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Bon Voyage

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iv.

The Lord, of course,
 had his one flaming Word
 that set the earth spinning toward the sun.
 I have whole sentences:
I am an American.
Where is the toilet?
 The first sentence
 is obvious as these apples,
 and the second is no ice-breaker.

He spoke to slow-tongued Moses
 from the flames,
 and Zacharias, silent as I,
 was given words in the end.
 Did Paul, too, preach words
 he couldn't read?

All around me, men in shaggy hats
 and women wearing widow skirts
 fill their bags with fruit
 that shrivels and rots.
 The bread I've come to share
 would never stale
 if only I could shape it
 into something anyone
 could understand.

"A Prayer's Lost Language: The Mission Diaries of Michael Fargo" is a long poem, or a series of poems, that stems from the journals of a friend. This friend, Michael—I've changed his name—was a missionary in Bulgaria in the mid-1990s. He sadly passed away last year, but I have been fortunate enough to read his journals. Each section of the poem (section 1 appears here) begins with an abridged entry from Michael's journals, and I hope the whole poem draws the arc of his personal journey, which is, I think, a very human journey more than an overtly religious one. —DW

ALAN SOLDOSKY

Bon Voyage

I can't see you off with only a handshake
 and a monogrammed pencil, the kind Steinbeck
 used to use, round without edges, to protect himself
 from blisters. I watch you in line,

fumbling for your passport, holding your ticket
 like an aerialist with your teeth, the tags
 trailing from your gray backpack,
 newly inscribed in their plastic cases.

I can almost read your name
 through the increasingly illegible distance
 and strain not to look behind me
 for your head going through the gate.

But I look anyway,
 the weight of your farewell
 still pressed into my shoulders, as if
 you've come up to me from behind

the way you do and reached across me
 with your gingery arms and grabbed me
 around the neck. I can only marvel,
 as someone in a red blazer and helmet

hair looks you over and ushers you through,
 at who you've become. I don't have permission
 to accompany you into the terminal.
 The best I can do, as you take yourself

where you have to go, is this sinecure
 of words to buoy you into the world's
 thin blue air, this paper charm
 that says I wish you a smooth departure

and safe passage.