

Smol Yameen

By Yoav Ben Yosef

This poem starts with the Hebrew words for left (*Smol*) and right (*Yameen*). In the Israeli army, they are loudly called out during a cadence march. The poem then moves to the very different environment of a Zendo in NYC. Years later these words came back to me during walking meditation, creating a disorienting sense of unreality, even astonishment at this new setting. What does it mean for a soldier to find himself in this still, serene environment? Is it not mere pretense to walk with such beatific air? As a gay young man, I did not see my fellow platoon members as brothers in arms. I saw aggression and pride in their new-found power, exemplified by the M-16 in their hands. They would most likely have laughed at this new group I've assimilated myself into, walking with the foolish idea that slow steps and a soft gaze can bring us to enlightenment. Is it possible for me now to let go of my boots and helmet when these Hebrew words assert themselves at every step I take?

Boot camp, center of Israel, 1994;

Real life, Manhattan, present day

Smol —

Yameen — *Smol*

Smol —

Yameen — *Smol*

Smol —

Yameen —

Yameeeen —

Yameeeen

Smol

The marching. Our steps must be called out
 in perfect synchronicity
 to the sergeant, all the way up in the bleachers.
 We, the newly enlisted, were cacophonous
 up until a week ago. Now we are

packed
 into a single symmetrical square. The power-
 hungry. The Blood-hungry. The terrified.
 Yelling as one. The sergeant himself
 is very hungry. He wants our vowels and syllables. Our guts,
 Our balls. The terror
 of the pansy carries still louder than anyone else's.
 I should know.

This rhythm, this cadence of the march

— *Smol Yameen Smol* —

Being mindful (speaking anachronistically) of our boots
 in the sand (no shuffling!) —
 came to me
 this morning, walking meditation
 at the zendo in Chelsea, the sunlight
 stretched on the pale polished wood panels
 beneath our stocking feet.

Attempting peace in this embarrassment
 of comforts.

Once upon a time my life was over.

Now look at me. If it weren't for the memories

(Smol)

I may just think

this is for real. The six of us, a monk in full garb,

black robe and brown sash, and five dilettantes,

pretend-bodhisattvas, here this morning, walking

in silence (*Yameen*). We are beatific, look

at the hints of smiles on our faces, look at our auras,

where my helmet used to be.

Attempting peace with the memories

(personal)

(collective)

Because of the memories

Peace with its very absence—

how else? —

after all, this is Zen.

If it were not for the IDF—

Smol

Yameen—

(My) life (is) (was) over

Joy, joy, joy

every step

send it out

All the way to Israel—

Right left right—

with love

to the sergeant.

May he be safe

May he be happy

May he love himself just the way he is.