

JUDAS

**JACOB
NEWBERRY**

“Take me to the hill,” my father says,
“where Judas was hanged.”

I interrupt. “He wasn’t hanged,” I say,
“he hanged himself.” Now we are arguing again –
“Semantics,” he replies. “Just take me there.”

I will refuse – three times,
as it turns out – but I am weak; his insistence
is too strong. He needs to climb
that hill of blood where the branches are heavy,
where the olives pave the earth like stones
fallen from a limestone
tree. He asks again. I have lived here too long.
We are standing
on my rooftop and the tower near my house
is tolling all its Sunday bells.
Everything is ringing and there are
too many sites of dying to be seen while he is here.
Jerusalem is a graveyard
and we walk within its walls and we give thanks
for what we see and all the headstones here are trees.

“I just want to go,” he says,
and for some reason I cannot explain how long it’s been
since I have visited a place where no one died.

I'll go, I say,
if he will understand the difference, how the meaning
of those words is changed – the active of the *hanging*
from the passive of the *being hanged* –
but he is unmoved. "To die
or to be killed," he says, waving his hand,
"the ending is the same." I disagree.
"In either case," he says, "it is the Lord
who did the hanging."

Except
that it is Judas, always swinging
by that unholy neck, not God, with silver
scattered on the ground inside the temple,
always Judas
who performs the dying. The difference is real.

Like on another day,
the week before, also sitting on my roof,
our folding chairs pulled close to the makeshift table,
this time no tolling bells or clouds diffusing
through the atmosphere. He was on his second
helping of a simple dish I'd made.
When he went inside for thirds, I tossed two
spoonfuls of my own over the ledge. The crows
leapt from their cypress perch
and down into the courtyard. My father
came back and I pretended I'd been eating.
He sat.
"Why did you toss your food over the ledge?" he asked.
I said nothing. "I saw you through the window."
"The crows looked hungry," I told him.
"I see," he said. "Anyway,
it's good." I nodded. He watched me then,
not touching his own plate.

I cut

the meat into twenty pieces and
spread them out among the rice,
then took bites so small they might be missed
and chewed them twenty times.

He thinks *to die* and *to be killed* are just diversions
to the final state of things; there is no action
in his mind that bears repeating
if the ending is the same. So I must be forgiven
for my anger when he asked:

“You can’t quit counting, can you?”

as though the calories would be paid for by the Lord
through my unknowing, that thinking
something has no consequence can make it so.
But Judas, writhing while the capillaries burst
and while his eyes filled up with blood
and while his narrow spine
was cracking –

he had a number in his head, he had a consequence,
a wish for thirty pieces of undoing.

Father,

you will forgive me, it is three days now
since I last ate and I am having trouble
knowing words when they appear, except
this time is clear: *being hanged*
and *hanging himself* are not the same.

You will forgive me, Father, all

my trespasses: I am

so hungry now, and it is Judas who is hanging,
not the Lord, it is Judas
with the weakness traveling outward
through the flesh, refusing at some peril
when his friends insist he take their bread and eat it –

This do in remembrance of me –

it is Judas, with the nights turned red,
who in his dreams is eating, silent as he can,
nearly everything his house contains;
it is Judas,
 reaching for his heart
beneath the ribcage that extrudes through his skin
like paper straws under laminate,
seeking that undoing once again,
his back hunched over while he kneels
in search of absolution, yes,
even in his dream, a certainty of no forgiveness
for his body's last transgression;
 it is Judas who awakes,
trembling from the memory of food,
 all hope escaping as the skyline turns
to scarlet and the fibers from the rope
are broken elements of shale that he remembers
as a child he liked to pass across his arms to watch
 the blood begin
to show itself while somewhere close his mother
waded in the sea and all around the gulls
 were screaming, screaming, screaming.