

"SO MANY THERE WITH ME"

a review by Catherine
Carter

Jessica Jacobs. *unalone: Poems in Conversation with the Book of Genesis*. Four Way Books, 2024.

CATHERINE CARTER's poetry collections with LSU Press include *Larvae of the Nearest Stars* (2019), *The Swamp Monster at Home* (2012), and *The Memory of Gills* (2006), with a fourth, *By Stone and Needle*, forthcoming in fall 2025. She is co-translator and co-editor, with Brian Gastle, of the first complete modern English verse translation of John Gower's long medieval poem, *Confessio Amantis* (Medieval Institute Publications, 2024). Her work has also appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *Orion*, *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *RHINO*, *Ecotone*, and *NCLR*, and she has been the winner of *NCLR*'s James Applewhite Poetry Prize and of the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Award. She lives with her spouse in Cullowhee, NC, where she is a Professor of English Education at Western Carolina University.

Jessica Jacobs's third full-length collection of poems, *unalone*, is subtitled *Poems in Conversation with the Book of Genesis*, a declaration preparing the reader – insofar as that is possible – for what is to come. This collection grows from everything Jacobs learned about self-examination from her award-winning *Take Me with You, Wherever You're Going*, and everything she learned about research and persona poetry in her first full-length collection, *Pelvis with Distance*. The poems of this substantial collection are indeed conversations, in a sense drawn from the rich Hebrew tradition of midrash, an ancient and multivalent collection of later commentaries on the stories of the Torah. In this tradition, readers and scholars consider not only the Hebrew words of the original sacred texts, but what the lines seem to leave unsaid – as well as what has already been said by prior commentators on the same text. Some of the commentaries are taught as part of the text itself, rather than as separate works of exegesis, along with the commentaries on those commentaries.

Midrash, then, is perhaps a bit like dinner at a large family reunion, where that family's accumulated histories and stories are retold and re-remembered, argued over, interpreted and counter-interpreted, mined for their meanings to those alive in the

present moment – meanings which, in the next generation, may well be revisited from still newer perspectives. The family members' voices interlace, contradict, talk over and under one another, so that what we call *meaning* may better be rendered as *meanings*. And the midrash tradition is alive to this plurality. As Jacobs's first section, *Bereshit*, and second poem reveal, the first three words of the Torah are not "In the beginning," but "In the beginnings." As the divergent creation narratives of the first two chapters of Genesis suggest (did God make male and female in its own image, or did God make Eve from Adam's rib? and just when were the animals created and named?), in this tradition sacred text is constantly being made and remade, begun and re-begun, in a universe rife with beginnings.

This is the context in which *unalone* can enter into bilingual conversation (Jacobs studies Hebrew) with the stories of the Torah. Creation, Eve, Methuselah, Noah and his nameless wife, Lot and his nameless wife, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob and Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Zilpah and Bilhah, and Serah are all invoked, along with other characters of those traditions. Jacobs's new collection encompasses both careful scholarship and ultimate surrender to mystery, receiving both approaches as equally relevant and holy.

The book is divided into twelve sections, based on the first few words, or *parashot*, of each of the first stories of the Book of Genesis, like "Go forth" or "And he appeared." Some of the poems are persona poems, written in the voices of Torah figures like Sarah or the undying Serah. But the sections also illuminate the tendrils and roots which connect all these stories and voices to the poet's own family and experiences, and to the world we all inhabit together.

That world is far from the "simpler" world mourned by those who imagine that change, complication, moral ambiguity, and identity politics are somehow modern inventions. It's a world of loss and divorce and agonizing early dementia, of global pandemics, species loss, and climate refugees, of violence and rage, of choices between accepting guilt and accepting our own powerlessness and of finding more company than we might expect, as we climb the many branches of the sacred. It's a world, and a book, rich in puns and rich in mouths, all of which have words to give.

So much goes on in this broad, deep collection that it is difficult to select representative poems or even themes. The book is a kind of Torah ecosystem, with each story and theme braiding or unspooling into, and echoing off of, all the others. In some ways, the most meaningful response I can muster would be to hand you the book and advise you to read it. Like the tradition it plumbs, it is nearly bottomless and will sustain and reward nearly infinite re-readings.

"Read the book," however, doesn't help those for whom the book's not at hand, or who need details before deciding whether to read it. Begin, then, with two of the collection's central concerns. One is the excavation of the silenced voices of women, in pursuit of a truer, deeper vision of the world as it is. The other is the effort to come to terms with what "God" can possibly mean in that complicated, agonizing world which, if not fallen, is at least always falling, in context of family, injustice, and loss. The book does this by drawing on the deep wells of holy text, midrash, imagination, unexpected correspondences between seemingly disparate experiences, and, as Jacobs writes in "Ars Poetica," "the right words ready as pail, cord, and winch / to draw out even the deepest waters."

As one example of how this works, "How Many More" addresses a fascinating variant story of the founding of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacobs's note quotes the medieval French rabbi and Torah commentator Rashi's own note on a still earlier source. This story suggests that for each of Jacob's twelve sons, founders of the twelve tribes of Israel, a twin sister was also born, and that each son then married one of those half- or stepsisters by a different mother. In this tradition, then, these invisible, silent twin daughters would be the unnamed mothers of those twelve tribes, which are generally identified only by the names of their fathers. These are some of the "so many women / left uncounted, unnamed. And how many more // made extinct by men's hungers."

Whether or not such female twins ever existed at the literal level, literal women certainly did. As the poet remarked in a recent interview, someone had to feed the patriarchs and bear their children and do their laundry, which the poem envisions as snapping "like flags / in the breeze, bearing the standard // of their whispered nation." However, the poem does not merely lament the silenced voices of the tradition ("mystical creatures or just bad // translations"). It also compares them to aurochs, an extinct precursor to modern cattle: "real / animals now mythic, hunted into extinction." This metaphor links the stifled voices of these women with our own Anthropocene extinction crisis, in which real species are "disappeared" daily, even hourly. This single couplet brings a contemporary ecofeminist slant to the story.

The poem goes on to fuse the twin sisters with the far-from-mythical uncredited female scientists, inventors, and authors who haunt human history. It wishes, on behalf of all these women, that the unnamed twins had taken

their father's story of wrestling the angel

until dawn as their own, had taken their men
in a grappler's embrace

steady as a winepress, extracting the names
not given, the birthrights denied.

They were the leaders of the true lost tribes.

JESSICA JACOBS is the author of *Take Me with You, Wherever You're Going* (Four Way Books, 2019), one of Library Journal's Best Poetry Books of the Year, winner of the Devil's Kitchen and Goldie Awards, and a finalist for the Brockman-Campbell, American Fiction, and Julie Suk Book Awards, and *Pelvis with Distance* (White Pine Press, 2015), a biography-in-poems of Georgia O'Keeffe, which received the New Mexico Book Award in Poetry and was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award. She also co-authored *Write It! 100 Poetry Prompts to Inspire* (Spruce Books, 2020) and is the founder and executive director of *Yetzirah: A Hearth for Jewish Poetry*.

Here, scholarship and imagination transmute the patriarch Jacob's violent encounter with the divine into new registers. The sons of Jacob who founded the twelve tribes become the angels with whom Jacob wrestled, angels who can be themselves forced, perhaps through the midrash tradition, into providing a justice which the story otherwise refuses. The invisible female twins, the grapplers, squeeze their due from these men "steady as a winepress" crushes grapes. And the result is that those names and birthrights become metaphorical wine.

This figurative use of wine sets up associative resonances across the rest of the Torah. It invokes (to name only a few of the Torah's literal and symbolic mentions of wine) Noah's role as the first vintner, Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine to Abraham as emblems of his priesthood, Lot's daughters' very problematic use of wine to conceive by their father, Isaac's blessing of Jacob with plenty by explicitly hoping that God may give him ample grain and wine, and, later, the founding patriarch Jacob's blessing of his own son, Judah, which describes him as having washed his garments in wine. In Exodus, wine is listed among appropriate offerings to God, a visible sign of joy and celebration. And all these associations are what the poet claims for these other, forgotten names, the lost stories, pressed from the patriarchs by those they have silenced: holiness and taboo, joy and betrayal, sacrilege and sacrament.

These invisible, perhaps mythic women are re-envisioned as the "true lost tribes": exiled, deported, forgotten, and yet still fermenting in the stories we tell, like yeast in wine.

Not only does the poet know her Torah, but the collection offers an overall vision of the divine as profoundly immanent in every experience, be it love, rage, ecstasy, mourning, fear. God, whatever we may mean by the word, is not off in the sky, but ambient in the here and now, the vine and the wine, the story and the commentary, the quotidian connections between one human and another, and between each human and the nonhuman world. And that vision of connection, of unalone-ness, is thoughtful, compassionate, and beautiful.

The introduction of the G-word may be the time to note that there are eight short poems in the collection, spread across the *parashot*, titled "And God speaks." These identically titled poems don't presume to put words into God's mouth, a wise craft choice, but offer different perspectives on possible connections to the divine. I'll quote the final "And God speaks" in its entirety:

And God speaks

in a sound beyond
sounding: A ready well

in the driest desert.
Your mother's palm,

just before sleep,
cupping your small cheek. The still

small voice you've known
all your life. You'd always

assumed it was yours
alone, just like

you'd always assumed
you were alone.

Here, too, connection and allusion are immanent and everywhere. The "ready well" invokes not only the well of water which God reveals to Hagar, dying of thirst in the desert, but also the well of family feeling and of tears that Judah calls forth from Joseph's heart back in "Ars Poetica" and the deepest well from which "the right words" can draw at the end of that poem. In the next line, that well, and God's voice, become the well of memory of the mother whom the poet is losing to dementia. That memory fuses into "the . . . voice you've known / all your life," a reference to the story of Elijah, who after the fire and the earthquake hears the voice of God as "the still small voice." The memory of the mother is also "the still small voice" of God which the speaker had believed was hers "alone." This voice allows the speaker to feel that she is not in fact alone, or not only alone.

This brings us to the book's final poem, "Aliyah," a word that means variously "ascent"; the ingathering of exiles to the land of Israel; and, in mitzvah ceremony, the calling up of readers to the pulpit to give blessing on excerpts read from the Torah. This final use is indicated by the poem's epigraph from the prayer recited in this context:



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"Blessed are you, God our God, Sovereign of the World, who has given us the Torah of truth, planting within us life everlasting." However, other meanings are implicit in the poem as well as the speaker envisions the divine as a tree of heaven:

Let me speak to you as the tree I climbed as a child,
the one in the far corner of my grandmother's yard,
whose bark was a tapestry of rough diamonds.
Your first branch was low enough to leap to,
textured enough to hold me. And each branch after
placed as though to keep me climbing.
I paused only to press my ear to your trunk
and hear it: the heartbeat of water
moving toward the leaves, the conversation
between roots and sky. Climbing until my hair
twined your needles' spines; until, anointed
by your green, you took root within me; so I speak
from the part of me who grows you, grows
with you, who will always live in your branches.
And in the boughs, so many there with me.
A vantage we could not have reached
on our own, a vision otherwise beyond us.
All of us, in that overstory, unalone.

This vision of God as a tree to be climbed pulls together many of the book's themes. The tree

of heaven, literally the tree in the grandmother's yard, draws in family, female lineage, and memory, and connects the past to the future. The rough diamonds are patterns of bark, felt in the feet, which also carry connotations of diamonds in the rough – priceless worth hidden in misleading exteriors, inner meanings which are yet to be explicated, old stories which hold the search for truth. The tree's "heartbeat of water" connects speaker and reader to the tree as a living, very possibly sentient, being, echoing the inclusive and perhaps animist commentary on animal sacrifices and species loss in earlier poems like "Covenant between the pieces" and "And the ground opens its mouth to speak." That heartbeat also foretells the "conversation between roots and sky" in the next line: its hinge word *conversation* calls back the book's subtitle and reminds readers of the midrash tradition, gives that tree agency and voice, and sets the nonhuman into right relation as a branch of the divine. The tree's sap provides an "anointing" with the literal and also holy material of this world: sap become chrism. And the final lines, hearkening back to the ending of "In the Shadow of Babel," set speaker and reader into right relation with all the others, the "so many there with me" entering upon "a vantage we could not have reached / on our own, a vision otherwise beyond us" in the "overstory," which is both literally the tree's canopy and figuratively the larger story in which we all participate.

From "Aliyah," readers may see that where we find the divine is in the quest for it: to seek, as in the midrash tradition, really is to find. But the poem can best show us this in context of the full volume. From all of *unalone*, all its voices and explications, its crossing, branching intersections, we see that it can only be done together. There is never just one tree, or just one ultimately authoritative voice or perspective drowning out all the rest. As Jacobs notes in "Why There Is No Hebrew Word for Obey," the central word of the tradition is *shema*: listen.

Which brings me back to "read the book." It is dazzling, gorgeous, thoughtful, spiritual, relevant, and even fun. But an even better idea might be to read it with a friend, or a few friends, and as you read, to talk about what you find there. Together. ■