

HENRY HUGHES

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## Vicki's Grandfather

The Sonderkommandos  
gulped and guzzled their hearts,  
leading prisoners off the trains  
and into the showers, saying everything's okay.  
Wheelbarrows, smoke. It was do this or die  
sooner.

On Friday afternoon I ride the C train  
to Brooklyn, enjoying the steel sway, the pneumatic doors  
opening at every stop, until I get off and walk  
the leafy streets  
up to Vicki's brownstone.

Sitting around, reading the papers,  
I just ask, *Vicki, does it bother you that I'm not Jewish?*  
*Not anymore, she says. Let's eat.*

Into the flames  
her grandfather slid all his daughters, save one  
who walked on ashes back to Long Island,  
holy sand spit of peaches and roast duck. *It's my mother, she says.*  
*It's hard for her. But she likes you.*

We eat clams  
at a bar between Oceanbeach and Rockaway,  
watching old, graffitied subway cars barged  
and dumped for a reef. Startled fish circle their new barracks.

Vicki's grandfather is buried in Poland.  
No one visits his grave.

# Why Is He Frightened?

—*Winter 2005*

Why is he frightened? Your son,  
three-years-old and shrieking from my hug.  
Maybe it's the beard, my vagrant voice, diesel  
under the collar—bus station bright  
as a shepherd's cave. *He's tired*, you say,  
wrapping him in blue fleece.

The paper reports a heavy cache  
of rockets and rifles found in a Baghdad baker's oven.  
Rubbing your boy's little back,  
and glancing at two shaky girls  
boarding with bagels for Chicago,  
I wonder if we can bury fear with a little sleep.  
Or bite it with good tires when the highway freezes  
and the speed of America is irreducible?  
Maybe just roll it over. An off white  
brightening our kitchen coffee  
when there's only rain  
and more news.

Wake to gunfire, to glass and hard crusts  
swept into a corner. There's a flour-aproned man  
sitting silently by the door. His crying daughter  
cradles him chai in a pretty cup.  
In an hour he'll be arrested for trafficking weapons.  
Next month she'll explode  
in a decent restaurant  
where a lieutenant, your husband and my old friend,  
has just ordered the lamb.

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**HENRY HUGHES** is author of *Moist Meridian*. His poems have been published in numerous journals, including *Poetry Northwest*, *Passages North*, *Louisville Review*, *Seattle Review*, and *Tar River Poetry*. He teaches at Western Oregon University.