

Amol iz geven

A shlemiel is a ne-er do well, someone you wouldn't want your daughter to marry, but it could describe the man you married. A mentsh is the person you should have married, the one who visits your dying grandfather in the hospital, gives to the Jewish Federation of Metrowest, and asks you what you need. A nar is a fool, also the man you married, who was full of narishkeyt, who could only give you tsoris.

Yiddish is the name of the Jewish language in Yiddish, and I am too young to understand this syllogism when my aunt says before a 1960s seder that my grandfather speaks beautiful Jewish. No, I insist, it's Yiddish. Yiddishkeyt is the Old Country, the Lower East Side, some parts of Brooklyn and the Bronx, where Yiddish store signs and phrases in the street reminded you of where you came from, even if Men's Furnishings and Kosher Chicken Market are still English but transliterated. But in Jersey, outside of maybe Newark's Prince Street, Yiddishkeyt is in the home, in the lighting of the Shabbos candles, your mother kissing your keppy to determine your temperature, putting an ankle sock filled with kosher salt to your ear to cure an ache, the assessment of her health, *Tsulib nisht-gutkeyt, bin ikh geleygn in bet a gantsn tog*, your mother confides to her sister on the phone so you don't have what to worry that she felt sick and lay in bed all day.

Amol iz geven is once upon a time. A bubbe mayases a tall tale probably told by some bubbe, every bubbe, every grandmother, somewhere at some point. If you don't sit down to listen, Tateh will give you a tender whack on your tuchus and then you won't be able to sit down. Mameh disciplines with her look and choice words, but then she'll comfort you with a mamashaynele cheek pinch and say *such a punim, such nachas*.

There in the dining room are the tchotchkes from the immigrants who came to the Goldene Medina, bought from Woolworths but displayed as rich treasures. There too are the photos of the only Bubbe and Zayde who allowed their photos to be taken. The other grandparents insisted the camera would steal their souls already—like a goniff. On the table all set for the Cousins Club are the bagels, lox, ready for a generous shmear of scallion cream cheese from Tabatchniks.

Then, as you yawn, your mameh tells you, *Geh shlofen*. And you go upstairs, check under the bed and in the closet for dybbuks. You climb into the bed, pulling the quilt made from Bubbe's mothballed featherbed up to your chin. Mameh tiptoes to your bedside, tucks you in, and whispers, *A gute nakht*.

Homage to the Women

They have no surnames, the eighteenth-century females
in my family tree. Aside from their children, they bear
only the names of their fathers:

Moszkowna

Eliaszowna

Michlowna.

In my ancestors' part of the world, before this,
there were no surnames at all.

Only Yudel the Tinsmith. Or Mendel
from Krasnoe. But the men are remembered by their
signatures in Polish and Yiddish on civil records, by
the act of witnessing births, marriages, and deaths.

They were taught in kheder to read and write,
lick the honey from their fingers.
The women were shown to cook and sew,
expected to bear children. Grandmothers were forgotten
but for their gefilte fish, candlesticks, and
featherbeds. The grandfathers passed down
their tefillin and tallit, their prayer books,
and the way they swayed when praying:
Hear, O Israel, the L-rd is our Gd, the L-rd is One.
Shema Yisroel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.

But as the men prayed, the women did math
in their heads, no abacuses needed to
give correct change back to customers. They
passed down their recipes, their pots and pans,
their stories, their keppelah kisses.

Bryna Dvorkin Krasner, daughter of Hillel Meyer,
I proudly wear your name, study your language,
frame your photo and your life.

A Band of Mothers

We five huddle, sharing our blue and white mosaic tesserae. My mother, Lillian, stands next to me, her mother, Rose, next to her, her mother, Esther Toby, next to her, her mother Chaja Rojza after whom Rose was named, next to her. Lillian's black lungs come from her seventy years of smoking her Kents, because a lit cigarette dangling between two red-polished nails gave her a regal air. Rose wears a corsage like the one she wore for her fortieth wedding anniversary in 1958 outside Schuster's Kosher Restaurant. Esther Toby holds a megaphone to make herself heard over the din of immigrants while she sells pretzels on Coney Island Beach until the police catch up with her. Chaja Rojza bears the black burden of widowhood, losing her butcher husband when he was just thirty-eight, leaving her in the shadows to raise four children on her own without meat. And I play a guitar, strumming their melodies of coughing and keening, as if we were sitting around the Seder table singing "One Little Goat," and the defeat of the Angel of Death.

Zakhor

For Emily Hall and her grandmother, Esther Politus Mordechai

Last night I ran a program to commemorate
Yom Hashoah. The speaker was the granddaughter
of a Greek Holocaust survivor. Between the stitched
seams of her narrative, between the creased folds of
photographs tucked into a drainpipe in Ioannina
for safekeeping, is a mother placing her hands
on twelve-year-old Esther's head
to bless her sewing apprenticeship,
as if it were a Sabbath gift.

Wrapped up in Esther's story, I neglected to light
my own memorial candle to remember my maternal
grandfather's siblings, my paternal grandmother's
siblings, the heavy losses dealt to my family,
losses I would never have known about
had I not dug into my ancestral roots.

Esther was the only one in her family to survive. She
and a new husband came to America in 1951. She
found a job as a seamstress for a North Carolina
department store, tailoring a future for herself and her family
stitch by stitch, seam by seam, at seventy cents an hour.

My grandmother stitched together a plan to sponsor
her only surviving sibling to steam to America. My father
drove her to Manhattan, to wait on long queues
at the Joint and HIAS. Finally, in June 1951,
Leo and his new family arrived. My grandmother
hadn't seen him in nearly forty years. But
the seams between eldest sister and youngest
brother ripped when my grandmother gurgled
her last breath two months later.

Esther took every opportunity to speak out—
at schools, synagogues, the USC Shoah Project,
before dementia set in, forcing her into assisted living.

Both Emily and I, the granddaughters, quilt the patches
of witness and remembrance. We knot the threads in place.

What Do We Inherit When We Inherit the Name of the Dead?

Do we inherit the shape of the face, the size of the ears, the length of the limbs? Do we inherit their fears, their worst secrets, their first loves? Their illnesses, weakness of spirit?

I am named Bryna, after my father's sheitl-wearing paternal grandmother, who died twenty years before my birth. I carry her ears, her insistence on family connection, her ruthlessness, her leap-of-faith decisions like leaving Russia for America at the age of sixty.

I am not named for my father's mother, Eva, but I carry her thin hair, her business savvy, her diabetes, her cancer. I bear her burdens of bringing family together after the Shoah. She did it in person. I do it on charts and Ancestry. In the 1990s, her cousin Evelyn told me about the day her father picked Eva up at New York Harbor in 1913. Her cousin Murray told me my grandfather Max may have owned the business, but Eva was boss. Her other cousin Evelyn couldn't remember and nibbled on her bagel shmear. I've traced Eva's steps on the sidewalk of the Bergen County courthouse. I've shown my father his mother's signature on her Petition for Naturalization, and his own name, typed. He took my hand in his and cried.

In Praise of Dreams

After Gary Soto

In my dreams,
I religiously do the laundry every week,
carefully fold and put everything away.

I tell my parents they are, in fact, dead
but I'm glad they're still in our family home,
my mother in the playroom watching her stories
and my father in the living room reading
the *Newark Evening News*.

I pick up the viola again, ignoring
my sister's insistence that the strings
are made of cat gut and take
the star seat of the school orchestra.

With the instrument against my chin,
bow in hand, I conjure Strauss'
Don Quixote windmills that churn
Schumann's pictures of fairy tales,
Hansel and Gretel clouds fluttering
against the gray sky.

In my dreams, Caravaggio's *Lute Player*
receives a message from his beloved
that she's given up the other fellow
and belongs to him now, lured by his strings.

Picture me, helping Wyeth's Christina
to her feet and escorting her
in my ATV to her house. Her thankful mother
invites me in for Earl Gray tea and crustless
watercress sandwiches impaled
with plastic swords.

I love to drive among the high grasses,
smell spring around me and I no longer sneeze.

I pull out a composition book
and label it "Second Chances."
Its lines are already filled.

Sonic Cash Registers, 1933

My grandmother opened the cash register
to find fiery ribbons of celluloid instead
of dollar bills. George Washington had moved
to Hooverville. The explosion down at River Road
belched waste-filled flames toward the sky. Damages
to nine now wasted buildings were estimated
at \$100,000. Not counting the ten
dead people and seventy-five injured.
The plant owner, Al Scheinzeit,
was charged with eight counts
of manslaughter. His cash register
required him to lease, not own,
the building. The property owner's
wife and daughter wasted
in the blast. Scheinzeit, whose shoes
squeaked from firehose spray, slipped
on his bail, causing it to slide down
the polished floor from ten grand to \$7500.
Maybe he asked his chauffeur for the moolah
as they passed each other at the police station.

The temperature on June 9 continued
the New Jersey heat wave. By 3:30 that afternoon,
the thermometer burned 100 degrees.
Store owners shut their bare cash registers
to relieve their cranky kids and themselves
of the heat and worry. They stuck
their toes into the Passaic River from the beach
at River Road & Hawthorne Ave.
They inched into the water, slapped
each other and the tips of current. Laughter
came out from behind the setting sun,
and wrapped itself around the dark
side of the waning moon. At 9:15 that night:
Boom!
Fiery ribbons teased, tickled,
and tangled torsos and limbs.
The sound of piercing screams and sirens.
The smell of burning flesh and plastic.

My father and his brothers ran down to the river

to see what was up. “You’ve got to do something,”
they demanded when they came back home
to their apartment behind the family’s general store.
My grandmother looked at my grandfather.
My grandfather looked at my grandmother.
They assembled boxes of canned corn
and black socks. They aimed to take them across
Ridge Road to Boro Hall and the makeshift
emergency treatment center. My grandmother
opened the cash register. “Let’s take
this too,” she said. My grandfather nodded.
But the drawer only held mangled plastic,
a film reel too hot to handle.

Surprise

1849

By July well-to-do New Yorkers left the city
for their country homes—soot-free air would protect
them from hollering cholera down near Five Points.

But Mother, pregnant, hoped for her first boy
after three girls and Father did not want to put
her or him, whom they'd name Eleazar, in jeopardy.

No hoofs on Union Square cobblestone, no
hissing of gaslights. Father and servants insisted
the girls be quiet. Mother must have her rest

In her four-poster, mahogany bed, the brocaded
drapes drawn over slightly opened windows. Mother's
womb gave notice. She called for her kin, Nathan women,

and the family doctor. But the son
did not arrive. I did. They named me
Emma, Emma Lazarus.

Acceptance

1864

I assault Father's knee with my sheath
of scribbles and beam as he reads aloud
my tear-stained violets

while my sisters
flounce around the house
tending to his comfort.

I know what they are thinking—
I am the self-appointed anointed one—
strange distinction
for the middle child.

When I peek out from my
barricades of books
and porcelain dolls I name
Athena, Artemis, Hera, Persephone.

I see only broken
vows, broken
hearts, broken
lives—
unrequited love
unanticipated death
unprecedented murder—
the core of my writing.
None of it original.

Success

1866

Come here, daughter, Father
holds out a brown paper package.
What is it?
I can see it's a book.

I can see he's bought it for me. A
first edition perhaps? A rare book
from Europe? Have we been missing
a volume from our Goethe and Schiller
collection? I untie the string, remove
the paper. I spy the title and author,
glance at Father, the gold flecks in his eyes glinting.

The title is *Poems and Translations*
by Emma Lazarus. Written between the ages
of fourteen and sixteen. I am a book author.
Through clouds of tears and still carrying
the book, this precious book, I blanket
Father with thankful kisses. *Enough*
of that now, he says, pushing me off his lap.
Decorum, always decorum. This is just a little
something for family and friends. He beams still.

I place the book under my feather pillow and let
my own words lull me to sleep.

The Jewish Cemetery at Newport

1867

*But ah! what once has been shall be no more?
The groaning earth in travail and in pain
Brings forth its races, but does not restore
And the dead nations never rise again.*
—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport”

Mr. Longfellow:

You took it upon yourself
to wander
through the Jewish cemetery,
through the inscribed stones,
liberating Sephardic ghosts, including
my own great-great uncle, Moses Seixas,
for paradise.

You know not the meaning of the names—
Lopez, Rivera, Touro, and even Seixas—
that catapulted Newport and my family
to gold-filled pouches and bank vaults.

Mr. Longfellow:

The synagogue,
and not the cemetery,
is the center of Jewish life.
You found its doors closed. Had they been open,
your eyes would have rested upon
the perpetual lamp and undying radiance, pews
the place for prayers from the freed slaves of Egypt.

Mr. Longfellow:

I realize I am many years
your junior, but someone needs to enlighten you.
The sacred shrine is holy yet.

The Sage of Concord

1868

Father ushers me into the home
of Samuel Gray Ward. He wants to show
me off, his protégé, the recipient
of his bankroll. Like a colt, I want to bolt
from the stable, until I spot
the gray-haired gentleman
in the parlor. He is tall, assured,
in meticulous black silk tie.

Father squeezes my fingers and pulls
me into the parlor. We approach this Puritan
man, his voice snapping of New England.
May I introduce my daughter Emma, Mr. Emerson?
She's a poetess. Though my hands no longer rest
in my muff, a warmth explodes within me.
Mr. Ralph. Waldo. Emerson.
And me. *Delighted*, this Sage of Concord
says and he takes my black-gloved hand.

Father says, *She has written a book.* Now I
know his intent. I can see Mr. Emerson
holding my 200 pages in his great hands, amazed
at the young talent who can translate
Goethe, Schiller, and Heine. My words will move
him as his words have moved me
and a thousand other youthful hearts. His
Self-Reliance has been the beacon,
no, the guiding star

through disagreements with my sisters—
 who gets to serve our father
 who has more stylish taste
 who is Mother's favorite—
through the nights when my mind muddles,
through the days when I am ignored.

Patience is not my virtue, but I wait until
my second volume is published. I inscribe
a copy: *Mr. Emerson with kind regards*

of Emma Lazarus. February 12th, 1868. New York.

Now we shall see if Father has been justified
in introducing us.

He Should Like to Be Appointed My Professor

1869

This is what Mr. Emerson writes:

*I await a letter from you
renouncing & denouncing me—
incapable of friendship, for I am a borrower,
not reviewer of your manuscripts.
Did you ever read such a word as 'gainst
in Tennyson—you've used it twice.
The verse fails by absence of all force & melody
in your last line. I will venture to sketch what I think
the ear requires. You permit feeble lines & words.
Cut everything that does not delight.*

I hang on his every word & realize
I am not much for *Reliance*.

The Sonnet of Long Island Sound

1869

I step onto the packet boat while servants
load our trunks. We roll across the sound to the island,
and climb the stairs to Beeches, the Lazarus cottage
they allowed Father to build only on the wrong
side of Bellevue. If I move aside the window shade
tassels, brace my hands against the sill, and lean perpendicular
out my bedroom window, I spy the sea.
The breeze through Brenton Reef lifts nine months
of must and mold. Down on the beach, but still
wearing shoes, I spot a sail. I breathe
children's laughter and cricket chirps, the lisping
tide reels me in like fishing nets near the cove.
I make the sounds and sights my own
while clouds change without notice.

Rhetoric

1870

What if
I let down my hair and let
it tumble down my back as I lean
forward
 over my writing desk?

What if
I wrote in my dressing gown
without the whale bone and laces,
not caring a whit
 about calling cards in my purse.

What if
I sneaked an orange from the kitchen
and did not join the family at breakfast? Then
no one would criticize
 my ink-stained fingers.

What if
I could just stare out the window
at my cherry tree and conjure up the words
of great poets
 & call them my own?

Then
I'd be accused of copying the masters
and having no voice of my own. How can I
when it has been tethered
 to corsets of tired phrases?

Headlines Fugue—Poor Washington

1870

My cousin makes the headlines, too,
arrested for the murder of my uncle,
the judge. Poor Washington Nathan.
He'll never be the same. Poor Washington.

*Horrible Murder. Benjamin Nathan,
the Broker, Assassinated in His Own House.
His Body Found Bathed in Blood
and Terribly Mutilated.*

A gilded fat man
in my own family. Poor Washington.
The way I see it, I am going to have to dedicate
my poem, "Lohengrin," to him:

*Between the massive, blazoned temple-doors,
thrown wide, to let the summer morning in,
Sir Lohengrin, the youngest of the knights,
had paused to taste the sweetness of the air.*

When my poor cousin tastes the air his tongue
will melt with the weight of others' guile.

Headlines Fugue—Puritan Pride

1870

Mr. Emerson has already seen the headlines
in the Boston papers. He writes me,

*I can easily see
that this ghastly incident will for a long time
refuse to be forgotten or hidden or veiled.*

The way I see it,
this ethical but poor Puritan
is telling this importuned
but wealthy New York City Jewess,
the Lazaruses will never
rise above the disgrace of murder.
No fat to shield us
from shame and circumstantial evidence.

Let my pen,
that mighty knife,
cut through marbled fat to bleed justice.