

Fran Markover

## Why I Plant Sunflowers

Because I'd watch my grandfather lose himself summers among the tall plants. He studied them, a school boy memorizing the past, urging seeds—*vaxn gezunt*, grow well. Because I picture him among gold-waving faces, lifting me up to the hardiest flower. *Francinooski*, he'd shout, *schane maidele*. As we twirled, my braids swung like thick ropes.

Because gardening was his salvation, he left uncut the fullest blooms for siblings whose names he'd buried in unmarked plots. Because I imagine how the brothers played hide & seek behind sunflowers that lit fields, how the boys severed stems, plucked and cupped seeds, scattered them on a table like gemstones. And the petals. How tightly they held, how soft the letting go.

## Ruchel's Lamp

I was keeper of her light, proud of my polishings until Blackie, the old cat managed a spectacular jump one night, the antique bowl of the torchiere splintering, the hand-painted flowers, fluted edges, just shards. I pictured my great aunt, how she might have perused the broken pieces, how she dealt with shatterings: crystal nights, razed home, separated families. The way she imbued what was broken, irreplaceable with new light. Looking at scattered fragments in my kitchen, I realize it's not the glass shade I grieve but this woman who held me in her lap while I tried on hats she'd sewn in the sweatshop—fascinators with feathers,

bird-cage netting, cottony rosettes.  
"If things aren't as you wish, wish them  
as they are," she'd mutter in a language  
I couldn't quite understand.

### Poya's Ring

I found it in an old keepsake box after grand-  
mother's death. She must have removed her ring  
before she left for the nursing home. I think  
of the history of Poya's treasure, worn to safe  
harbor after escape from the motherland.  
I wear her ring daily beneath my wedding band.  
The time I lost Poya's ring for a few months,  
my brother was hospitalized and I broke a bone  
in my toe. When I found her jewel, I sat on a dock,  
offered prayers for good fortune and protection.  
I touched the worn metal hearts as I watched  
a heron soar for the aerie where its young rest.  
The lake incandescent, inlaid with gold.

### New Year Honey Cake

Grandmother can't tell me why she sobs.  
She chops the pecans.  
Searches inside herself for the next ingredient.  
Nothing ever written down, her cake cut,  
thick slices, letters she could never send.  
In the cinnamon, she conjures invitations:  
cousins, babies, friends, parents:  
Names crossed out on calendars.  
She warms the oven, can't imagine life

without loved ones to share each confection.

Without names to rise for a God who loves sweet offerings.

Sometimes one needs more apricots.

Sometimes more time or light when there's so much heaviness.

Sufferings are for silence.

She reads lines of my face,

stirs in more honey.

### Abram and Esther Go to Temple

Their portraits, that is.

They rest on easels, next to me.

Esther stares into the emptiness.

She is grim, gaunt. Her head is shawled.

She is young and old.

Abram, her husband, has a long beard and frowns.

He might be handsome if wrinkles were gone.

What would they think of their time in temple,

sunlight on their sallow faces, the candles

lit by the children of the congregation?

Of the service called Yom HaShoah.

I bet they'd rather feed the chickens.

I bet they'd rather sleep in a bed of feathers.

I think they wouldn't like us.

I eat bacon, go to market Saturdays.

My husband is Methodist. His salads are Jello.

We plant carrots, lettuce, peppers but neglect to weed them.

My great-grandparents look more weary, wary

as I recite a poem I've written for them

about subjects I know nothing about—

starvation, tauntings, hiding.

They'd say who does she think she is—

this great granddaughter who has the same brown fearful eyes.

What metaphors can bless fresh cabbage, sew a dress,

buy safe passage for the babies?

What simile is as frightening as night?  
As saying our names in public?  
Who does she think she is—  
this shy, awkward woman who has our fists?

### Dzygovka

Finally my cursor finds the town, its legends, each rise and fall.  
My grandmother had scrawled *w* instead of *v*, *i* for *y*.  
She made me vow to never visit. Voice the name of her *matryoshka*.  
Each mouthed vowel, consonant, any *y* as march to the deepest pit,  
flight into the woods. *Shhh ... don't rouse the firebirds. You'll be clawed  
into feathers. Let the babies sleep.*

### *Dzygovka*

When I touch the screen, the computer fills with faces, candles incandesce.  
My palm shawls the window of the Chermoshnuk farm, shrouds  
wooden skates on a dirt floor, yarmulkes, the mandolin I'll strum.  
By my thumb are gilded waves—sunflowers, chickens, a field of children  
whose pictures have been pressed into black pages.

At my wrist, the Dnestr pulses, a vein that ribbons soft hills, a basket  
of challah, waters coursing through my grandparents' thoughts—  
past hushed villages, starred sons, glass smudges of Ukraine  
where my hand wants to pull green stems, fat beets, wants a door of pine  
so I can bless the mezuzah, enter for a bowl of borscht.  
My hands want flesh, stones, a cradle more than any map.

### Grandma's Stew

How she spoke to the vegetables, "soften up,  
already," or "take your time," in Yiddish.

Maybe she was thinking about the garden  
and how the pungent earth sifted through

her calloused fingers. Sometimes, I heard  
cries to the chicken roosting in thick liquid.

Question and response as if she were in shul.

The rabbi intoning his queries, congregants  
nodding amen. Grandmother asking the bird  
what's missing—salt, chives, a *bissel* celery?  
Sometimes, steam would moisten her face.  
It wasn't the onion commiserating or broth  
on lowest flame, but something bone-deep,  
green as kale that led her to whisper "only in  
dreams are carrots as big as bears," or "*mayn*  
cabbage, help me, *Got in himmel*," my God  
in heaven, help me remember—how much  
sour or sweet, how much longer for each  
layer to boil down, simmer, tender as flesh.

## How to Bake Challah

Start with the word: *challah*  
Let the music roll and part from the tongue.

Bless what rises. Bloom the yeast.  
Test the temperature. Warm hands

to mother the dough. Let go perfection.  
If there are flaws, forgive.

Welcome second chances. Take a moment.  
Hold a bit of dough. Love what's raw and tender. Shape-

shift. Put a bird on top. Call it *Feigele*. Savor the name.  
Think Moses ascending Mt. Sinai. Think ascent from misdeeds.

Form ladders. Smooth twelve humps for twelve tribes.  
Round loaves for joys felt wholly like a girl on a swing,  
pigtails flying. Braid the dough, thick, thin. Picture arms intertwined.  
Candles that twist between light and dark.

Weave crowns for prayer. Stir in surprise:  
raisins, dates, cardamom, apples.

Finesse doughy fingers to inscribe Books of Life.  
Scatter seeds, poppy or sesame, like manna gifted over desert.

Spread honey on whatever's dry and empty. Learn how to sweeten.  
When the crust is golden, when the body gives, when voices fill the air,

invoke the old adage: eat bread and salt and speak the truth.  
Dust the good china. Cover the challah the way a shawl wrapped around us

folds into remembrance, talliths of tired shoulders.  
Neighbors, strangers complete a circle in open tents.

Break bread, break morning into song.

### Benny's Confectionery

Among the treats, my father chose my mother  
the day she stepped into Benny's Confectionery

on Avenue K in Canarsie, the year she used her full name—  
Claire Renée, her thick dark curls pinned

with a wild rose. He was handsome, a Brooklyn boy,  
home from the war over France when he ordered

his usual—a double sized egg cream, introducing himself—  
Carl Harris—offering one coconut dusted truffle

to the slim pretty girl at the soda fountain.  
I imagine his light-heartedness at the adagio of her name.

*Claire Renée, if there's honey, there must be mosquitoes.*  
This, before jitterbugs and lindy hops in the kitchen.

Before songs were crooned at the kitchen table:  
*Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me,*

*no, no, no.* Before the troubled children, farm chores,  
second job bussing tables. Tired in later years, after

the illnesses, my parents would rest on the couch,  
the TV a blue hum, candy wrappers scattered on plates.

Father summoning remembered French, *ma chère*, his head  
on mother's shoulder, smears of chocolate on his face.

### Why I Wear Cedar Frost Lip Gloss #81

Because she wore it to clash with her cherry crème cotton candy hair.

Because once when I was little she didn't turn when I peeked at her Double D breasts.

Because her vanity was Hollywood mirror and light.

Because she lent me gold lamé stilettos and decorated my toes Florida orange.

Because she was incense, cumin, cayenne, and halvah.

Because she taught me *bubbalah* and *yenta*, bragged *Delicious Girl* and *schana maidel*.

Because she took on Joker Death in killer rounds of Mah Jongg.

Because she played Prevailing Winds and gambled for Thirteen Wonders.

Because she laid out her loudest muu muu the etherized day of her double mastectomy.

Because she pinked her blackened nails to *Luck Be a Lady* at chemo.

Because Reconstruction was her most practiced game.

Because she waved her wand and spangled Dementia.

Because she spoke in riddles of the Diaspora: *What doesn't exist? A ladder to heaven.*

Because we giggled when I rouged her face before she closed her eyes.

Because I leaned in, heard her say *beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.*

## Penny Social

Once a month, I'd wear my best dress and head for the temple to place my numbers into cups. Treats were plentiful: combs, key chains, quilted pot holders,

aprons sewn by women of the congregation. The knickknacks so enticing but I spent my extra tickets for big prizes: coupons for Bessie's Sweet Shoppe,

or the jackpot I coveted and won: a free cut n curl at Bev's Shear Magic on Main Street. My hair teased and lacquered into a page boy like Natalie Wood's.

But what I recall most was the tingling, the sweat before the winner of each treasure was announced. Rosie, head of the Sunshine Ladies, stepped up

to the bimah, pontificating about the *\*tchotchkes* on tables, praising participants who let go of well-earned pennies and dimes: like Izzy Needleman,

the tailor, leaving zippers and patches at his shop to bid for trinkets or Herbie, smoking his cigars, the rings forming little *O's*, relieved to be far from the

cow barns. Children stopped fidgeting, adults leaned closer toward Rosie, her eyes widening as she yelled to the crowd *and the winner is.....*

\*tchotchkes means "knickknacks" or baubles in Yiddish

## Hebrew Study Group

Syllables become new words, words slur into music, the three of us in awe of so many blessings—ones for rainbows and lightning, for trees that blossom, another for pastry eaten in the bakery where we study each month. We hope bagel, lox, vegan cream cheese arrive with an order of grace. Margaret telling us about the recent passing of Henry, first dog, who set a high bar

for friendship, his hospice on a favorite rug, departing  
the earth with dignity intact. Margaret holding his paw,  
lifting the window wide enough so his canine spirit  
could pass over baby Sylvia, past the garden where more  
prayers flourish, for grass that covers soil padding Henry  
as he ran among the grape hyacinth. For the golden gate  
opening, a mezuzah on the post to welcome Henry home.

### Tree of Life

—it's stitched onto the velvet mantle  
that protects the Torah at Tikkun v'Or,  
the name referencing light and repair.  
Its multi-colored leaves could have been  
appliquéd from Chagall's imaginings.  
We gather by the ark for Kaddish, recite  
names—eleven killed from a sister temple.  
Two victims—cousins of congregants.  
Like any night we're a village as we break  
bread. We welcome guests in our grief.  
Father Joe cries, laments flights of angels.  
Muslim neighbors chant from the Koran.  
Churches send worshippers sharing hope  
and soup. Police circle our building.  
What helps us heal and rise are our deep  
roots, the felt branches reminding us of  
the shelter of each other, how radiance  
can imbue empty spaces. The cloth dove  
hovering over the tree lets us remember  
recovery is a journey. Tapestry limbs sewn  
with invisible, unbreakable threads. The  
Torah wearing its tallit like grandma's shawl.

### Crystal Nights

I've never really feared living in this country.  
Never fathomed how grandparents braved icy tides  
to reach a new motherland. But as I peer through  
my centuries' broken windows, when the temple

I belong to had the glass smashed above the door,  
when my friend's sign *End White Violence* had *Kike*

scrawled in a black Sharpie, I feel hate's surfacing  
from deep rivers in my body. Nights I hear the

shatterings, chalk scratching against the store-  
front *Sunny Days* owned by a Jewish storekeeper,

sun crosses of white supremacy a brazen display.  
And I wonder if and how the shards that stun my

morning eyes can be reconfigured into healing  
mosaic, into stained glass glazed and impermeable—

that whoever repairs each breakage never again  
wipes history's blood-spill from sinews, border walls,

cages of children, never forgets the stone tablets  
broken long ago on a distant mountaintop. That

after a man in our city's heart yelled fascist epithets  
while I was walking, a hope that fragments hurting

inside me can be gathered together, become whole  
and holy in all those tender wounded places.

## Dear Grandmother Zipporah

I want to sail back to 1917, visit the motherland  
where you learned: bring extra sweaters, chocolate,  
crackers, just in case. Sail back to 1920, enter the

rowboat that carried you and young Moishe, grand-  
father-to-be. To witness another vessel, miles up-  
stream, the neighbors who didn't make it. To return,

toss stones of remembrance into the river, recite  
Kaddish for names drowned. I want to be caged in the  
Bucharest jail and fathom the fright of bribing

a soldier, to escape then haggle over a lace dress, the  
wedding ring that'll someday grace my finger. I'd like  
to help rescue grandpa's mandolin so that I could

hear him strum Yiddish folk tunes, the instrument re-  
strung so that his grandson could wail rock songs for  
a high school band. I'd like to fix the immigration

papers that stated your name as Pauline, not Zipporah.  
Time-travel to first sightings of the Mother of all Exiles  
lifting her torch, lighting *your tired, your poor*, as you

struggled with a new language, stepped onto the dock,  
dirty and pregnant with my favorite uncle. To hold sweat-  
pearled hands as we walk, freeing long deep breaths.