

# New Poetry from D.A. Gray: “Cactus Tuna”; “We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays”; and “Reverse Run”



FARMER OF ROCKS / *image by Amalie Flynn*

## **Cactus Tuna**

A semi-sweet taste  
of watered-down nectar  
bleeds out from the prickly  
pear nestled  
    on a crown of thorns.

In the desert you once  
sneered over rifle sights  
at the farmers drawing

rakes over the sun-  
baked ground, and now,  
as atonement  
you're a farmer of rocks  
and what comes with them.

Stained fingers tear through  
leathery skin. Sometimes you  
forget you're standing  
alone in a cactus patch  
red trickling down.

Grace is not this –  
living on what grows where  
nothing had a right to grow,  
seeds fine as sand  
hide between teeth.

And crows, refusing to starve,  
land unafraid, pick through  
the rinds, eat, take flight  
scatter seeds on rocky places  
and among thorns

even on tops of walls,  
and maybe it's resilience  
or spite  
something finds purchase here.

### **We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays.**

The mystery is often in the gaze of men  
and women waiting for the sky to speak.

We used to spend days in the desert  
waiting until the sky whistled and then  
we wished we hadn't.

Someone's former  
home, now sharp edges of cinderblock  
cut upward through our soles. We kept  
walking through the desert; everything  
radiated, catching us in the crossfire.

\* \* \* \* \*

We spend days in the Hill country  
beneath a blistering sun, a clean sky,  
traces of blue that have faded,  
burnt off but for the edges by noon.

'Say something,' we shout in our minds,  
looking up as if it's God. Eventually  
the sky speaks in the language of wind,  
fear fills our hearts. Still, we knew  
it would be this bad, yet wanted so much  
to feel something – until the moment we did.

## **Run in Reverse**

In dreams the ball bearings and nails and flame  
are sucked backwards out of the truck, along  
with the screams, and the shrapnel enters  
The IED, a makeshift paint can half buried in sand.

The boy's face heals, his body slides back  
into the passenger seat and after a momentary  
glare at this pained country he turns and smiles  
at the driver. It's a calm hundred-degree morning  
and the Baghdad street is filled with shoppers  
carrying bags, laffa bread, eggplants poking  
out the top, Turkish vendors serving doner kebab,  
their angry looks toward the truck  
have softened now and they're joking.

\*\*\*

Some days walking with my wife, I turn,  
walk backwards just to say something silly.  
It's that moment that seems truest. She is  
looking at what's to come just beyond my shoulder,  
no regrets about the past, and I'm trying to hold  
on to what we left, moving against my will  
into the future blind, the scene I'm trying  
to make sense of, moving farther away.