

Di Goldeneh Medinah

by Ed Frankel

“To be no one’s sleep under so many petals.”
— Rainer Maria Rilke

I

The memories amble in, don’t they, Molly,
like the old muzzled bear the Pole
brought on a leash to your village in Zhitomir
to wrestle with the drunken Russian soldiers
then dance for rubles to the accordion and violin.
While the balalaika played, they poked him with sticks,
tossed coals from the fire, and cigarettes at him
that caught in his fur and smoked and glittered.
You imagined him dreaming his mother’s warm, feral milk,
the nuzzle of fur, as she pulled
the pine needles and leaves over both of them
like a second skin in the hollows of their cave
under the snow in the old growth forest.
Luckshenkup they called you,
the noodle headed dreamer.

In the Pale of Settlement
the Luftmenschen, lived off the air,
A soup made from small change,
throwaway bones, two onions, two potatoes,
shav and wild greens picked by the banks of the Teterov.
A soup thin enough to read a newspaper through.
After Csar Nicholas was assassinated
the *Novoye Vremya* headlined: “To Beat
Or Not To Beat Jews?” Is it really a question?
They were clutchers, pickers, sellers.
Buy it for a ruble, sell it for a ruble and a half,
pins, needles, paper, string.
Stand on your toes to reach God’s ear,
beyond the Pale of Settlement.

Even at eleven, Molly, I wasn’t too old
to lie across your lap as you scratched my back
and told me stories about Zhitomir and the pottery.
At eleven you are trimming on the kick wheel,
imitation gold edges on bone-white plates,
auguries that spin between your knees

that you stare at unblinking—
 a ring around the man in the moon.
 a face in a bone-colored mirror trimmed in gold,
 Will you take her to the Goldineh Medina.
 The Golden Promised Land, Mr. Man in the Moon?

Max, your brother, with a bandana over his nose.
 has been mixing the clay since he was ten,
 the iron oxides, feldspar, kaolin, lead, sand, grog,
 powdering the flowers of his lungs.
 Pull the bandana over your nose, tie it tighter, Max.
 Who knew from dust and fumes in those days?
 Max, the Ladies' man. Max, the dancer,
 the dresser. In his fancy vests, and slicked back hair,
 Max who never saved his nickels and dimes
 to bring anyone else over.
 He'll be dead before he's thirty.
 little Max, the ladies' man
 Mad as a hatter.

Six years from now, you will treadle
 another kind of wheel in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory,
 But now all the children dig clay at the river.
 You make dolls that you'll fire in the kiln.
 Bible figures you name that come alive in your hand,
 Esther, Sarai, Susana, Rose of Sharon.
 Eins, tsvey, drei, fir...
 You march a a clay golem across the wedging table.

On cold nights, you rub your back against the brick kiln
 then sweep the shop floor waiting for the load to cool,
 to chip the teats off the fired cups and plates.
 You pull out the window brick, to peer inside:
 whispers of orange and yellow winds,
 a boat rocks on waves of fire. A shooting star.
 the silhouette of a tiny figure— A golem? An angel?
 dancing on the horizon between earth and heaven
 shot through with prisms of red and gold.
 always the lukshenkup,
 the noodle headed dreamer.

If you had the second sight back then
 you wouldn't see golems and angels.
 You would not be talking to the man in the moon.
 You would see fire falling from the sky,
 people of the air like shooting stars.

Your friends Gussie Rosenthal and May Caliandro Levanti.
 on the ninth floor ledge of the Triangle Shirt waist factory.
 Flames lick out from the window to catch Sara Brenman's hair.
 The firemen's ladders only reach the seventh floor
 The eighth floor—Wait Sara they are coming to get you.
 She jumps toward the fireman, her hair on fire,
 But the fireman on the ladder reaching, reaching,
 can't hold her, can't catch her.
 He nearly falls as she bounces off of him.
 Her skirts and white underclothes blossom over her head,
 a lead filled rag doll screaming.
 The blankets and nets are useless, the falling bodies
 rip them from the firemen's hands.
 When Sarah's body strikes the ground
 her heart explodes.
 Dead weight.
 Izzy Gould is dropping those too afraid to jump,
 holding them over the ledge by their wrists,
 face to face--Yiz gdail y yiz gadash...
 Mary Levanthal and Antonina Coletti embrace each other
 and jump.

The cones that tell the temperature and augur the final glaze
 melt at two thousand degrees,
 to signal the end of the firing.
 We shouldn't stare into the kiln too long, Molly.
 We'll hurt our eyes.
 It's like staring at the sun.

Luftmenschen: people of the air

Golem: In Jewish mythology, a creature fashioned from clay, animated with special prayers to do the bidding of the person who created it.

Gussie Rosenthal, May Caliandro Levanti, Mary Levanthal, Antonina Coletti, Sara Brenmen: five of the one hundred and fifty six men and women who died in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

Yiz gdail y yiz gadash...: Beginning of the Kadish, the prayer for the dead.