

Charles Rammelkamp

B'rsheet

My daughter returned with her husband
from two months in Spain,
her tummy bulging like a balloon.

“She’s big as a house,” I marvel,
but my wife observes:
“No bigger than most pregnancies
at thirty-two weeks.”

But it looks to me
like Creation itself.
Let there be a firmament
in the midst of the waters.

On my way home from the gym
after I’ve swum my morning mile,
I see a billboard looming up ahead.
Forever has no end, it declares,
but it does have a beginning.

It’s an advertisement for a jewelry store.
The profound statement’s stripped away
to reveal the soft sentimentality inside.

Ch-ch-ch-changes

Turn and face the strange.

An e-mail arrives
from my twin brother in Los Angeles,
fighting an uphill battle with cancer,
stage four. Started in his lungs;
now it's in his spine.
He's in real pain
after five bouts of chemo
over the last year and a half
and now a drug treatment called Opdivo.
No telling how much time he has left,
the last of my nuclear family,
father, mother, older brother
already dead.

An overlapping text *pings* my phone.
It's my daughter, on her way home
from the hospital
where she'd gone at midnight –
false labor, it turned out,
Braxton-Hicks contractions,
Seismic waves ripping through the Earth –
but still less than two centimeters dilated.
Still, she's in terrific discomfort, too,
soon to deliver my first grandchild,
a girl we already call Paloma.

News Today, History Tomorrow

My first thought is the newspaper headlines.
Okay, more like the fourth, fifth or tenth thought.
But I've always snapped my cats and kids
with the banners that mark our times –
elections, deaths, war, crimes.
OJ's verdict, McVeigh's execution, Clinton's impeachment.
It's Flint, Michigan, and Donald Trump, of course,
and thirty years since the Challenger.

Arthur Miller'd been married to Marilyn Monroe
almost a year, when he was found guilty,
contempt of Congress, refusing to spill names
to the House UnAmerican Activities Committee,
unlike Elia Kazan, who did name names.

When Miller was subpoenaed,
Francis Walter, committee chairman,
told Miller's lawyer, Joseph Ruah,
he was inclined to cancel the hearing
if Monroe would have her picture taken with him
for a campaign poster for the fall election.
Miller refused and the investigation went on.

Walter won re-election, and the following spring,
though his conviction would be overturned on appeal,
Miller was cited for contempt.

In the end, I just take cellphone pictures
of the newborn, with her mother and father:
my first grandchild, a girl named Paloma.
Enough news, enough history.

Gemini

You expect it and expect it and expect it,
but when death comes,
you didn't expect it at all.

Bob had been fighting cancer for years,
a losing battle against a stronger opponent,
mano-a-mano through five rounds of chemo,
radiation, opdivo, pain management,
addiction to opiates,

and all along the Cain and Abel struggle,
the Jacob and Esau conflict,
after which, one of us would still be standing,
for a little while, at least.

Seven weeks shy of sixty-four,
the Beatles' milestone for old age,
me with a grandchild on my knee,
he with a widow and pet iguana.

And a lifetime of memories,
not all good,
that I shall scrimp and save.

The Pearl

When Doctor Katz told the audience
at the Holocaust Memorial Observance
that history does not, in fact, repeat itself,
and keeping alive the resentment and pain
was simply counterproductive –
a thesis he'd developed as a Sociology professor –

Eva, whose husband's family had all perished
in Dachau and Treblinka,
dismissed the keynote speaker as
“not a real Holocaust survivor”
because he'd spent the war in England
where his parents had sent him
as part of the kindertransport,
a seven-year-old boy
separated from his family forever:
they'd all be killed in Bavaria.

Her hair swaddled in a turban –
Orthodox to the core,
as if keeping alive some shtetl memory –
Eva also sighed that Katz was “boring,”
gushed about Shmuel Birnbaum,
who'd spent four years in Auschwitz,
because he'd cried real tears
when he recited the Kaddish prayer.

Eva kept a kernel of bitterness inside her
like the proverbial grain of sand
the oyster coats with nacre to form a pearl.

Charles Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books in Baltimore, where he lives, and edits *The Potomac*, an online literary journal – <http://thepotomacjournal.com> . His photographs, poetry and fiction have appeared in many literary journals. His latest book is a collection of poems called *Mata Hari: Eye of the Day* (Apprentice House, Loyola University), and another poetry collection, *American Zeitgeist*, is forthcoming from Apprentice House later this year.