



Image from Travelers Point (Hidden Pool at Bridalveil Falls)

Andrew Schwartz

Into the Valley

On the train to Yosemite, the conductor wears
a yarmulke and tallit. Slashes tickets
with razor blades. Speaks pig Latin

as though all passengers are secular
Jews like me, riding to a land
where Hebrew's banished, the temples burned.

Wildfires rip through the Sierras,
dry them to deserts. Borders vanish
and no one knows anymore what country

we're from, what religion we're supposed
to practice. My grandmother, still an Old World
beauty in simple housecoat, holds a sponge cake

as a gift. Says she'll be getting off at Leberdov,
village on the shifting border blurring Russia
and Poland, where she and the ancestors lived

but no longer exists
on any map. At Merced we board
the double-decker bus that will take us, all of us

refugees now, into the valley. It's just me again,
among strangers, huddled and squinting
at tinted windows, expecting the worst.

We make our way through granite walls
that edge the valley. Burdock's crowded
the California natives. The conductor distributes

penknives and children's scissors, instructs us
to cut the coarse leaves for tea. At Bridalveil,
we stop, cry out at the free-falling water,

hike up a slippery staircase of stone.
Chewing the burdock, we study the Merced
as it drains. Across the valley, Grandma Ceil

free climbs El Capitan. Turns. Hangs
from a narrow limb and waves. I leap
into the waterfall. Hope I can reach her.

Andrew Schwartz's poetry, fiction, and nonfiction have appeared in
Catamaran Literary Reader, *Columbia*, *Confrontation*, *NER/BLQ*,
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