

Homecoming

My mother came to a dead end called Poland.
The shops gone, the house no longer home.
She knocked at the door. A man answered.
She could see over his shoulder into the living room,
Her mother's lamp, her father's chair.
She could hear music swinging from the radio,
post-war American bands. She asked to come in,
just for a minute to take a breath of the air
that might still carry her father's cigarette smoke,
the scent of her mother's soup,
the pencils she sharpened at the desk.
No. No, and again, No.
Words she would carry with her
wherever she went-away from Lodz,
Krakow, Bialystok, away
from the street that was not her street,
the city that was not her city,
a coat that was no longer her mother's coat—
someone else's arms in the sleeves—
a stranger who came to the door,
wearing her father's shoes.

Mishpacha

My aunt kept a strap hanging on the wall,
though my cousins, years later, swore
she never used it.

My uncle stood outside the kitchen window,
barefoot in the dark, outstretched hands
inside his shoes, mumbling;

Fres, Fres Kindele. Eat. Eat.
or Baba Yaga will get you—

that old crone with the crooked grin
who sleeps naked in a house made of twigs.

I'll call the police, my mother would warn,
whipping the receiver off its cradle.

This was America, but what did we know,
green as we were, new shoots rising
from Old Country mud.

I could eat you up, the aunts chuckled, pinching
our cheeks, looming above us like cartoon
characters, words shape-shifting in the air

and we pictured them, mouths bulging
with flesh, spitting out our bones
sopping up bloody scraps on the plate,

as we tilted our heads, listening
for the truth, some great love buried
behind the threats.

Two Tales

For my father

1.

They took your clothes.
They gave you striped pajamas
In which your body swam
like someone far from shore.
They brought you to a barracks
and ordered you lie
beside others also without names.
In the morning, they marched
you to work.
In your hands, they put a shovel,
ordered you to dig. Which you did,
until the hole could swallow the sky,
big enough for you to lie down
and be done. *Fill it up*, they said.
And you did. And when it was
full they said, *Dig*, and you did.

2.

They took your clothes.
They put you in a blue gown
tied at the neck like a child's bib.
They fed you, first with a spoon,
then through a tube.
Beside the bed you heard a voice
calling your name: *Morris, Morris*,
persistent as rain on a roof.
In the hallway shoes clattered
like horses restless in stalls,
and you were walking in the woods,
frost stenciled on the trees,
breath rasping like wind
in your throat.
Then you were home inside
your mother's arms, your face

Poems by Gail Newman from her book "Blood Memory," c. 2020

Ccose to her breast and you
were a boy again, laughing,
with cherries staining your mouth.