the heat

Radiate

From the

Rough rocks

At low tide

Seeing the roots

Of fallen trees and

Pressing your

Back

Against the door,

The wind

Banging on the door

Begging to be let in.

The sea spray dotting

Your face

Like little buttons

Of the land.

This feeling is oddly soothing,

Sending the reader into

A state

Of

Pure

Bliss.

And after falling asleep, sending yourself into that time of wonder,

It's morning

A morning in maine

The falling out of a tooth,

Cold ice cream that

Makes the

Teeth that are left

Shiver with the cold

The cool nuts and bolts

From the port.

And the loud

Whirr

Of the motorboat

telling you to pack up,

(don't forget your toothbrush)

It's time to go

Chowder is

waiting

at home

A(SEXUAL)TENSION

Olivia Nguyen

I yearn to be touched by words the way your hands are supposed to touch me, to feel the weight of words on my flesh and bone, the comfort of pressure when my nerves go numb.

My body begs for my tongue in cheek to stomach real irony, in the same way you urge me to open up, unclench my canines and purse my lips to let others in. The same way I want empty promises to leave marks on my neck, to be grasped where I'm all over hands and in pieces, a name stuck in your throat and morsel in your stomach.

My tongue speaks in ways an illiterate would beg to read into, but my virgin ears are rendered lay by bedroom eyes. I yearn for my first kiss to be the way lips taste in chapters, the way rosy cheeks are spelled—because a first is everything when you're courting a participation award.

I crave sexual attraction in the vulnerability of kinks, curves, and loose screws. I want you to see my bones without craving it like a dog, without carving my exterior like your blank canvas. Must I demand that you let my silhouette sleep but not with another?

You touch my skin the way names are sprawled on bathroom walls, etched so deeply to not be forgotten, the same way bookmarked pages are never read. To make ends meet, must I demand to be unfolded the way eared corners are smoothed down?

Because I dare to breathe, my back is to be marked like paper. The lines on my body cross borders and close doors, they hold warnings and hands but none of my own. Between margins, they are the bricks buried below graffiti, the grooves of another's work plagiarizing my own.

On screen I'm told what I am: exotic red lips for the white man, closed mouth but open legs, both begging to understand foreign tongues but speak not a word. If you can't speak my body's native language, why must I convert to yours? I can't touch my broken body, but my body is allowed to be broken by your touch. There are no pedestals for the gap between my thighs, I'm either on the ground or six feet under.

By law, I am to worship the bland and colorless, but I have no right to keep my white sheets pure, untouched by the White House, white man, white picket fences. If looks could feel me up, I'd be pushing up white daisies too.

I "just haven't found the right person yet" and if I "pray hard enough, they'll come" but the only salvation sure to come is between your legs. You want me on my knees, screaming his name like it's your own; to swallow, not spit, like the rest of the feeling world. Forgive me for I am a sinner, guilty for blushing but the heat is frustration, just not from between my thighs. I am to repent but not be intangible; if you can't spread my legs, you'd rather have me spread thin, mind crawling like a toddler.

You follow my lips but don't heed to the pleads they sprout. I pray my voice is louder than the moans of silence, the premature babble you can't make out with. I know you yearn to mount me like the art piece I am, bend me the way you do straws and persecute with a tongue down my throat. I refuse to mold my curves to fit the shape of your hands; I would rather you choke dry than suffocate in your heat.

Only when I'm meters underground will someone read the writing with my name. The letters on my tombstone will outlast the hands—the hands muffling cries, the ones between thighs, prying lies from hips and sugar highs from my lips. Hell knows I'll sleep in my obituary with my legs uncrossed, knowing that your fingerprints have never marked my body, knowing the only hands that have tasted my skin are my own. The tears I shed will be justified by my muted corpse—still just a warm body. I'll rest when the flowers finish and my name is screamed in grief, and only then will my last words be touched by another mouth.

[I'M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE]

Feranmi Olawoye

I'm not supposed to be here,

But here I am.

For this reason my mother named a name that

Took up space

A name that was a mouthful, usually in the wrong order

A name that I thought never resonated with me

"How do you pronounce that?"

I always await the day that I meet someone new

It always gives me this weird joy when someone is learning to say my name

I always thought that there was only one way to say it

But I have learned there are many ways

A way to say it when you genuinely don't know how to pronounce it

A way to say it when you really don't care

Both ways still feel the same

They still touch a place at the back of my throat that I can't seem to touch

In my head, my name has never been that hard to say

A roll of the tongue here, and pressing of the lips there But I've heard otherwise

A spitting of random things here, and adding some more syllabus there

Yet, to this day I have learned to correct them Everytime

RED STRINGS

Willow Pimadaly

i learned it
i learned how to feel it
how to let go and hold on
to move forward
without chaining myself backwards
and every which way

i learned to put air back into my lungs

i found healing
i watched it get swept away in the wind
i kissed it and held it
and folded it beneath my pillow
i rolled it between my fingers
inhaled and exhaled all of my wishes
i stuffed it in a bottle and threw it to alaska

because it's time and kissing away the lack thereof it's loving adoration as a series of moments and mending as an understanding

it's all-consuming clutching misery carrying it to all corners of the world why hold on to that? i found a place to put it down.

i felt everything and nothing else

it's kind and warm sometimes sweeter in my sleep

the wash of relief when the right words find me

the rediscovery of my sanity

it's remembering your suffering untangling red strings from deep hours past

it's reminder that the sun will rise and the birds will cry realizing peace as an extension of want and not only in slumber

it's unlearning to brace yourself when someone tells you i love you

for generations people will find pieces of me between the floorboards

they'll know i found it

i found

my mind

CAN'T BOOK ME

Jamaica Rodriguez

That tells you about my character
No plays
Bad days
Don't make me fade
Because i still smile at every pass by
No matter how many times i've gotten a glare
Or a blank stare

That tells you about my character
Because i bend and fold to fit myself
And simply move around how others perceive me
I don't fit into those size 0 expectations
I don't fold over men like those jeans in my drawer

See that right there is character
And better yet Ik mines
Without reciting lines
Ik mines
Without sticking to a script written by faceless facades
Ik mines

See that right there is character
Fuck development
I grow and evolve like any scene
Better than anything you've ever seen
Because this message is ever sent
Ever felt
Tells you my character

Don't just look I watch I don't just stare I see

My character ain't in no play
Cuz i dont play
Especially with peoples who claim no name
My character wears curly hair
Sometimes curlier than others
And every part uneven
But yet precise to me

Because my character doesn't defy god's creations Orumila's creation I am as smooth as OSHUNs river And quick and sharp as oya's Blade

I am peace and fierce rolled up into yemaya's wave I am the strength and fear stricken into the sky When shango makes you feel his presence I am the eye that looks That silver smile told all to well by odua

I am the head and the tongue with the breeze that reaches me at the top of my hill

Of obatala's mountains But better yet i do not strive to be all powerful

My characters shows you
The layers
Hidden in a chipped skateboard
And ripped vans
My character tells you the bruise and every aching bone, muscle
From the way i love to sway
With beats that make you go ayeeeeeeee

My character tells you that i am not one not two but more things that i don't have time to name
Because in this hair is roots
And in this mouth is truth
Held tight by lips and teeth that bite
My truth is my character
One that has a written verse
My script is this poem
And unfinished
Because if anything
My character should tell you

This ain't no front
This book has a cracked spine
While quite literally at the beginning of its pages

THE CASCADE

Clara Schnoll

moments in the present shape, cut, contort the future of our fabricated lives little whispers in the night convince you to shed your skin and mind whirling your thoughts into intervals of feeling that abandon you as you wait for the sun to rise once more. kicking pain out will not erase its erosion in your heartit will only teach you to forget; not to grow into that blossom that beautiful light that lays with the moon and sleeps with the stars. memories haunt more than relieve youat least until you really hear the chords and love that coexisted with your smile. puzzle pieces of your corroded mind build into the pretty picture of trees dappling the road sea salt on your tongue warmth of an embrace fragments of you. and now all your thoughts trickle in realization peace and hurt cascade into feeling and maybe even Acceptance.

SMOKE MUFFLED WORDS

Solana Schwarzinger Reuter

Smoke in the air
Polluting the lungs of the people
Walking out of their classrooms

To go to lunch

Walking out of their offices

To go home

Bikers breathing a little harder

On the days where they can't get enough air

Days where the air tastes and smells orange

California's on fire again

The people will say

Fire season

They'll call it

On the news-

On the radio-

In conversation

The beginning of fall every year

Hopefully it won't be as bad this year

They'll say

They'll talk about the rain

About how the ground isn't as dry as before

So a couple days of smoke isn't that bad

But when will they realize

That the smoke won't go away

The fires won't stop

They'll keep burning and burning

And burning and burning and burning

And the smoke will rise up and up and up

Until it can't rise anymore

Until it has nowhere to go

When our atmosphere is glowing with saffron and scarlet

Because it isn't the ground that is too dry

It isn't the time of the year

It's the earth - our planet

Crying out

Trying to catch the attention

Of the people who are using-

Abusing-

The resources it has so kindly given

And turning a blind eye to the consequences

Maybe they'll realize what they've done

When their kids aren't allowed to play outside anymore

When the people won't have to wear masks because of covid
But because the air is toxic

When they can't walk their dogs for more than ten minutes

Or they'll collapse

When the tourists come to visit Muir Woods

But it's temporarily closed

Because all the trees burnt down

And they don't know how to restore a forest

When the forest is ash and charcoal.

So caught up in the now
With space travel

And the possibility of inhabiting Mars

And astronauts on the moon

Maybe they'll realize before it's too late

That we can't all fit on the moon

That we only have one planet

And it's dying slowly from our mistakes

But I doubt it.

They'll keep believing it's political

When the third fire of the day burns through their house

And they have nothing to eat

They'll sit at their tables until the very end

Dismissing global warming
Until the flames consume them
Because that's not their problem.

DIAMONDS ARE A GIRL'S BEST FRIEND

Julia Segre

They tell me I cannot carry cash over to America, So I sell away everything I can find and give my money to a man With a mustache who shoves a diamond ring onto my finger. The jewel containing my entire life Is a bit broken down, the brass aching as it struggles To keep the stone set in its frame. Diamonds are a girl's best friend, darling, The radio sings as we pack our life up in the dark. Our windows broken, the moon dripping into the room Like syrup that has been boiled for too long. My mother taken last week by another man With too much evil behind his eyes And his chest sticking proudly out from behind His uniform. A young one, still eager to win Over his country. We have long since lost our country, so We drive as far as we can Then push the car when we are out of gas. We crowd onto a cattle ship That still smells of manure and hay. We are livestock and we are outrunning Everything. Everything is on my ring finger And it's a little too big so I have to take Care that it doesn't slip off.

I think about taking a mikveh in blood. If the grit will purify me.

I haven't felt clean since I stole
A pure woman's passport. Her cheeks
Rosy and well-fed.
A man tells me on my way through the port
That he knew I wasn't a Jew
Because they have horns.
I wonder if it is worse to impersonate
The devil or to appear as one.

If you could trade lives, would you?
Yes, yes. I wouldn't hesitate for an instant.
When I get to America,
My children will not even know they're Jewish
And I will prop up the most beautiful
Christmas tree that the big-boned
Broad-shouldered country has ever seen.

Someday they will beg me to tell them why I hurry Them along in the folds of my skirt When walking by the temple.
I will not tell them that When I look around at the cantor And congregation I still see firewood.

I wonder how much hate a body can take.
I wonder about my cousins and soul sisters
Being sold down the drain for soldier's
Brags over beers and a hearty laugh
In these hard times.
When they say the Jews are stealing all the wealth
I wonder if they mean the boxes
Of jewelry outside the camps,
The silver chains spilling out like blood.
I wonder if they mean my diamond ring.
I can barely lift my left hand

The weight has gotten too heavy.

I wonder how many times you can lose everything
Before you give up trying to get it back.

I wonder how much grief a soul Can hold and when my people will start dying from it And not from being shot down a straight line Like cattle.

I wonder how many times you can bury A body that looks exactly like yours before you are allowed to mourn.

If you lost everything, what would you do? I haven't lost everything. It is all In my diamond ring.

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