Fiction

In the ethnographic fiction competition for 2000 the Society for Humanistic Anthropology has made two awards. Ayala Emmett's story, "Going to America under the Jacaranda Tree," won first place and is included here. The runner-up award is given to Maura Hanrahan's "Caboto 500," which will be published in the next issue.

Ayala Emmett has given us a multilayered story of separation with a muted emotional tone that refrains from beating the reader over the head with ethnographic facts and messages but, rather, builds to a subtle crescendo that captures the contradictions of separation, the hope and the despair of departure. The Society for Humanistic Anthropology has long supported the exploration of experimental and creative forms of ethnographic representation, including fiction. We have been an integral part of the relatively recent focus on both the politics and the poetics of ethnographic representation that has opened the door of experimentation a bit wider. Many of us have squeezed through that door to enter an open space without walls of discipline maintenance where we can explore the practical and theoretical implications of recent calls for greater engagement with the public and for more passionately accurate representations of the human experience.

—GREGORY RECK
Fiction Editor

Going to America under the Jacaranda Tree

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I had an impeccable reputation in our small town, until I planned to go to America. I was known as respectful to my elders, loyal to my friends, and devoted to Esther, my father's mother. But my imminent trip changed everything.

The day before I went away, Esther called. She invited me to have coffee at her house. "Yes, yes." I was breathless on the phone. My mind, a soaring kite, already flying high up above town. But my heart was still waiting for Esther's approval. My departure was, of course, my own choice. But this personal decision was entangled in my web of relationships with my town, my family, and most importantly, my grandmother. I could not wait to leave, but I desperately wanted Esther's blessing for my first journey across the ocean.

"Don't be late, Naomi." My grandmother ended our telephone conversation in the same way she used to say good night to me when, as a child, I stayed at her house. There was no lingering. In moments of parting, most of my relatives used to stand at the door for a long time, saying "good-bye" without actually leaving. Esther did not resort to unnecessary procrastination. She always acted with a sense of regal confidence.

Years ago, in Europe, my grandmother had owned a restaurant. It was the most elegant Jewish restaurant in Frankfurt. It was known not only for the fine china, the beautiful silverware, the excellent cooking, and the service but also for Esther's piety and strict adherence to Jewish dietary laws. There was not a rabbi who came to the city who did not eat at her restaurant.

When the streets of Germany had swarmed with marching fascists, she told me, you could see, if you dared to look at their shiny polished boots, how ominous they looked. Esther was very frightened, but she never hesitated. She took her five children and went to Palestine with her dishes, her embroidered tablecloths, her devoutness, and her memories, which she often shared with me.

When Esther came to Palestine in 1935, she realized right away that there was no need for her kind of fancy restaurant. Everything she brought from Frankfurt simply became part of her home. Shortly before my departure I said to Esther, "I love your house and all the beautiful things you brought from Europe." Because of going away I had become more openly sentimental, but I genuinely admired my grandmother's possessions.

She told me, "I've often wondered why I bothered to bring them. Where did I think I was going? I had no idea what Palestine looked like. But I did know it would be a safe place for us, and I was right."

Over the years my grandmother made good use of her skills, her china, and her silverware. I did not know when my grandmother began her afternoon coffee ritual in our little town. But I knew that as far back as I could remember, it always had the elegance of a banquet. There was freshly ground coffee, a choice of delicious pastry, a white linen table cloth, and fragrant flowers from her garden in a beautiful Dresden vase. Most of the year, in spring, summer, and fall, and on sunny winter days, the table was set on the porch under the Jacaranda tree that overlooked Esther's lush garden. In Palestine, Esther learned to love the local trees and flowers, and she passed on to me her passion for plants.

I was an obedient granddaughter until I arranged my American trip. It was clear to everybody in our family that I inherited not only my father Daniel's dark hair but his eagerness to please Esther. I also inherited his lifelong dream to be an explorer. My father, however, had to confine his aspirations to reading about remote places like the Amazon River. But I could tell by the way he read to me when I was a child, with real feeling, that he secretly wished he could be there himself, on a boat in South America, going down this mysterious, immense river.

If Esther knew about my father's longings, she certainly did not share her insights with me. But I knew that she would not have approved of his longings. For as long as I could, I tried my best to keep my own ambitions from Esther, but unlike my father, I decided to ignore her effort to protect us from what she saw as a dangerous world. "Home-tethered" was how I saw my whole family.

My father Daniel and his two sisters and two brothers all lived in our small rural town, Tikvat Avot, which literally means "hope of the fathers" in Hebrew. All our kin lived in Tikvat, as the citizens called it. People in our town liked abbreviations, they loved to simplify some things, such as names. Yet from time to time they were not averse to complicate issues and take offense when, I thought, none was meant. They were still mad at the state for building the highway too far away from Tikvat in 1954.

Our mayor, Yitzhak Lahav, wrote a letter to the Ministry of the Interior that he made public. The letter said, among other things, "We had sacrificed so much to see the State of Israel become a reality, and our very own government decided to ignore us." A few months after he wrote his bold letter, Yitzhak got reelected to be our mayor by an overwhelming majority.

Since the highway incident, people in Tikvat were not too crazy about the Founding Fathers. People felt just fine about dropping Avot (fathers) from the town's name. In 1970, as I was getting ready to leave Tikvat, our elders still talked about the highway as though it had been built only last night. Tikvat, in the local lore, went to sleep proud and patriotic and woke up in the morning to find the highway snubbing the town.

I grew up in Tikvat, and I was fond of our people. But I felt it was time for me to explore places where people invented other kinds of grudges and created different loyalties. Unfortunately, my plan to go away, like the infamous highway, was seen by many Tikvatians, including Esther, as an undeserved insult. My going to America scorned their sacrifices.

For this last afternoon with my grandmother, and well aware of my new position as giver of the town's latest affront, I wore a long white cotton dress with short sleeves, white sandals, and a white ribbon at the end of my long black braid. I showed a nondefiant demeanor, I hoped, an almost chaste look, an attempt on my part to appear calm while feeling wildly adventurous with the prospect of leaving Israel for the first time.

Edna, my mother, looked at me as I was ready to leave the house, shaking her head vigorously from side to side, her thick brown curls bobbing forcefully. "You're not going to appease Esther, if that's what you're thinking."

"Mom! White is the color of peace and reconciliation."

Looking at my mother, I felt a sudden pain in my heart. I gave Edna a hug to defend her from her mother-in-law's fierceness and a light kiss on the cheek to protect me from seeing my mother's sorrow because she was about to lose me to America.

I usually walked to Esther's place, my parents' house being only one kilometer away from hers. But on that afternoon I decided not to walk but to take the local bus. It was a very hot day, and I wanted to present a cool, neat appearance for the occasion. On the way to the bus stop, I met my cousin Iris. She looked at me in the same way my mother did, shaking her head. Only Iris seemed amused. "Going to Esther's, I see. Poor Naomi. Brave enough to go all the way to—what's that place you're going to?"

"Amherst, Massachusetts."

"Yes, exactly my point. You can pronounce that long American name but you're unable to say 'no' in Hebrew to Esther." Before I could sort out a response to Iris's stinging observation, she hugged me the way I had just hugged my mother. Protectively. "Go. You don't want to be late. I'll see you later. We'll come after dinner to say good-bye."

Esther's children, including Jacob, Iris's father, stayed in Tikvat out of loyalty, love, habit, convenience, or other reasons they would not necessarily divulge. They had all built homes within walking distance from Esther and each other. On a quiet night, if one of them had shouted really loud, they could all hear it. But now that they had phones in their houses there was no need to yell or raise their voices.

Jacob would forget this sometimes and speak loudly on the phone to my father who lived a few houses away. Jacob wanted to be an opera singer, but Esther objected to what she believed was a frivolous pursuit. He became, instead, a music teacher in our local school and the cantor at the main synagogue in Tikvat. But his dashed dreams did not change the fact that uncle Jacob had a powerful voice.

Several families would be privy to his phone conversations with my father. When my going-away plans became real I was worried that uncle Jacob might discuss it on the phone because his booming voice flowed freely through several

porches and open windows in the neighborhood. His voice landed on our porch at the same time that my father held the phone to his ear inside the house.

"Please uncle Jacob, if you want to say something to dad about my trip, could you not do it on the phone? Couldn't you come over to our house and do it quietly? It would mean a lot to me."

Often, after Jacob talked to my father on the phone, and without any prompting, the neighbors would offer their opinion or advice to Jacob or to Daniel. I did not want unsolicited commentaries on my going to America. I did not want my father to have to defend my actions. I dreaded the idea that our neighbors would actually join a phone conversation that had to do with my life. The brothers mostly ignored the neighbors: Jacob, because he did not care, and Daniel, because he was fundamentally a shy man.

My kinfolk, who would describe themselves as close-knit, loving, and loyal, did not hold privacy in high regard. During the day and in the evening, they were in and out of each other's homes, borrowing, complaining, or seeking refuge from their own domestic spaces. Peaceful relations, within and between households, were punctuated by occasional rivalries and squabbles. All of us became involved in every dispute.

America became my destination because I wanted to explore the mysteries of people who had anonymous, private lives and who got praised for doing their own thing. I wanted to live in a country where people called before they came to see you and did not visit unless invited.

My 11 cousins and I continued the pattern our parents set up. There was a familiar cycle of fights and reconciliations. In school and on the street we were united against the other Tikvat children. They would jokingly refer to us as the tribe of Esther. But we, her grandchildren, also came up with surprises. Iris, who was my age, had already launched a career as a folksinger. She inherited her father's musical talents. But, unlike Jacob, she faced Esther's disapproval with irreverent equanimity.

Iris and I were kindred spirits, though not on the surface of things. She wanted to stay in Israel, and I could not wait to leave. But we had a deep bond, an interest in the intricacies of human existence. She knew how to sing about life's mysteries in Hebrew, and I hoped to write about other people's lives in English.

When I got on our local bus to go to Esther's house, it was quite empty. I was relieved. Riding the bus in our town was risky if you did not feel like talking. The bus in Tikvat was more than a mode of transportation. Like the health clinic and the local cafe, it was a legitimate hub of gossip. It was as important as the newspaper for getting information, though it was not necessarily accurate or objective. People on the bus were often personal and direct. Some were quite famous for their sharp tongues. I was lucky, I thought, because right in front, behind the driver, was an empty seat next to Pinhas. He was my father's close friend and a man of few words. I overestimated my good fortune. There was Shula calling from the back of the bus.

"Here's our American girl. Like Esther, you think you're too grand for Tikvat. So, Naomi, the Hebrew University isn't good enough for you, or is it that you just want to learn English?"

Rachel chimed in. "Kids nowadays just want to go abroad. They've no sense of obligation to our country."

The two women did not really wait for me to answer. Even in my excitement I could see that some Tikvat people were already pushing me out, as if my imminent departure was no longer my choice but theirs.

Pinhas squeezed my hand. "Good luck, Naomi. Show them in America what Israel can produce. Make us proud."

I did not think I should tell him that America would not even know I was there. "Pinhas, you're one of the best in all of Tikvat." All of a sudden the thrill of going away was invaded by an unexpected and involuntary strange sensation in my eyes. Controlling my tears seemed more urgent than straightening my dress when I got off the bus.

Stepping onto Esther's porch with eyes that saw "departing" everywhere, I could see the formality of her afternoon coffee, the delicate porcelain cups, the tall coffeepot, the folded linen napkins, the warm cakes, the silver fruit knives next to the fresh figs. I looked at this refined setting that always gave Esther the authority of an expert in matters that stretched far beyond her culinary skills. I saw her presiding over a party knowing the power of her position.

Seeing Esther sitting in her usual place at the head of the table, I thought of the hundreds of times we have been through this ritual. Being invited to my grandmother's afternoon coffee began for me in childhood when she seemed to treat me like a grown up. For a number of years, after school, I used to go to Esther, who disapproved of my mother's working but agreed to keep me out of mischief. She would let me drink sweet coffee as she skillfully disguised the fact that she gave me mostly milk and not so much coffee. While I concentrated on the delicious taste of the drink and was busy pretending that the aroma of coffee came from my own cup, my grandmother wanted an account of school and my homework.

Sitting perfectly still but discreetly breathing the strong scent of honeysuckle, sweet peas, and roses around the porch, I put my cup down after every sip. My grandmother would watch me closely; she did not approve of my attempts to inhale the aroma of flowers. She sometimes caught me with my face buried inside my very favorite, the honeysuckle, and warned me that too much fragrance would give me headaches. I never got headaches, but I did not contradict her.

At our last meeting, Esther, like a magician, pulled out some old notebooks with my name written on them. Carefully she opened one of them, smoothing the pages of my childhood homework.

"I thought it was quite bold of you to write this on your botany assignment." Esther read from my homework in a clear light voice that sounded almost youthful.

"The dictionary's definition for honeysuckle is sadly understated. 'Any group of climbing, twining vines of the genus *Lonicera*, with small, fragrant flowers of red, yellow, or white' simply fails to convey the abundant sweetness of my grandmother's honeysuckle. The drawing of the plant in the dictionary misses the reality of the lushness that bursts from the *Lonicera caprifolium*."

"I can't believe you've kept my school notebooks."

The real surprise, which I kept to myself, was that I saw a side of Esther that I did not know. I knew of my attachment to her, but I never really considered Esther's side of our relationship. My grandmother sat there with her right hand, aging, graceful, freckled, resting on my notebooks.

I said, "Do you remember how the first time my botany teacher used the Latin name of my precious honeysuckle, I told you that definitions just give facts but fail to describe the mysteries of life?"

"Yes, Naomi. I could see even then you'd become discontented and search too hard for meaning. Here it is, what you wrote in your botany exam in seventh grade. You made the observation about the limitations of definitions, and your teacher wrote on the margins in his red pen, 'You need to address only the botanical questions.' At the bottom of your next exam you wrote, 'P.S. You should see the *Lonicera caprifolium* in my grandmother's garden. The perfume of the honeysuckle is incredible. It attracts bees, birds, and humans.'"

My going away, or perhaps the fact that Esther kept my notebooks, made me bold.

"I thought you'd be pleased with my commentary because I knew you too loved the honeysuckle in your garden. I proudly showed it to you, and you said you never in your life talked back to a teacher."

I remembered I always used to sit still while my grandmother talked about her childhood. She told me how she behaved when she was my age. Esther as a child seemed to me as beautiful and as remote as her elegant restaurant in Frankfurt.

My childhood notebooks produced a flood of memories I did not anticipate. I grew up in these coffee ceremonies. I ate the pastry that Esther made. I liked all of them, but my favorite was her Black Forest cake. I remembered how I would use my fork, keeping the well-ironed, starched napkin from gliding off my knees. Stimulated by all the sugar, I would silently imagine myself flying far away from Tikvat to all the exotic places my father told me about. Sitting on Esther's porch as a child I often envied the gray sparrows and wondered if I would ever have wings. Growing up under the Jacaranda tree, I did not know that I was already preparing to go to America.

On our last afternoon together, as I waited for Esther to talk about my going away, I looked at the Dresden vase that came, like her, from another land. It was placed as usual at the center of the table, always on the same spot. Only my grandmother touched it. I sometimes saw Esther's face soften when she held the vase in her hand. She never told me where she got it or why it had been so precious to her. There was a life-mystery beyond the mere fact of a flower vase that I now observed and stored in my memory. Years later, whenever I saw a similar vase my heart would beat wildly and uncontrollably. Without warning, pain that I could not locate would spread to all parts of my being. My memories, like my grandmother's, became stronger than the life I was trying to live at that moment.

Sitting there looking at Esther putting her hand on my schoolwork, I thought that I would never look as refined as she did. I was aware how this elegant atmosphere that had angered some of the grown-ups in Tikvat always fascinated my childhood friends. Esther's coffee ceremony was actually exotic to them.

This European elegance in our small and mildly prosperous town was regarded by my friends as an enchantment that they knew I failed to recognize. They knew it even though I was careful not to show how envious I was of the nonchalant way in which we drank coffee at their own homes. Any mug, cup, or glass would do. We did not have to sit down or interrupt a game. I knew I would be able to live in remote places because at my friends' homes we ate pastry with our fingers, licking them as a sign of our total appreciation and wiping our hands on our clothes.

The day I was invited for the last time to my grandmother's house, I did not need to inhale the fragrance of the honeysuckle. My turning 20 recently, my first trip abroad, and my imaginings of life at an American university were already intoxicating. I finished the first cup of Esther's delicious coffee.

"I'm going to America to study so I can write about life."

"There's no need for you to go away to do that. You did it perfectly well right here in Tikvat when you were a mere child. This is what I tried to show you when I brought out your notebooks. Israel is a safe place. Safe, Naomi."

My second cup of coffee tasted bittersweet. My going to America hung around the table, diminished by Esther's life, her accomplishments, and her courage to look the Nazis in the face and know the truth before it was too late. There was not much I could say. She saw my departure as a betrayal of the purpose of her own life.

As we sat on the porch shaded by the Jacaranda tree, the strong scent of the flowers carried by a light warm wind in our direction brought tears to my eyes. Maybe the tears were touched off by the fact that I was going away or because I loved Esther and she seemed unwilling to bless the monumental change in my life and the purpose of my trip. Unlike the dictionary, I was going to write about the mysteries and complexities that always surround mere facts.

"You were born in Israel, you grew up here, you don't know the meaning of diaspora, of anti-Semitism, of being a Jew in a Christian world. You don't know you're going into exile, *galut*." "Galut," she repeated slowly, and the word got stuck, like a lost kite, in the thick Jacaranda branches.

Esther sat in her chair dressed in her finest black-and-white silk dress, her gold brooch, and matching earrings. Tall and slim in the finery she brought years ago from Frankfurt, she looked as if she was about to receive royalty. I was her only guest. She looked at me with her black smoldering eyes, touched by age and sorrow. I tried to comfort her.

"I'm only going for a few years. This is temporary. Just to study."

I really did not know I was going to stay on in America just as my grandmother feared. But in July 1970, one month after my 20th birthday and two months after I finished my service in the Israeli army, all I knew was that I was going to live in a place far away from Tikvat. When Esther finished her coffee, she said in a strange voice, "I see you've made up your mind. You were always such a good girl. Now you've become stubborn. Like Iris."

"I have a scholarship. I have an airline ticket. My suitcases are packed. Everyone's coming this evening to say good-bye."

"When you go to America," she spoke in an unusually tender voice, "remember who you are." I nodded. "Don't ever forget who you are. Never forget you're the great-great-granddaughter of famous rabbis. Don't forget that our family line goes back directly to the Royal House of King David."

Esther made me recite the names of all the Hassidic rabbis, *tzadikim*, "righteous," as she called them, that graced our family tree. All of them, she often told me, had a close relationship with God and had been extraordinary miracle workers. I chanted, "Mendel, Elimelech, Zusia."

"And don't forget the greatest of them all, the Baal Shem Tov."

"Yes, the one who could speak with animals, birds, stones, and trees and could travel from one end of the earth to the other in a single night." I said it without a trace of my usual disbelief. On my last day in Tikvat, in Esther's house, I suddenly felt close to these rabbis, but I did not say anything to Esther. It could be just a brief lapse of rationality due to my departure. But my grandmother looked at me shrewdly. "The *tzadikim* will protect you. When you need help, you'll appeal to them. They'll intercede with God for you."

She made sure, one last time, that I understood how we trace our lineage all the way to the biblical King David. I was as dutiful on the eve of my departure as I was when she first told me about our royalty when I was very young and came home crying. She said then, "When they tease you, tell them who you are," and she recounted the names of our ancestors.

I knew better than to tell the kids in Tikvat fantastic stories about wondrous miracles, about flying *tzadikim* dabbling in Kabbalah, or of King David being my ancestor. I thought especially of King David and his wives, and I was not sure I liked him all that much. I learned in Tikvat that leaders are human and can disappoint us. I took the town's political disposition toward authority to my Bible reading. I felt I could disapprove of what the king did. It was certainly much worse than building a road in the wrong place.

Poor Bathsheba, the king saw her bathing on the roof. And even though he knew she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, he summoned her, and according to the Bible "she came to him and he lay with her." King David, the Bible tells us, wrote a letter to Joab: "Place Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest; then fall back so that he may be killed." But King David was my ancestor. Esther was quite firm about it.

Under the Jacaranda tree, my grandmother gave me a brief hug. She was not a physical person, and hugs or kisses were a rare exchange between us. But suddenly Esther embraced me and let out a strange sound. A sob. I closed my eyes for a second, to preserve her dignity and my own composure. Then for the first and, as it turned out, the last time in my life, I hugged Esther and held her tight. She did not move away. She was very thin under all that silk that she brought from Europe. I put my face close to her face, and I had to stand on my toes. Esther was still a tall woman.

My grandmother smelled of honeysuckle, sweet peas, roses, coffee, cakes, and courage. She often told me that we could smell feelings such as fear and hatred. She did not mention courage. But I knew with absolute certainty that the scent of courage was floating through Esther's life, her elegant porch, and her beautiful garden. I stood there breathing it in, a distinct stunning fragrance.

Under the Jacaranda tree I had my arms around my grandmother, who had brought her five children to this place that I was about to leave. I cried because I felt so grateful to Esther and because I was so thrilled to go to America.

When I finally fell asleep it was almost morning in Tikvat. I had my last dream in my parents' house.

I was on the beach in Tel Aviv with my parents and Esther. Like my great-great-grandfather Rabbi Mendel in Esther's stories, I could, miraculously, fly. It was such an extraordinary feeling. I felt so completely happy, light, and peaceful. How could I doubt Esther's story about Mendel? My long hair was holding me up aided by a good wind and the fine strong smell of the Mediterranean Sea. Every time I flew up high, I could see my parents waving to me on the beach.

But some people standing at the edge of the water were holding a long string that was attached to me, and they kept pulling me back. I called out Mendel's name to help me gain altitude. I invoked kinship to remind him who I was. "Zeidi Mendel," I shouted. "You've got to help me. I now believe in miracles. I am flying, just like you." But the people kept pulling the string to make me come down.

Just when I despaired, ready to give up, Esther walked over to them. Calmly, with her tiny silver fruit knife, she swiftly cut the string. I was free.