

Zeke Gerwein

11th Grade

Oakland School for the Arts

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There's a lot of noise on the bus between my apartment and the synagogue, so I never take it. I never go to the synagogue. Complaining about noise on the bus is like complaining about how wet the ocean is--I've always wanted to ride the bus places. Ride the bus just because. I bike places instead. It's faster than the bus, cheaper, and I never get any exercise except for biking. I don't have to rely on the fickle whims of AC Transit to take the bus..

My bike was stolen a few days ago. Nice ass folding bike locked to the stop sign near Estéban Gomez's house. Stolen. I've been walking places--who needs to ever leave Oakland? Drumming against the edge of my keyboard, I drink tea and think of reasons not to take the bus to synagogue. When it rains, I go through tea like I'm on a *mission*. Down to the dregs now, down to reusing tea bags for two or even three cups but I can't buy more because the bus stop is only a few blocks away and if I get to the bus stop there's no reason not to go to synagogue.

I'm an atheist. Synagogue is a lonely cold place and I can never figure out why I'm there and who all the people are at *Kiddush* saying 'Oh, sasha, what are you writing this time?' because my parents talk about me. Everyone's friendly, everyone cares so deeply and everyone's Jewish so they all speak like me, many of them look like me, and there is that carefully measured ambivalence between Israel and Palestine, bagels and kombucha, Hebrew and English and then there's me, lost and awash as the rabbi asks us to pray for the IDF or for some nameless deity. What do I know?

There are some people in their twenties at synagogue. We all grew up at that synagogue together, all ignored each other the other six days of the week, all scorned services and shit.

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Talking to them makes me want to claw off my *yarmulke* and tear apart the walls. I haven't seen them in years.

“The reason you feel lonely at *shul* is because you don't make any sort of effort to connect to people there.” my mother said for years and years. “You're so fixated on your friends, but you ignore all these people in your community who care about you.”

She left a voicemail the other day when I was out at some party, inviting me to come up and spend the afternoon with my family and the whole congregation that watched me grow up for all these years. They missed me when I was in New York, but now I live so close, don't I? Just over in Oakland. My brother, Yonatan, comes over for Shabbat dinner *all the time* and it's harder for him, at UC Santa Cruz and everything, to schlep up there so often. I should make the extra effort to connect with family. I'm just a bus ride away!!!

When's the last time I went to synagogue anyway? My parents always bemoan how disconnected I am with my culture. What a *shande*. It's one of those days when all the sentences come out wrong. If you want to be the Great Queer Jewish Writer, you *have* to write, don't you?

I sort through the text messages left on my phone from last night. A few people want to ride the train to the end of the line and back several times, writing poetry all the while. I've got deadlines, I write back, then get up and stare at the kettle of tea silent on my stove. *Hi Sasha, it's your mother again, just calling to ask whether or not you'd like to join us at shul. We're going to head over there now, but if you'd like to join us it would be no trouble again.* I pace the

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apartment and stare at the blank Google Doc. A poem. Any poem would be great right now. If you want to be the Great Jewish Queer Playwright, you have to write.

Aren't I supposed to love writing? Barely makin' it. Supposed to be doing the thing you love. Aren't I pathetic? It's raining enough to overflow the gutters and force the cars to uproot all the standing water at the intersection of International Boulevard and Eighth Avenue. I can look out over the city street and watch people drag themselves to work and back. Oakland turns gray when it rains.

I don't know where any clothes remotely suitable for synagogue would be. Naked in a studio apartment. Maybe I'll write a play about that. I look at the nice dresses crumpled up below all the jeans and woolen shit that I've been wearing lately and deliberate for a few seconds before putting on wrinkled blue slacks. No matter how accepting Berkeley may be, wearing a dress to synagogue on my first day back in a year is probably not the best choice. A dark gray sweater. A rain jacket. An umbrella. Layer up, layer up, protect yourself from whatever onslaught comes your way. Naked in a studio apartment, even when dressed. God, I feel like a child again. I used to hate getting dressed up.

This whole thing is stupid. I'm culturally Jewish--Judaism is one of those religions where you don't have to attend synagogue, you'll feel guilty either way. I have deadlines. I grab my notebook and pencil and stuff it in a messenger bag—no *yarmulke*, no *tallit*, no god. There's one tea bag left in the box; I toss it into a thermos and pour boiling water all over the stove. The

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hallway is overheated; beyond the lobby it's pouring rain and there's that irritating chill in the air you can't banish no matter how many layers you have on.

I wish I could slam the door to the complex walking out. The air smells like used toothbrushes. I kick the thin concrete of the sidewalk like it could snap any minute and send the whole street down into the centre of the Earth. It's a bit of a walk to get to the bus stop, a few blocks maybe, enough to make it a struggle to drag myself down the stairs and over to Fifth Avenue, where you can catch the 1R. South of Lake Merritt, East Oakland seals itself from the world with a canopy of imported palm trees, lining International Boulevard like it's the capital of some tropical country, all of them shaking in the November wind and pummelled by this incessant rain that will never ever stop.

The 1R to Downtown Berkeley is delayed; not coming for seventeen minutes. I stand at the corner in sight of the dull green bus shelter and spread my arms, twirling my umbrella like Mary Poppins. There's a sixty something Korean woman huddled under the bus shelter, a younger old white guy making irritated sounds on his iPhone. Other than that, the whole corner is empty. Even the cars driving up water in the middle of International Boulevard muffle their engines in deference to the rain. It's so fucking cold.

"Shipments will be coming in, *soon*," the younger old white guy says to his iPhone. "I told them not to hire Madison. No, no, leave out all the seasoning at the Halloween party. Thirty seven. Forty two. Existentialism."

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“Hi Sasha! Love your umbrella!” The twenty six year old instrumentalist/proprietor of the cafe across the street where I go sometimes. Mohammed Zhang-Brown. “You going out in this weather?”

“Yeah! Going to visit my parents.”

“Oh? Good luck!” A pause and we’re both soaked through by the rain. “It’s really coming down, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is.”

I dated Mohammed until like last week. They have never met my parents or gone to synagogue with me. During the five months we dated, I did not go to synagogue except for twice on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur and that was in New York when I was over there visiting. How long until that fucking bus gets here? My parents told me they didn’t care if I married a Jew as long as my partner enjoyed Judaism, but they were lying. They would ask if each new boyfriend was Jewish and each time I would say no. I don’t know why I never dated other Jews.

“Self loathing,” my mother would tell me if I bothered to ask her. “You’re scared of yourself and your culture. Therefore, you’ve hooked up with and made friends with other Jews but you’ve never dated them.”

I twirl the umbrella faster and faster. The rain’s coming pretty forcefully at this point. After a little while, I give up and sit down on the soggy little bench. The white guy and the Korean woman have both left. The bus has been further delayed by thirty five minutes. *In today’s edition of shitty AC transit we have the IR deciding not to come at all.* I post to my

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Snapchat. No notifications. Nothing to do but not write in my notebook. This is stupid. What am I going to do, the theatre equivalent of a road movie?

It will take a full hour even once the bus comes. O AC Transit, how you punish the unfaithful. Waiting at a soggy little bench for the 1R as if the 1R could be expected to come at all, the forty minute traverse through every interchange on Telegraph Avenue, the long, slow ride up to Berkeley (about half an hour or so, longer in the rain), and dragging your tortured corpse the last quarter mile from that faraway bus stop to the stuffy hallways of Congregation Beit Shalom.

Yonatan, my younger brother, senior at UC Santa Cruz would have no problems going back to synagogue. Synagogue was his *thing*, no matter how few people his age were there. He never felt desperate or insecure; he would talk to anyone and he would *enjoy* it. He would revel in it. And he would take a Lyft. He would live in Berkeley. He would live across the street from my parents house and walk the four blocks to the synagogue every Saturday.

“Sasha is perfect!” he would yell like over and over when I was in high school, everytime my parents asked him to not spend six hours a day on Youtube. “You never have to ask them to do anything!”

“I’m not perfect, Yonatan!” I would be so angry. “I have problems too!!”

“Everyone has problems and you don’t have *any*.”

Neither Yonatan nor I speaks Hebrew so maybe neither of us is as perfect as we assume the other one to be. I wonder if he’ll be at synagogue today.

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The street has become much darker. Is it already afternoon? I take out my phone to check when the bus is getting here, but it refuses to turn on. Dead. The palm trees are very pronounced. The sky is ready to crack and collapse everything.

“Excuse me,” I say to the idea of a bus. “Do you have the time?” But of course the idea of a bus is a fucking idea so *it* can’t respond. I stand up and pace the curb on International Boulevard. The thought of walking a mile and a half to Downtown Oakland, where you can catch a number of buses to Berkeley is ludicrous. I have started this journey and I will fucking finish it.

“Oh, there isn’t much time here.”

It’s the Korean woman and the young old white dude, staring at me. I had thought they’d disappeared already. I’m not sure which one spoke.

“What do you mean? Isn’t much time here?” I speak as quickly as possible, as if this will make the bus appear. “I’m trying to get to Berkeley! The 1R just won’t get here and I’m going to be late to see my parents.”

“Aren’t you done with your parents?”

My mother told me, back in high school, that in planning my education she could not decide between public school and Jewish day school. My father had gone to Jewish day school, he was now fluent in Hebrew, he could recite any of the ancient texts, he understood the archaic Aramaic dialects not spoken for untold thousands of years.

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“I’m so glad I didn’t go to day school. It would be such an insular life, you know? All those people my age at synagogue who go to day school--none of them have non-Jewish friends!”

My mother pretends not to hear me. “I ended up deciding you would seek out Judaism yourself. You would learn Hebrew and study Talmud with your *Abba* after school. You could get public school life education and day school Jewish education.”

“That didn’t happen.” I try to make sure my mother hears the satisfaction in my voice. I will not be insular, I will not go to synagogue every week, I will not practice Hebrew.

“Sometimes I wonder what I would do if I had to make the decision again.”

“Well, I’m glad I went to public school.”

“I know you are.”

All the light has drained from the sky. The palm trees look pale gray against the sidewalk.

“What do you mean there’s not that much time here?” I tap my umbrella on the sidewalk.

“Well, they train the buses to be late.”

“I know! I know! I just need to get to Berkeley. When’s the last time I went to synagogue?”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought you said something.”

“No, I just said that they train the buses to be late.” The two of them speak in one voice.

“And they do, don’t they?”

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“What am I supposed to do?”

The rain comes harder and harder, smashing the concrete with high pitched explosions. It sounds like a child playing in a punk rock band with a triangle.

“Well, you could walk to BART. How far *is* it to Lake Merritt Station anyway? Less than a mile, right? You’re trying to get to Berkeley?”

“I’m trying to get to my family,” I whisper. “My family.”

“Taking the bus is never the simplest way to get to synagogue.” The two of them are singing in time with the rain. By the time the bus comes I’ve brought my notebook to my face to cover my ears.

I must have taken the 1R before, but the route is unfamiliar. Taking buses on Shabbat is forbidden by Jewish *halakha*. How could I get a bus onstage? Write something about liminal spaces. “Existence is like waiting for the bus”. Something like that. Except the bus never comes. I’m reasonably sure I stole that from somebody at a creative nonfiction workshop in high school.

It’s been hours and hours and no one on the bus has talked to me. We’re crossing some gray hill on some gray avenue, with the monochrome city singing cacophonous below in great churning water. I try to look for the bay or the lake to get my bearings but cannot; the whole town is submerged. By the time I get off the bus, synagogue is long over. It’s got to be eight or nine or midnight. Everything is dark.

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“Yo, Sasha!” Estéban Gomez is wheeling my bike through the ankle deep ponds of water along International Boulevard. Somehow, I’ve gone nowhere at all. “I didn’t think I’d catch you. I found your bike in my neighbor’s yard. No idea how it got there.”

“Thank you so much! I’ve had the weirdest day. Do you know what time it is?”

“Oh, it’s eleven o’clock. I was just going to get lunch. You texted me that you were going to take the bus to Berkeley to see your parents, didn’t you? Are you heading out now?”

“No, I think I might just spend the day at home. I’m exhausted.”

“Oh well. We all aspire to great things.”

“Yeah,” I say, striding my bicycle. “I guess we do.”