

Tefillin

You think you know your life till you forget
your own father prays every morning, unzips
a velvet pouch to wrap worn leather strips
about his left arm and hand, seven times around,
like dressing a wound. You forget he prays
in greased blue coveralls before the workday rush
of mufflers and brake pads, and that he prays
on Sundays in sweatpants and socks. He sets
a black box a centimeter above his hairline,
slaps a yarmulke upon his skull, prays, then stops.
You think you know your life but forget
your father has done this since you were six,
since a thin, kindly rabbi spent a week
in your home. How could you forget? It's true
your life no longer confides in you. For too long
you've been wary, screening its calls
like a bookie you have lost all resources
to repay. You forget your father prays the way
he does paperwork—all alone and without
enough light. He never makes a show of it.
Never once offered to teach you how.
You think you know your life until the power
sparks out one snowy December morning,
so you climb your parents' stairs
with your two children and laundry in tow,
and there's a stranger by the curtains—
his eyes squeezed shut, toes arrowed
toward Jerusalem—bound in black lines.