

AUNT BIRD, CONJURED

—For Feiga Maler, 1919 – 1942
who died in the Kraków Ghetto

i.

When I still spoke the language of falling snow bending in the wind, and believed the world could be a different way—that we could learn to dress ourselves in the life of another—my young aunt’s soul slipped into my bedroom and bloomed like a pear tree.

My fingers were beating a keyboard, dust zigzagging in the woolen light of the winter afternoon. The river outside my window was taut along a horizon that clung to the fuzzy nap of sky. In that sky, the sun had begun to burn a hole, so that the atmosphere seemed to be fraying.

My aunt’s sapling soul was nervous and mute, her mouth having been stopped up with earth for so long. Still, she grew—white flowers bursting from her chin—but remained silent.

ii.

Years later, haunted by my computer screen’s membrane of light, I discovered what her fate had been, her brief story chronicled on the flare of the Internet’s pages. But I couldn’t stop seeing her beyond the monitor’s plastic skin.

(Genocidal little earth,
I imagined you sniffing
the hem of her skirt,

letting death piss
against her moon ribs

and carve up her nights, erase her desire
to inhabit a whole life,
to tear away her scrim of sadness.)

iii.

What I found out: she had taught in a school for girls, and was killed in Kraków in 1942. She was just twenty-three. The Germans occupied the city, its vast squares stained by the dregs of each dawn’s milk-tea light.

On the far side of the Vistula River, the enemy had created a Jewish ghetto in the area known as Podgorze. Gone were the buzzing lanterns on the garrulous streets of Kazimierz, the quarter that had housed the largest Jewish population. And vanished from the porches and balconies, leaning on the breeze, were the slumping succahs, the small shelters built in memory of the Jews who had lived in the desert, their roofs covered with fir tree branches.

No one could be seen praying on the riverbanks on the second day of the New Year anymore. No one could be seen tossing breadcrumbs into the water, the ritual for casting away sins. This was what the occupation authorities wanted. By March 20, 1941, the resettlement of the population was complete.

But after Passover, the ghetto began to look strange, carpenters and bricklayers building walls around it in the form of Jewish headstones. Large arches hunched along a crooked sky. Bars were fastened to windows, their boney shadows clutching the floors of crowded rooms.

iv.

(I share a skin with her now.

Her life unleashed
from time's body.

But how far can I picture
the edge of her breathing,

guess the shape of her collarbone
or grasp a God gone wild?

I, who am so unencumbered,
watching the snow of a new January swarm

and soften my world with its fat whiteness.)

v.

Her life was like a thick soup in my mouth. Her name the Yiddish word for "bird": *Feiga*. She wiped a grain of soil from her lips, and I could hear the meat of her voice speak. It climbed up and down my mind, so that she inhabited the weave of each thing.