



# Tidal Wave

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Uncle Nathan rubs back the hair  
over blue numbers,  
chants Hebrew psalms,  
then slips away to a heavy wooden chair  
planted to face the fence  
where my father watches a ballgame  
through slats that will never be fixed.  
On its way to taunt Uncle Nathan,  
Grandma's beef smoke  
oils the undersides of leaves on her favorite maple.

My father sprawls out, holds a sun reflector,  
feet dug into sand  
down to where it's cool,  
Grandma's maple, parchment-dry.  
Chicken fat soaks into brown paper bags  
three floors up on the clean white kitchen windowsill.  
I sit on the fire escape with kosher chicken and comics.  
Grandma speaks Yiddish into the soup.  
Tonight's sky will be brighter than the Ferris wheel.

## Grandma's Buttons

Ticking on a wooden sewing table  
in the parlor, spilling onto  
the floor – getaways – and  
I creep down, head between  
the legs of the table. Above  
me the drawer and its wonderful  
mechanism that lets it slide – open / close –  
and I'm feeling for the buttons –  
flat wishbones, rounded  
ones that feel like wood  
that aged wood – and above  
the thunder. Grandma's pouring buttons  
into a round metal tin that held  
butter cookies from Aunt  
Celia, who painted her chalked face  
with pink powder – or so it seemed  
to me.

## My analyst

has no email address. He does not carry a cell phone. There is no window in his office, and only one chair.

He has no desk really, just a small table, like a coffee table – to put his coffee on. He writes with a pencil on a yellow pad.

The only item I have really taken notice of is a small yellow pencil sharpener – the kind I used to have in a pencil case in grade school.

I have focused in on that. He told me his mother gave it to him, and not to his brother. This is something he has brought up often in our sessions.

Sometimes when I sense tenseness in his face, when he can't stop fiddling with the sharpener, I ask him about the day his mother gave it to him.

When he repeats the story of that day, I can see the skin on his forehead relax. He looks at the outside wall (as if through a window he wishes were there).

I know I am reaching him – he has brought another cup into the room. Soon I believe he will ask me if I would like some coffee.

## “Before you write from the heart,

we will need you to take a stress test.” “What?” “We will inject a dye that will provide us visual markers that show when you begin writing from the heart and when you stop.” “I don’t believe that that is possible.” “Our tests have always been an accurate measure. We will discuss our findings with you at a conference two weeks after your test. This provides our doctors, staff-writers, and editors time to analyze your results.” “What if you find that I do not always write from the heart?” “That would be consistent with our findings, and will have no effect on the content of any subsequent rejection slips we send you. Thank you for your time, and remember to fast before the test.”

## Candle in the Universe

We sat at our desks.  
Tony kept clicking his inkwell.  
Miss Torpo would turn and look his way,  
and he'd stop instantaneously – then start again.  
But she was distracted. Mr. Ostenbruner was setting up.

He had placed a white candle in the middle of her completely cleared desk top. He was now placing balls at different lengths around the candle – a baseball, a ping-pong ball, a tennis ball – and some other rubbery-looking balls (the kind little kids play with).

And he would step back – and back – and then to the desk and moving the balls (ah, even a soccer ball). And some of us were watching, and some of us were talking, and Miss Torpo would rap a piece of chalk quickly on the blackboard to signal – *shut up!*

Mr. Ostenbruner was the man we would see in the halls on a ladder changing a lightbulb or painting over a door frame. Or outside fixing a loose door-closer. Or in the Boys room putting a sign over a sink or toilet “Broken. Do not use.” He could appear almost anywhere – just walk in during class, fix something, then walk out.

Now here he was in our class – still in his white overalls – about to teach us something. And again Miss Torpo rapped the chalk fast, and sharp, and loud – and we all stopped

and looked forward. “Mr. Ostenbruner will now bring us the Universe,” she announced. “But first I need volunteers to bring down the window shades.”

Four boys jumped up and each began pulling hard and fast on the cords connected to the shades. And there was terrible squeaking and rolling noises and dust began to float in the air – beautiful dust particles captured by the sun still streaking past the shades where they didn’t quite fit.

And Mr. Ostenbruner lit the candle, and we all watched as the flame flickered and a thin stream of dark smoke rose up toward the very high ceiling. He pointed at the candle. “The sun,” he said. And he was sure of it. He picked up the baseball. “Earth,” he said. And he began to walk around Miss Torpo’s desk. Round and round.

Louie, the kid in the back row, was waving his hand back and forth and making moaning sounds. “What is it, Louie?” said Miss Torpo. “I have to go to the bathroom.” He said, “But I don’t want to miss the baseball going around the candle.” “No.” Mr. Ostenbruner said pointing. “Sun. And here, Earth.” “Okay!” Louie yelled as he ran out of the room. “I just have to pee, so I’ll be back before the sun burns out.” And we giggled, and watched the black smoke rise. And Mr. Ostenbruner sat down.

## On Dark Wings

I held her hand,  
not waiting for death,  
but in anticipation of Colorado  
or Canada, a vacation  
filled with expectation.

I held her hand  
with the courage I would give our children,  
with the courage to face doctors  
who, like reporters,  
just tell the story  
(there's always a story).

I held her hand  
as if I expected pain to be afraid,  
to run away  
when it saw us.

I held her hand  
as it swelled with poison  
that dripped into her arm through a needle  
connected to theories of doctors  
who once prescribed leeches.

I held her dead hand,  
the gold meaningless band  
shining in sunlight  
that couldn't warm her skin,  
couldn't give answers,  
couldn't even ask the questions.

“*Tidal Wave* is a serious achievement, carrying off what Charles Simic called ‘the said quality’ of growing up and growing older, as if these two worlds existed simultaneously on parallel planes. Much of childhood abides in Dennis Lee’s recollection of the shape and meaning of a button, in offices where doctors ride small horses into the waiting rooms of life, and analysts sit in spare, unfurnished rooms (whose offer of a cup of coffee would mean so much), in the fortune cookie that offers not wisdom, but a dance. I admire the intelligence and honesty of these poems and the sense of a life constantly at the threshold of a change of heart. Their tides are driven by moon powers: the lift of spirit; the swell of the imagination; the crashing body; and at last, the undertow of memory.”

— DAVID KEPLINGER, JUDGE  
HENRY MORGENTHAU III POETRY PRIZE



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