

"HOW GOODLY ARE THY TENTS"

(Numbers xxiv. 5)

Sept. 1976

Slowly I ascend the steps of the synagogue.  
I remember when throngs of worshippers would have been  
at my side  
walking with me  
ages ago.  
The temple has moved to another place.  
As I climb I feel I am saying goodbye to too much.

I open the door  
carefully  
as if I would otherwise awaken things better left asleep.  
The corridor looks the same, but it no longer leads  
anywhere...  
I approach the door of the main synagogue;  
for a moment I'm not sure I wish to see...

It hasn't changed.  
The majestic pulpit still towers over rows and rows of seats,  
Yet they are empty.  
I don't think I've ever seen them ~~that~~ way before.  
No bewildered children, no annoyed parents.  
Gone are the old men who have come to cry  
to the one  
they know  
listens.  
The giant stained glass windows still offer their mute message:  
there are no takers.  
The sun continues to shine through them:  
illuminating nothing.

I stoop to pick up a piece of paper left on the floor--  
a page torn from a prayerbook.  
Its words lament the exile of the children of Israel  
from their land. Two thousand years  
have passed since it was written:  
"How doth the city sit solitary,  
that was full of people!  
How is she become as a widow!  
She that was great among nations, and princess among the provinces,

How is she become as a tributary!"  
Gently, knowingly, I replace the paper.

I approach the Aron Kodesh--the holy ark  
where the Torah scrolls were once kept.  
When the curtain is opened all rise out of respect.  
Slowly I open the curtain:  
no one stands, no one sings.  
There is no reverence for emptiness.  
The holiest place in the synagogue:  
"How is she become as a widow."  
Hurt and confused, I shut the curtain.

I look out upon the seats,  
standing where I stood  
when I first chanted the prayers  
before the congregation.  
Seven years of study in preparation  
for that moment  
and all it meant.  
On that very spot my father told me of his dreams and hopes  
for me.  
Now as I chant those same prayers,  
they echo and fly back to me,  
hollow  
and taunting.  
Rushing towards the exit, I turn back for  
one last  
look.  
I hadn't noticed it before. The final tribute to the remoteness  
of the past.  
On the pulpit hangs the eternal light, the light that is to burn  
forever.  
It is out.  
And I leave.

Outside.  
I take a deep breath of the present.  
And once again,  
the synagogue  
is empty.  
Except for the piece of myself that I left behind.