

Midge Goldberg

Arroyo

It's a dry year this year. In the arroyo
the sheep jostle their way down steep banks, low
— lower down than last year, thinks Ramirez —
to find water. He notices the mark
of last year's flood high up the sides. They trot
faster as they get closer — he hears the bell

of the sure-footed ram in front, the bell-
wether of the flock who owns the arroyo —
at least among the sheep, who clump and trot
behind. Arriving, the ram lets out a bellow —
a bleat being the sound of panic, a mark
of fear, and he fears nothing. At least Ramirez

thinks the ram fears nothing. Not like Ramirez,
who each day fears the clanging of the bell,
the gravelly rumble, snort, and roar that mark
a flood's rapid approach in the arroyo.
But no rain's coming and the water's low.
He should get a dog, he thinks, who'd trot

easily down the slope and make them trot
to safety with him. Evenings, as Ramirez
strolls through town relaxing, his dog would follow.
He likes the city — people, the church's bell
pealing, grand buildings. Not like the arroyo —
remote and dull, the opposite of landmark,

the place is an aside, a snide remark
in this translation of a life, a trot
instead of the real story: *The arroyo
is burying the man who is Ramirez.*
He likes this gloomy metaphor, the bell
tolling for him, he thinks, deep and low.

He stops outside the 7-11, low
on cigarettes. The dog would circle, mark
his territory, waiting for the bell
above the door that says it's time to trot
alongside this remarkable Ramirez,
lead the way back to the dry arroyo

that could flood at any moment, and trot
below high-water marks to guard Ramirez
from sheep, from bells, from flood and the arroyo.

Bernadette, On Playing Dolly on Broadway

So, sometimes I can't hit the highest notes.
That campy bit, pretending that I'm tired?
Yeah, sometimes I just need to catch my breath.
You'd never recognize this "Broadway star"
at ten a.m., hobbling around the room,
needing an hour to stand up, hit the john —
72 ain't 50, that's for sure.
Just think about your mother — who am I kidding,
your grandma doing shows six nights a week,
and twice on weekends. So yes, a dramatic pause...
can mean I'm pooped.

At noon, I take my limo
(though it's fun to think about the subway —
I'd wear a polyester jogging suit
and scarf and look like any other nonna)
and head down to the theater to get ready.
It takes a while to make me look this good.
But then it's time.

I ride on stage — that bit
with a horse — and then the audience notices me.
I have to stand there casually while they clap,
a minute, more — my hand raised in a wave.
Sometimes just for fun I'll wink at them,
so they know that I know they know it's me,
we're in on this — this thing, this show — together.
I guess that's one thing age can let me do,
own everything: the stage, the seats, the story,
the fourth wall too.

And what about the ghosts?
Carol, Ethel, Barbra, they're all here,
we all hear them, the audience and I.
Everyone out there brings their ghosts as well,
whoever played the record for them first.
The house I play to has a fifth wall, time,
and all the seats are taken every night —
I've found that ghosts can be the toughest critics.

So I'll just break the wall because I can
and play for laughs to get them on my side,
ignoring my creaks and quavers. The cast is young;

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I need these folks for company — we prop
each other up, whisper forgotten lines.
While everyone's together in this room,
we clap and laugh and cry and mug and sing —
we know we'll be alone when the curtain falls.

Florida, But Inland

I practiced pinball in the two-room clubhouse
at Hidden Lake the summer I was twelve.
We'd just moved to this complex east of town —
no lake, just asphalt and a laundry room.

I played alone until I met her — Shelley,
long hair, white-blond, which she wore loose, on purpose
(I didn't learn "tow-headed" until later).

She had a bike. Not a "bicycle," like mine —
a Schwinn, picked by my New York City parents,
who took me to a store where I was measured
for proper fit from saddle down to pedal —
but a "bike," from KMart, with a banana seat.

Shelley was bossy, also younger, but
she knew where we could ride to get a Slurpee,
the Seven-Eleven down Palm Avenue.
She told me about the Girls' Club as we passed,
which I thought was some kind of orphanage,
but with a pool, which made the girls seem lucky.
I wondered if she'd steal a candy bar
while we were there, or make me take a BlowPop;
instead she bought some gum — grape Bubblicious,
something I was not allowed to have,
or so I thought. I bought some anyway.

On our way home, when I was turning into
the complex, left hand straight out, signaling,
I bumped a car's back fender with my tire.
I don't remember seeing her again
that summer—my own decision, I suppose,
to stay inside our air conditioned unit.
I'd never thought a girl might steal before.

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Playing Along in Temple

*A basket of multi-colored egg shakers
sits next to the prayer books at the
entrance with the sign, "Please take
one and play along as we sing."*

The man who taps his egg to keep the beat,
not on the up beat, nothing syncopated,
just one after another, tap, tap, tap.

What is faith? That is faith.

The man who trips while walking to the bimah,
and doesn't see it as a metaphor.

What is faith? That is faith.

The man who sits and smiles as he sings,
his finger following along the text
though clearly he already knows the words.

What is faith? That is faith

or I'm imagining it all —
the faith, the fall, music, the man, the egg.