

EZRAS NASHIM

Tovah Gidseg

I.

A low wall cleaves men from women at prayer
Husbands from wives, brothers from sisters
Tablets of the covenant, broken in two

Pushing women into community
Sanctifying a brief disruption of each family unit
Just until the end of shacharis

For a moment they are not wives
Partnering now with G-d alone, answering to G-d alone
Kadosh! Kadosh! Kadosh!

Couples unpaired across the mechitza
Who goes with whom?
An impossible matching game

II.

The women's section is a garden of headscarves
Of gauze woven through with gold thread, felted hats, glossy wigs
And the uncovered heads of the unmarried

We bend, sway in a dance with G-d
Whisper well-worn praise to the heavens
Whisper well-worn comfort and gossip across chair-backs

A low wall bisects the room back to front, but I find my place
In the back of the sanctuary where the divider ends,

Body mostly with the women, yet some part of me pushing into
men's space

Cracked-spine siddur with butterfly-wing pages cradled in my arms
A book of awe, the yearnings of our people
Settling into my football hold

Button-down pressed hard against yesterday's iron
Black slacks bold, fresh #2 fade
Hineini

An older woman stares at me, whispers to her daughter
Who smiles towards me, whispering back to her mother:
She belongs here

III.

From here I see the family I have built, separate
My love sits in the front row of this space, apart
So we each can focus on our words to the Divine, not on each other

Away from her I can better utter praise for that which is larger
Whose arms are as strong as hers when I fall into them
But not as soft

Our children run between us, laughing, stealing hugs
Sticky hands tug a mother's skirt or shirt cuff
Stage-whispers from lollipop-lacquered lips

I stand near the door, wrapped in prayer
Close to the men, but firmly within the territory of women
Dyke sentry at the mouth of the ezras nashim