

People of the Air

by Ed Frankel

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*Thank you for help along the way
to Reed Wilson, Mike Rose, Regina O'Melveney,
Carole Mora, and Chris,
once again, who keeps me honest.*

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People of the Air

Guelaguetza

At the stoplight of the Overland entrance
to the Santa Monica Freeway going West,
a woman is standing on the four foot-wide median
that separates traffic, selling bags of oranges
and peanuts from a shopping cart,
single stemmed crimson roses.
She walks up and down, peering
over the flowers into the drivers' windows.
I try to figure how much she makes
on each two-dollar bag of oranges,
each two-dollar long stemmed rose.

I buy a rose, a bag of oranges and some peanuts,
tell her keep the change from the twenty and wish her well.
At home I put the rose in a glass of water.
and think about my own *atravesados*,
my own crossers of borders—*Luftmenschen*—
people who could live on air as they traveled,
with their hearts trussed with twine and old rope,
clutchers of lean bones,
their valises stuffed with stale bread, hard, longshots,
posed *sepia* memories in stiff borrowed clothes,
clutchers of thin straws and last hopes,
who didn't wear necklaces of marigolds and sugar skulls
but maybe one of *rozhinkes mit mandlin*,
raisins and almonds,
who didn't drink *champurado* made from corn and chocolate
but glasses of tea with lumps of sugar between their teeth.

In Russia, they were pickers and sellers,
who bought pins, needles paper and string
for a ruple and sold them for a ruple and a half,
who stood on their toes to reach God's ear

beyond the pale of settlement.
Rockers in the lap of steerage.
Venders and hawkers
wheeling pushcarts on the cobblestones
instead of shopping carts by the freeway.
They were luchenkups—noodle headed dreamers.

I want to see you again Juana,
face to face, no glass between us.
I want this poem to be my ofrenda to you,
Guelaguetza—and an offering for my people of the air.
That these words, like your corn stalks and sugarcane
arch across the years to provide an alter in time,
a space to lay out my luftmenschen's pictures,
their favorite things and mementos.

My father's stiff, sweat-stained handball gloves,
a picture of him, at Hickum Field, Pearl Harbor,
his campaign hat cocked and jaunty,
behind his fifty caliber machine gun in 1940;
my Aunt Molly's button from the Garment Workers Union,
her picture taken in 1911 during the strikes
as she marches arm in arm with the other women;
my grandfather's copy of Huckleberry Finn and his English dictionary;
my mother's copy of Edna St. Vincent Millay
that she saved her pennies to buy in 1936.
No moles and sweet tamales,
but maybe varnishkes with kasha and potato latkas.
No mescal but maybe some schnapps or some cherry Kijafa.
After they've eaten they will look for me
to leave their good will and their blessings.

Juana, you won't remember the gavacho
who watched you by the freeway and wished you well,
who saw his grandparents in your place,
who saw his Luftmenschen sewing in a maquiladora

instead of the sweatshops in New York in 1911,
who had the audacity to imagine you dancing
with a necklace of sugar skulls and marigolds,
and then another of raisins and almonds.
Forgive him his audacity,
hijo de la gente del aire.
Son of the People of the Air.
He comes by it honestly, and he means no harm.
He too is a luftmensch,
another luchenkup,
another noodle-headed dreamer.

Guelaguetza: a Zapotec offering, a gift to share or reciprocate.

Ofrenda: offering.

Gavacho: Caucasian- American.

varnishkes mit kasha and potato latkas: bowtie noodles, bulgar
wheat and potato pancakes.

Maquiladora: sweat shop.

Our Breath on the Mirror

Under the Dodgers cap, and khaki work shirt
the woman selling flowers by the freeway
is short, broad and full as the Goddess
of earth and death, Coatlicue, and you hear
the rattles on her ankles, her necklace
of hands, and skulls shaking
to the heart of a distant smoking drum.
The two snake heads rattle in her hands
as Coatlicue begins to dance.

With a lift of her chin Juana raises her eyebrows
offering the flowers—Guelaguetza—
to faces behind the glass that look at her,
pretend not to look at her.
Windows hum open or slide closed.
Sometimes men rush and fumble for dollar bills
as they watch the light, then lay the rose
beside them on the passenger seat.

Juana relieves herself at the Arco station
or in the bushes by the side of the freeway.
She is two thousand miles from Tlacolula.
She and her brother each paid the coyote
two thousand dollars American to guide them
through the labyrinths of arroyos and barrancas
past la Migra, in their blazers with their nightscopes,
across the border, that jagged scar, al otro lado.

She wires a hundred and fifty a month
to her mother who pays the bills,
who makes a payment on the land in Mitla,
who saves the rest for three years to send other children
to hide under the remote pitch of the moon
from the green and infrared lights that search

for silhouettes of caravans and the dreams of caravans,
the heat of human bodies, on a backlit horizon.
They will walk with care past the listening machines
that hear their pulses surge and their mouths go dry.
They remember Eliseo, Macario, and Evodio from the village
who froze to death last year in these mountains
just three miles from the highway.

You would like to believe that the Virgin of Guadalupe
covered them with her shawl, that the Naguals
came to them in their sleep
and told them that the storm would pass,
brought them posole and steaming champurrado.
You would like to believe that their tears froze like pearls,
that they died in a fairy tale
like the ice princess or Grimm's little match girl.
Perhaps freezing to death is like falling asleep.
Huddle together, M'ijos, six hands,
six arms and legs, entwined,
three hearts, thick, and slow, and beating.

What are you dreaming Juana, out there by the freeway?
Are you rocking in a hammock years from now
in your own jalapa in Mitla?
You braid flowers and colored ribbons
into your granddaughter's hair for The Day of the Dead
The smell of the cempasuchil, the marigolds
and the smoking copal, remind you of roses and oranges,
the gray faces of the gavachos in their shiny cars
stony and silent as the hieroglyphs of the old ones
in Monte Alban and Tule.

The Camazotz call your name Juana,
from their dream gardens and the church bells ring in
the cold winds of the north that bring the spirits of the dead.
Your mother and father are coming across the River Chiconapan
the day after tomorrow, El Dia de Los Muertos.

They will need gifts and travelers' provisions.
Lay the path of orange marigolds from the door to the alter.
Scatter breadcrumbs and flower seeds for the birds
which are the souls of small children.
The alter is perfect—gladiolas, chrysanthemums.
Stalks of corn, bamboo and sugarcane arch across time
and the cycles of the soul's resurrections.
Don't forget—Abuela liked Chapulines, fried grasshoppers,
and Abuelo Joselito liked his mescal.
Leave them a glass of water.
They have journeyed far and they are thirsty.
Candles, yes, lots of candles to light their way.
Go to the Cemetery and clear the weeds.
See that the graves are swept clean.

Put the sugar skulls, with their maraschino eyes
and syrupy smiles next to the old pictures:
Gran Tio Chuy, fuerte y formal
as he stares into the camera.
The Angelitos, the dead little children lie posed
in their parents arms: Refugia, at two years old
on Tia Cecilia's lap in a white dress
holds a cross to the camera in her cold, tiny hands.
Arrange their favorite foods, the seven moles,
home-made mescal and candied pumpkin,
fresh baked "bread of the dead."
The alter is perfect.
Nothing must be touched by anyone.
The children will return on November 1,
the adults the day after.
They cannot eat but will kiss the food,
take in the aromas and moisture of the preparations.
When they are satisfied they will look for you
to leave behind their good will and their blessings.

And the gavachos will come as well,
two thousand miles from el otro lado, how strange

with all their gear and their money, rushing,
taking pictures, que raro.
When they smile they seem sad and hungry.
Remember when one—sin verguenza, shameless,
even wanted to buy the shawl you were wrapped in,
and the blanket you were sitting on at the cemetery.

The tour buses and the shiny rented cars rumble
out of the dusty night into Tlascalula.
Gavachos with video cameras at the windows
film The Day of the Dead.
When you look at them, the flesh melts off their bones.
Allegados, son iguales.
Having arrived, they are all equal,
like the figures in Posada's drawings,
Skeletons in shorts, with cameras around their necks,
take pictures of each other.
Donde esta la bathroom?
Skeletons bargaining for rugs and black pottery.
Ask her if the dyes are natural or artificial
skeleton children, loud and unmannered
maniosos y malcriados, grabby and badly behaved,
skeletons full of coming and going
taking with them little pieces of your village
to put on their walls and mantles.

Lights explode beside the people at the graves,
the red eyes of the cameras glow
like the eyes of the Camazotz in the night
who come to steal people's dreams.
The skeletons covet it all, the sugar sweet holidays,
the rituals, they look south of the border,
to have maraschino cherries for eyes,
necklaces of marigolds and syrupy smiles,
to have their souls become bread of the dead
for the Gods to feast on.
But their pleasures last as long as the marzipan skull
that melts on the tongue and is gone.

Do not mind them Juana.
They desire what the dollars cannot buy,
not the charms or the pictures of la Virgen
to put on their walls or their refrigerators.
They also want to stop the rush of time.
We are all skeletons in a Posada drawing
all on our way, coming and going to Bone Town.
We all borrow, hunt and gather, and dance to faraway drums,
whiten our faces with rice powder as we try
to commemorate ourselves and those we love,
to see our breath on the mirror.

Guelaguetza: a Zapotec offering, a gift to share or reciprocate.

La Migra: US Immigration Service.

Al otro lado: to the other side.

M'ijos: mi hijos, i.e. my children.

Naguals: mythical Mexican trickster animals.

Champurrado: hot drink made of corn and chocolate.

Jalapa: open air, palm-roofed house.

Copal: incense made of resin.

Camazotz: Olmec diety associated with night, death, and sacrifice.

See that their graves are kept clean: a blues line from Blind Lemon Jefferson?

Posada: Mexican artist/cartoonist and satirist famous for popularizing the Calaveras, depictions of the skeletons of Day of the Dead.

Sin Verguenza: shameless one.

Breath on the mirror: Popol Vuh.

Ofrenda: offering.

People of the Air

“To be no one’s sleep under so many petals.”

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.
Luchenkup 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 Tsar 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 luchenkup,
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 ragdoll 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 Levantahl 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 Levant, An-
tonina 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.

II

Visitors bring rumors of pogroms in Kishniev and Grodna.
Jews killed in the streets by gangs of the “Black Hundreds”
the week before Easter, during Passover
when Max reads from the Haggadah.
“Once we were slaves in Egypt”...
“Why is this night different than all other nights?”

As I lay across your lap I wondered
how would I fare
bound for market on the wagon
on the cobblestone streets of Zhitomir,
No layered, patched skirts to hide under.
Wearing my heart outside my body?
Carp swim circles in a barrel.
The painted bird whistles in a mournful eye.

How would I do in the bedlam and disarray,
the confusion of horses, boots, and bloodletting,
Ataman Suljuk is not Yul Brynner
as some brooding Taras Bulba in billowed trousers.
He is the instrumentum vocale,
the tool with the sharpened face.
Would I hide under my cart of pins and needles,
the paper and notions, would I cry out
when the flat of the sword caught my cheek.

III

The Luftmenschen fold the maps into songs and stories
that they sing to themselves before they sleep.
Songs that mark the forest paths,
with strips of ribbon, far from Zhitomir
they notch the shy trees, tuck stories in their cradled limbs.
Etch letters that are numbers to dance like flames
above the doors of strangers.
The language of the people of the air.
Fellow travelers in smart old shoes
show you how to sew that necklace into your greatcoat,
here's how to avoid the check points.
Luka is a friendly town
Dubovitz is not.
Here's how to hide your locket of keepsakes
in the heel of a boot.
Here's how to sugar the border guard
with jewelry or smiles or the promises of favors.
Here's how to find the crossing, the harbor,
the rocking lap, the dark belly of the SS Furst Bismarck.
The Darmstadt just pulled out of port
the SS Penland, sailing under a British Flag
is bound for Japan, Shanghai and San Francisco.
Count your rupes carefully. What else can you sell?

In the Berlin Station, the train takes on coal and water.
Faces press against steamed-up windows.
Local Jews sit at tables
dapper in long fur coats and canes,
gathered silk dresses, and fashionable shoes.
Bread and soup they served the Luftmenschen
apple strudel , dolls and tops to the children.
Molly slowly turns a wooden figure in her hand,
A blond boy in liederhosen with a feather in his cap.

A tall, pale woman, with a parasol,
a scented angel, fingers Molly's auburn braids.
Molly touches the white, perfumed wrist.
The painted lips part to speak:
"Shayne punim, shayne ketzela,
what a silly question.
Yes, of course we're Jews,
but first we're Germans."

Shayna Punim, Shayna Ketzela: pretty face, pretty kitten.

IV

In the murmur of closed air, in steerage,
in the rocking lap of The SS Penland,
by the engines that labor and groan
in the trembling of shadow pools and pressed nights,
a concertina, a calloused fiddle, and a mouth organ, recall
“Rozhinkes mit Mandlin,”
Raisins with almonds.

In patched carpet bags, in burlap sacks,
in hearts trussed with twine and old rope,
in valises stuffed with stale bread, hard, longshots,
posed sepia memories in stiff borrowed clothes,
in hidden pockets of old great coats,
clutchers of lean bones,
clutchers of thin straws and last hopes,
reluctant lovers of leaving,
the Luftmenschen bear their remnants and last chances.
As they squeeze toward the portholes
to bathe their faces in the North Sea air
in the second winds of morning.

Molly is on her toes—ich vil zayen—
lift me to see. On thick corduroy shoulders,
she watches through a sunrise porthole
a pantomime of lumbering golems
billowed riders on twisted horses
knotted, puffed, like fresh-risen chala.
There! carrying a candle,
a flying fish with the head of an angel
in folds of darkness and emerging light.
Inverted heads linger over translucent torsos,
shot through with prisms of rose and gold,
toys of remembering, over a green kimono sea.

V

In Japan the money runs out.
The rubles that Moma kept in her gotkas
are worth less than toilet paper.
Molly, Max, and her mother, walk the streets.
Dora sews and cleans for the Europeans.
They lived with the doll people,
butter skinned with the voices of birds.
They drink green bitter tea from tiny cups
no lumps of sugar to put between their teeth.
Small hands touch a freckled arm.
Keiko giggles and brushes out Molly's auburn hair
to twist and pile it on her head.
Molly smiles the Rose of Sharon.

It takes thirty men running to get the big kite off the ground.
They are fishing in the speckled, blue waters of Heaven,
where the clouds are lotus blossoms, here
on the other side of the world.
They are letting the big golden one,
the king of the carp run, hoping
he won't sound and get away.
They are taming bulls, and wild white horses.
They are chasing turtles, cranes and dragons.
The Buddhist priests augur the future,
if the baby will be a boy or girl
by reading the kite's direction and the turtle's smile.
Smaller fighting kites dart and chase each other.
The losers flutter, and tumble in a confusion
of splintered bamboo, torn, painted silk,
sparrow bones and colored paper,
a long, spiraling disarray.
When a child is born, we fly a kite, Keiko tells Molly
to welcome the souls of children.

A bare-chested man pulls on one of the lines.
A mustached red-eyed dragon and a chrysanthemum
glisten red and blue, trembling on his back.
He beckons Molly with a toss of his head,
to hold the rope with him between the other men.
Follow the tattooed man's gold-toothed smile
upward Molly, up the line, there—
a box kite bigger than the old synagogue in Zhitomir
floating in the sky in the shape of golden carp
that struggles against the line
he will swim against the currents upstream.
You can hear the great bamboo struts creak and strain.

Gotkas: underwear.

VI

No matter how you chase it, Molly,
your mind slips away
like the young bear before he was captured,
on the edge of the hunters' camp site—pacing
smelling the cooking fires but keeping his perfect distance.
They make out his shape in the shadows
but their nooses and ropes are useless,
there on the edge of the old growth forest
outside your village in Zhitomir.

I'd like to turn the foot treadle backward,
unwind all those hours in the factory, unravel
all the dresses, the shirtwaists,
all the sleeves and collars
until all the colored threads
are piled up high around you like the snowdrifts
that cover the bear as she sleeps, but so much taller
as tall as this high-rise of iron and glass,
dovecotes and warrens.
These cubicles of final hibernations,
this view out a window that doesn't open,
over the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers,
where a quarter moon hangs in the clouds
like a necklace of memory and forgetting,
white pearls of morning and the black pearls of sleep,
years, days, names, words, slipping off the necklace
into the shadows of the river
named for a tribe of Indians
that no one remembers.
You are transparent, almost invisible,
faceless as the stars.

Downstairs in the recreation room,
Luftmenschen and the ghosts of Luftmenschen
play bingo for cheap watches,

movie passes and meal-deal coupons at Wendy's.
For exercise they march softly in place, bend
and twist stiffly from the waist.
"Good Mrs. Kanter, breathe deeply,
"Mrs. Techner, I like your exercise outfit, very stylish."
The ones in the wheelchairs, faces like apple dolls
move their arms in slow circles and rock to the music.
Sometimes the boy with the guitar sings
"Kisses Sweeter than Wine"
"It Was a Very Good Year."
Maybe the boy knows "Rozhinkes mit Mandlin."
Your favorite song,
are you wearing a necklace of raisins and almonds?

VII

The hokey pokey man sells penny ice cream on brown paper,
down the street from Tin Pan Alley.

The woman that Molly cleans for tells her,
“You want to go to the ball Miss Smarty Pants?
“Go dance with the laundry.”

The Hurdy Gurdy man cranks the magic box
and the monkey in the red cap dances.

Outside the factory, at the general strike meeting
the Pinkerton Captain tells his men
to get the red-headed one.
The big mouthed Jew-girl with the bandana.

In di Goldeneh Medina, hungry hands are the smart hands
that sew shirtwaists for the Gibson Girls
who gaze off into the distance from the cover of Harper’s Bazaar.
Molly, the learner, buys her own thread and Singer machine.
Forty-five dollars down, a dollar a month.
In the din of pressed air, the piecework and shadow pools,
the machines roar like the engines of heaven.
She joins the other sewers, pressers, basters, pullers,
the fellers, tenders and turners at the sooty windows,
where they gather for lunch,
like they pressed toward the portholes in steerage.
Each week the girl who produces the least is fired
at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory
at 33 Washington Place in 1911.

In my newsreel memory, factory foremen
sugar the police with fifty dollar bills in cigar boxes.
Hired thugs and prostitutes pick fights with the women picketers.
The police move in to restore order to things.

My Farbende, the fire that dances,
I see you Molly in your one room, fourth floor walkup
that you shared with Sara Brenman.
You climb slowly into the tub in the kitchen
your arms, black and blue, swollen purple and greenish-yellow,
that covered your head from the policemen's clubs
when you threw marbles under their horses' hooves
outside the factory, when the private guards
knocked you and the other girls down,
and the rich ladies on the sidewalk,
the Gibson Girls on the trolley cars cheered.

Shirtwaists: popular kind of blouse, popularized by the Gibson Girl look.

Gibson Girls: models drawn by Gibson that appeared in magazines such as Harper's in the early nineteen hundreds.

VIII

I have a secret, I can tell you
now that we are alone here
and I am a grown man in my forties.
You are the woman in the painting
A Double Portrait with a Glass of Wine,
wearing the gray dress, Molly
with the slit up the right front leg,
plum-colored stockings, a necklace of raisins and almonds
the bodice is undone, loose and laughing,
a crescent moon in the creamy clouds,
breasts of Susana and the Rose of Sharon,
You are dancing with me on your shoulders,
Hossana, Hossana, O Susana, I sing
in my thick, greenhorn accent.
As we laugh.

I hold up a glass of ginger ale and cherry Kijafa.
Is that a jester's cap I'm wearing,
or my love for you, dressed up in purple,
descending in an emerald cloud?

I sit astride your broad bare shoulders,
one hand over your right eye as you dance.
What are you holding in your hands,
playing cards, tickets to Coney Island, a bouquet of feathers?
You smile, almost bursting
as the laughter lifts us off the ground.
Our heads turn upside down
your eyes are open, my eyes are closed
as we curve into each other
in the folds of colors inside of colors,
fields of yellows, rough ochres and mustard.
We are high over Zhitomir
then back in the kitchen,
for the kiss.

IX

If Molly was eleven in the pottery
seventeen in the Shirtwaist factory
then she was sixty or so, when I stood on a chair
and she pinned my pants
and hemmed them for my Bar Mitzvah.
The cast iron wheels spun
the filigreed iron treadle rocked and dovened in place.
Baruch Atoi Adonai Eloheynu Melach Chalom.
I watch her hands, smart, alive like birds,
skin still like porcelain even then, high cheekbones
hair still rusty red.
So she must have been 75 at the break-in.

Instrumentum vocale—a tool with a sharpened face
jimmies the window and drops in on the balls of his feet.
A gloved fist, a knife, a flushed, oiled muscle with barely a voice,
A spider web on his elbow, a blue teardrop by his eye,
a crying heart tattoo,
baggy pants, backwards baseball cap, or was it a beanie?
Was he white or Puerto Rican?
“I don’t have much money, but you can have it.
“Is this something you really want to do, sonny?”
Then the apartment, settles into bedlam and disarray
furniture overturned, broken sepia pictures
of men and women in stiff borrowed clothes,
unsmiling faces cut open hiding no folded money.
Thick seventy-eights of Jan Pierce, Caruso, shattered,
“Songs from the Trenches of the Spanish Civil War”
“Lachrimae”—the broken notes
like so many rabbit bones and shattered tremolos,
the books dumped from shelves hiding nothing,
no money, no gold rings or jewelry.
Those old Jews—up to their tricks again.

You are a late night long distance telephone.
A two-line notation in the neighborhood paper .
“Elderly woman beaten and robbed
near Rising Sun Boulevard and Broad Street.”
Ella, the neighbor, finds you Monday morning
a ragdoll in a confusion of blood and nightclothes,
a long, anonymous pain.
Quick take her pulse.
Wrists like the bones of a sparrow.
Plum and butter clouds on the silk.
Crazed blue skeins on porcelain skin.
Not a ragdoll, not a feather,
a broken kite of balsa wood and torn paper.
Nobody gonna hit you anymore.
Old bones aren't made for that kind of beating.
Who'd want to cause an old woman this kind of trouble?
Nothing but small change in the cookie jar.
Call 911, she's still alive.
Mrs Techner can you hear me?

*Baruch Atoi Adonai Eloheynu Melach Chalom: Bar Mitzvah
prayer.*

X

They say the sense of hearing
is the first to come and the last to go.
Can you hear me Molly, I whisper in your ear.
Let me tell *you* a story, this time.
You are back on the streets of Zhitomir.
I have set right your father's cart on the cobbled stones.
The Black Hundreds have disappeared.
I brush off your dress and buy you fresh baked chala.
Here, take this baked potato, this hard-boiled egg
to warm your hands, on your way to the pottery.
Tonight you will have all the chicken you can eat,
not the neck or rear end once a month,
the Pope's nose, your father calls it
under his breath, but a breast and a leg,
like the men in the family used to get.

Lie across my lap and I'll scratch your back,
the way you scratched mine when I was little.
We'll play the game where we trace letters and words
in Yiddish on each others back to guess them.
Hurray, hurray, di Buba gelait ayn ey.
Fa vus fa vus, zi hut a langa nuz
I will blow air in the palm of your hand,
tickle it lightly, then the little mouse
will run up your arm and you will laugh.
Mizela maizela mizela maisela.

Sit at my feet and I'll undo your braids
and take out the tortoise shell combs.
I'll brush your hair down,
trace the pale veins on your neck and temple
under your porcelain skin
as the doll people loved to do.

I want you in the gray silk dress
slit up the side with the plum stockings
A necklace of raisins and almonds.
I'll carry you on my shoulders to the sunset porthole
and then up onto the deck,
out of the closed air, and steerage
out of the rocking of shadow pools,
the pressed nights' murmur.

I'll fly you like a kite
into the second winds of morning
above a green kimono sea.
I want to feel the tug and pull on the line,
then release the string and float you into the billows.

Hurray, hurray...a langa nuz: a children's rhyme, "Hurray, hurray! the grandmother laid an egg. Why, why! because she has a long nose."

Mizela Maisela: mousey, mousey, little mousey.

XI

Now Molly, one last Buba Meisa,
a story, like the ones you used to tell me.
The Great Bear is asleep,
hibernating tonight in the folds and hollows of space,
a black hole in some far off region
of her old growth forest.
In the thickness of her blackberry dreams such time passes,
ten thousand years with every long breath.
The belt of the hunter frays
and the constellations drift a little more apart
The great bear smells honey in the hollow tree,
like the one you and Max hid in from the Cossacks
that night coming home from the pottery
in the woods, outside of Zhitomir.

The bear dreams of her mother,
way behind the sun.
She is yawning, waking,
sliver flashes ripple down her back.
as she rubs her side against the rings of Saturn,
licks the mist off the Milky Way
and drinks from the river of shining milk.
She unravels and numbers our days,
moves the drifting planets back into their places.
She is light-years beyond the hunters and watchers
with their useless snares and nooses
their night scopes and listening machines.
They will never again see her face to face.

She approaches through the firmament
in her slow and rolling gait,
yes, unmuzzled, and unchained,
claws longer than the Big Dipper,
stars, like night-blooming jasmine hanging in her fur.
She shakes off the blackberry dreams of night

and reaches for the honey-covered sun.
She rises on her hind legs, lumbering,
no balalaikas, no concertinas,
no Pole and drunken Russian soldiers poke her with sticks.

Listen, Molly, under the rose petals of your sleep.
Press your face, against the window.
The hokey pokey man is calling your name.
The hurdy gurdy is playing “Rozhinkes mit Mandlin,”
and the bear begins to dance.

the rivers of shining milk: Octavio Paz.