

## ELIJAH VERSUS SANTA

Weight advantage: Santa. Sugar and milk at every stop, the stout man shimmies down one more chimney, sack of desire chuting behind, while Elijah, skinny and empty-handed, slips in invisible as a once favored, since disgraced uncle, through the propped open side door. Inside, I've been awaiting a miracle since 1962, my 9-year-old self slouching on this slip-covered sofa, Manischewitz stashed beneath the cushion. Where are the fire-tinged horses, the chariots to transport me? Where is the whirlwind and brimstone? Instead, our dull-bladed sleigh rusts in the storage bin beneath the building's soot-covered flight of cellar stairs. Come back to me father, during December's perfect snowfall and pull me once more up Schenck and down Pitkin, where the line wraps around Church Hall. Show me, again, the snapshot of the skullcaped boy on Santa's lap. Let me laugh this time and levitate like a magician's assistant, awed by my own weightlessness. Give me the imagination to climb the fire escape and look up toward the Godless Heavens and to marvel at the ordinary sky.

## MORE MONEY THAN GOD

my father said, again and again, shaking his head  
in disbelief at any ostentation; the neighbor's gold-  
plated knocker (we still banged fists) or my own lust  
to own the autographed edition or the waxed bronze bust.  
It is not only the idea—which should hold all the pleasure—  
but the poet's pencil marks on paper which we treasure  
above the memorized poem. And so I fan my flushed face,  
signaling the fast-talking auctioneer, who has traced  
the provenance, and picks up the pace, multiplying offers.  
And who now does my father's bidding? Heaven's coffers,  
perhaps, are for the destitute; but why did he have to die  
to escape the shitty, crime-ridden, never-to-be-gentrified  
neighborhood of both our births? The cost of living,  
he would argue, is not the worth of being alive.  
But still he checked each lottery ticket which littered  
the empty lot next door, praised their silver latex glitter,  
praying to the beautiful unscratched, like little gods.  
Money talks, he taught me. But nobody beats the odds.

## WORTH

The “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is worth any number of old ladies.

—William Faulkner

I’m tabulating the cost of the gas versus her coming blindness.  
My mother won’t stop growing weaker, her dearest three  
friends dead this past winter. And what, she quizzes,  
on our way to the hospital, is a body worth?

She wants me to give her the high school chemical cost; three-fifty?  
Five dollars? But my organs, she’ll counter, add maybe 22 mil  
on the black market. Still, I’ll say, Munch’s *Scream*  
sold for that times twelve just this May.

Justice may be blind or, as Maimonides argued, one newborn on  
the seesaw can balance all unkindness, but is God’s Word  
life or art, I want to ask, as we circle the lot praying  
for parking at his namesake medical center.

It was Maud Falkner (no “u” by the way) they say, who passed  
down her love of Dickens and Keats, Grimm and Cather  
to her too sensitive, self-centered, alcoholic eldest son.  
Her husband offered up self-loathing and guns.

My own father also hated to read. But he worked a second shift  
from the day of my birth. A man takes care of family first,  
he’d say, before adding, but no one will remember  
me, so what’s my advice worth?