

ENGL 120, Reading and Writing the Modern Essay
Professor Pam Newton

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Mia Rose Kohn

City of Children
by Mia Rose Kohn '24

There are no peanuts. There are no chocolate bars or muffins. When high-fructose corn syrup was discovered in the yogurt, it too was banished by the Mothers. The Girls know only carrot sticks and freeze-dried strawberries, sold for \$8.99 by the snack-sized bag. They spread sunflower-seed butter on Dave's Super Multigrain bread, and from the Mothers' counters pluck satsuma oranges journeyed from far away down Interstate 5, from the cracked lands of citrus fruit and Fresno. The Girls are safe.

It is morning and the Girls are in plaid. If they are lucky, nannies with accents have shoved sandwiches and satsumas into slouch-inducing backpacks. The Girls slam car doors and wave as they pass by bronze letters sunk into the stucco: The Hamlin School for Girls. The school inhabits a stout white mansion. It belongs to a collection of Italian-revival giants that tower above San Francisco upon the hills of Pacific Heights: the Flood Mansions. Son of silver miner James C. Flood, James L. Flood commissioned this particular mansion in 1901 for his second wife, Maud Lee Flood. She was the sister of his first wife. When the first wife died, James revoked his family surname from their daughter, formerly Constance Flood, shipped her off to a convent, and erected the Maud Lee Flood mansion. In 1928, Sarah Dix Hamlin bought the mansion and opened a school for girls.

The mansion smells like old wood and dust on new carpets. Of the golden sun that pours into the city from dawn till dusk, little enters the mansion. The Girls are safe; there are no cancer-inducing UV rays and no peanuts or high fructose corn syrup.

But there is a math teacher who locks the door and asks a 5th grade girl to dance for him. Older girls have cried to the headmistress, for their sisters must take his class. He is still drawing fractions on the chalkboard. There is no chocolate, but there is a girl in 2nd grade, adopted as a baby from Guatemala, who is asked to do a presentation about “where she is from.” In the spring, there is an annual trip to the Pinnacle mountains. A suicidal 6th grader is forced to go. She is left alone, against the express advice of her counselor. She contemplates jumping off the mountains. She does not.

Every day at 3:15pm the Mothers return. We cannot greet them until they produce a paper with our assigned 3-digit number. In the mahogany foyer, we sit in silence until this number is projected onto a screen. We all wear plaid and hunch our shoulders when we start growing breasts and take a detour around the school when we graduate and must drive past it.

There are the Girls who walk home to other mansions. They are mostly blond and all fair and peachy. Their Mothers return in yoga pants and kiss husbands salty from their mid-day surf. Winter is for skiing in Tahoe and summer for growing grapes in Napa. When these Girls turn 18, their Mothers will throw debutante balls. I will not be invited, but I will go to their doors on Halloween to receive king-size Toblerone Bars and get a look at the indoor pool sunk right into the foyer.

The rest of us drive down the hills to the land of mortals and tired mothers and financial scholarships. Look! Look at the bay! Mom shouts to the back seat at intersections where Pacific Heights mansions part like curtains to reveal cerulean sky and sea. Other girls drive further still,

across the water. Their bridge is not orange or famous. It is gray and leads east to Oakland. The Girls pass under the Eruv wire of the Oakland Orthodox Jews, a black wire boundary tethered to telephone poles and God. It ensures that the Jews can do certain tasks on the Sabbath. God will understand. Everyone is safe.

On this golden September day, as the girls drive home, the Jews are chanting. It is Yom Kippur, when they pray for their names to be inscribed in the Book of Life, to live for another year. They cry:

*As a shepherd herds his flock,
So do You count and record,
Visiting the souls of all living,
Decreeing the length of their days,*

*Who shall live and who shall die
who by fire and who by water
who by famine and who by drought
who by earthquake and who by plague
who in poverty and who in prosperity*

בְּרֹאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה יִכְתְּבוּן, וּבְיוֹם צוֹם כָּפוּ
יִחְתְּמוּן. כָּמָה יַעֲבִירוּ, וְכָמָה יִבְרֹאוּ, מִי
יִחְיֶה, וּמִי יָמוּת, מִי בְּקֶצֶף, וּמִי לֹא בְּקֶצֶף
מִי בַּמַּיִם, וּמִי בָּאֵשׁ, מִי בְּחֶרֶב, וּמִי בְּחַיָּה
מִי בְּרָעָב, וּמִי בְּצָמָא, מִי בְּרָעָשׁ, וּמִי
בְּמַגָּפָה, מִי בְּחִנִּיקָה, וּמִי בְּסָקִילָה, מִי
יָנוּחַ
וּמִי יָנוּעַ, מִי יִשְׁקֹט, וּמִי יִטְרֹף, מִי יִשְׁלַח
וּמִי יִתְיַסֵּר, מִי יַעֲנִי, וּמִי יַעֲשִׂיר, מִי יִשְׁפֹּל
וּמִי יָרוּם, וְתִשׁוּבָה וְתַפְלָה וְצַדִּיקָה
אֶת רֵעַ הַגִּזְרָה.

The land chants with them. After 11 years of drought, El Niño—relief—finally arrived on New Year’s Eve 2022. Floods dissolved the thirsty mountains into an avalanche and floated cars down the street. 22 people died in 19 days. Later, in the summer, like always, fires raged. They have touched 25% of California in the last decade. There is always the blue Atlantic water to stop them. By 2100, sea level could rise by 6.9 feet. Irrigation aquifers salinated by tidal floods, the satsuma groves in Fresno will die. Underneath their roots, the ground could, will, shake beneath the soil. By 2032, a seven-magnitude earthquake is likely to rage, its power equivalent to 32 Hiroshima bombs. California will crack along the San Andreas fault line, and the city will

crumble into the sea. The Girls learn of all of these things in school and cry and ban plastic forks from the cafeteria so they will be safe.

The Jews chant:

*We who are mortal, our origin is dust,
and so is our end.
We wear out our lives to get our bread
like broken vessels, like withered
grass, like a flower that must fade,
a shadow moving on, a cloud passing
by, mere dust on the wind, a dream
that flies away.*

אָדעם יסודו מעפֿער און פֿון לעפֿער. בנפֿשו יביא
לחמו. משׁוּל כֶּתֶרס הנשפֿר, כֶּחֶצִיר יבשׁ
וכֶּצִיץ נובל, כֶּצֶל עובר, וכענן כלה, וכרוח
נושבת, וכאבק פֿורח, וכחלום יעוף. זאת
הוא מלך אל חי וקיים.

At night, the Girls dream of plaid and peanuts, and the streets outside remember old dreams now forgotten. The Hippies left Haight-Ashbury long ago. The last of their stores failed after homeless encampments carpeted sidewalks in 2020. The Hippies dreamed of freedom; the Homeless dream of warmth; and on Castro Street the Gay Men dreamed of love and died in fleets because of it.

At night, the Girls dream of floods and fires. Gray Google buses roll in with the evening fog towards the city, away from their empire built to rule the new world. But even the rulers' dreams are flying away. Everyone is boarding planes and leaving for Texas.

*Convinced we can have it all,
entrenched in the dream of mastering the world,
we resist Your call to wake up.
Today You summon us out of our arrogance, out of
rigidity, fantasy, shallowness, self-deception,
to realize our frailty and our finitude.*

וידעו כל יושבי תבל
כי לה תכרע כל בשר
תשבע כל לשון:
לפניך יהיה אלהינו
יכרעו ויפלו.

When the Jews are done chanting they blow into a ram's horn, the *Shofar*, and it cries. The Rabbis say that it cries like the Mother of Sisera, a warrior, when he did not return home from battle. He had hidden beneath a blanket. He was supposed to be safe, but a tent peg was driven through his temple. 100 Shofar blasts for 100 Mothers' sobs.

<i>In truth,</i>	אַמֶּת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא דִּין
<i>You are the judge, the all-knowing, the witness.</i>	וּמוֹכִיחַ וְיֹדֵעַ וְעֵד
<i>You remember all that we have forgotten.</i>	וְכוֹתֵב וְחוֹתֵם וְסוֹפֵר וּמוֹנֵה
<i>And when You open the Book of Memories,</i>	וְתִזְכֹּר כָּל
<i>it speaks for itself—</i>	הַנְּשָׁחוֹת וְתַפְתָּה אֶת סֵפֶר
<i>for every human hand leaves its mark, an</i>	הַזְכָּרוֹנוֹת
<i>imprint like no other.</i>	וַיֵּאָלְיוּ יְקָרָא וְחוֹתָם יָד כָּל
	אָדָם בּוֹ

It is tomorrow and the Jews have left the temple and the Girls are in plaid again. They do not know about the forgotten Hippies or the dead Gay men or the people slouched in piles on the streets below the hills. In the yard, we cry and giggle toward the bay through the fence where the fog horns respond in low blasts. The earthquake alarm tests its cry as it always does on Tuesday mornings. The rusty wheel of a homeless man's cart cries, echoing across a silent street, and the Google bus horns cry out to the water under the orange bridge. The City cries for all of its children.

The City's population dwindled by 7.5% between 2020 and 2023. And there are the fires and floods and droughts and quakes and poverty and everyone talks of disaster and leaving for Texas. But—the Jews know well—doom has always been there, on the horizon, at the tip of the bay, where container ships pass in the night. Always doom and always children hiding from it.

But You are eternal, וְאַתָּה הוּא מְלֵךְ אֵל חַי וְקַיִם, the Jews will chant again next year to the hills where, from mansion doors, the Girls pour out into golden afternoon light.

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