

An abstract painting with a vibrant, textured background of various colors including blue, red, yellow, and pink. In the center, a mandolin is depicted with a pink body and a blue neck. Below it, a glass filled with a yellow liquid sits on a saucer. The overall style is expressive and colorful.

Grandfather's
Mandolin

FRAN MARKOVER

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, grandfather-to-be. To witness another vessel, miles upstream, 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, wedding ring that'll someday grace a daughter's finger. I'd like to rescue Grandfather'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 re-stamp immigration papers that stated your name as Pauline, not Zipporah. Time-travel to first sightings of the Mother of 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.

Why I'm Giving You Moishe's Mandolin

for my nephew

Because it's a voice in the dark
that leads you to an opening called college
Because the mandolin contains a small forest –
black cherry pits, twigs, dried leaves
All the squirrel must have needed
to survive the instrument's bowl
in Moishe's dusty closet
Because squirrels, chipmunks, crows
would maraud his May fields
Remind him of sunflowers
Of caches of fruit. Of long, hoary winters
Of what he squirreled away, broken –
screwdrivers, bicycles, chairs
Whatever he could preserve –
pickles, melodies, the forbidden *shima*
an escape, a root, a tremolo
that sustained him across the river Dnestr
The mandolin wrapped in wool
so that almost a century later
I can say good-bye to the frets, the strings
Polish the rosewood
The face riddled with rodent holes
Ready for a young hand like yours
to brush against the grain
Because the way you play guitar

is with a firm stroke and a scowl
Your music raw electric
The hard-rock of guns, gangs, city grunge
The mandolin fragile
Stones seeds dirt rattling inside
The instrument wanting to be re-strung,
plucked, swung to the air
Because your great-grandfather
would have raised a fist to the songs
that rap and gnaw at your belly

Fascinators

I thought her hats were alive.
If she hugged me, the rosebud on the navy
toque could cast a spell with perfume, turn me
into Czarina. Tante Ruchel labored hours
in her city shop, scissors clicking across fields
of muslin, snipping petershams for turbans
with ostrich plumes, or the tassled pillbox
on her antique white hair when she visited
the chicken farm, her flocked polka-dotted
veil tickling my nose, netting that could catch
unlucky mosquitoes. She'd explain how to
finesse cloth around the hat block, beads
held up to the light, sewings as if they were
diamonds. Each hat told a story – the green
fascinator prompted my aunt to celebrate
a princess frog who charmed her prince.
The fur beret, ebony ribboned, evoked journeys
of magical felines, threads woven into knots

of Hollywood whimsies that twisted like braids
of the snow maiden who melted. But the story

I loved most was of the firebird, roused enough
to flee, like my aunt who fled a castled land

to one day stand by my bed. Sequins and satin
spangled into dream where queens and witches

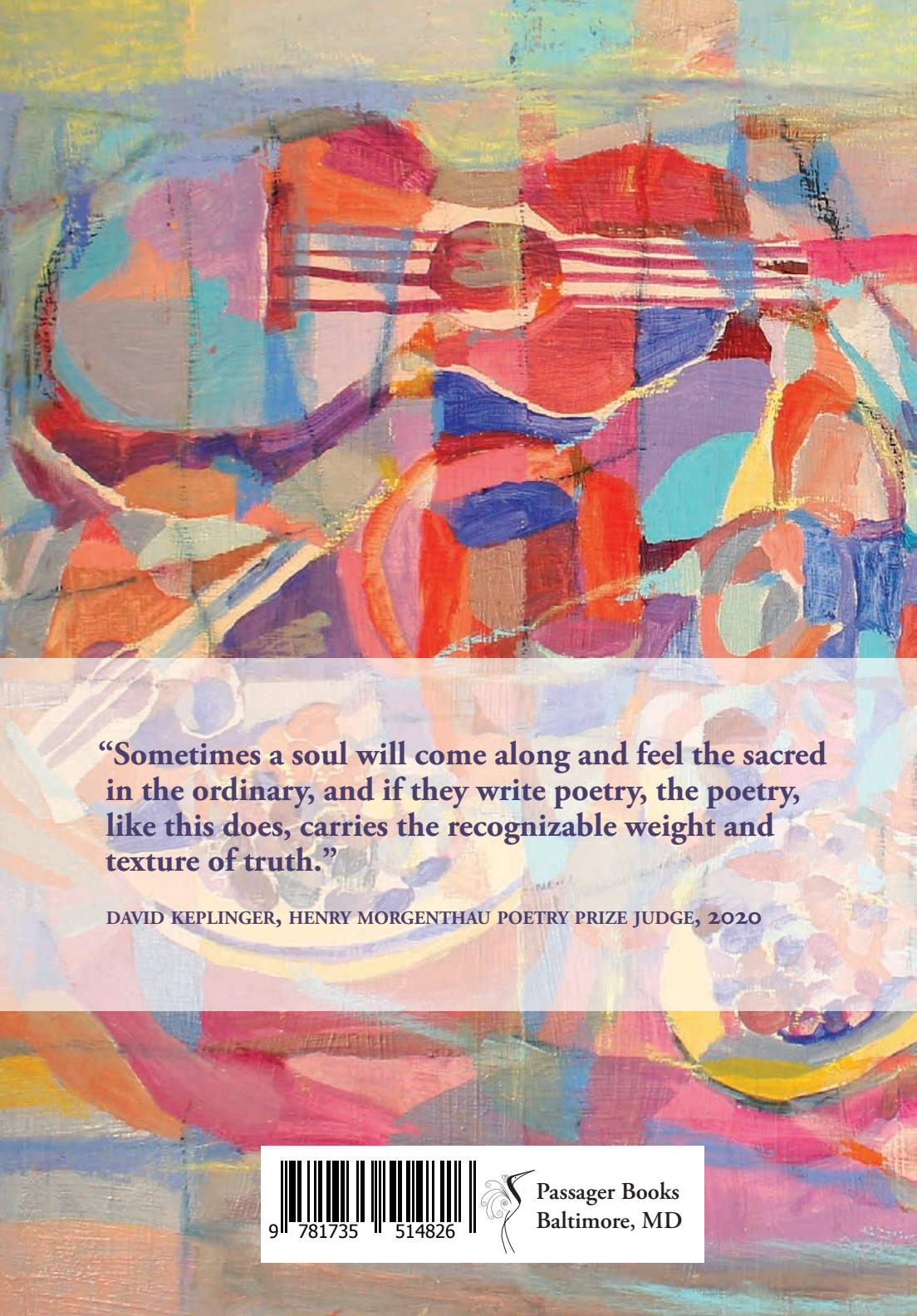
cradled me. A *shush, schane maidele* as the up
and down of feathers brushed against my face.

Kazatchka

After collecting the eggs, he'd pull off farm boots, wipe manure from the soles, phonograph full volume – violins, cimbalom, fifes. I'd watch a father I hardly knew dance in worn flannels. I'm not sure how he learned to lean this way and that. Perhaps some Cossack gene passed down from the fatherland. He didn't last long – jumps, kicks, bends with tired legs, but for ten minutes he channeled Carl, the warrior, squatting by tail guns in a bomber, or riding a stallion, red sash afloat, pants ballooning in wind as he brandished a scimitar. Carl, no longer *chicken plucker* as he stamped his sore feet, rattling cupboards, hands on hips to warn would-be marauders – *Don't dare invade our kitchen.*

Lift-off

The announcer at W-ELV delivers the final blow.
At 184 pounds, its name is Sputnik –
Fellow World Traveler of the Earth.
It's October 4th, 1957, launch day, the day the grandfather
I hardly knew passes to another world.
Max whose demise is forever linked,
forever one-upped by ballistics.
Whose story is scrapped into distressed leather –
the twenty dollar bill left from gambling,
ripped photo showing his grin, in spite of the losses:
wife, two sons never nurtured, his trashed apartment.
Alone on his final journey, he was a boxer at his apex –
Max the Loser vs. *The Mauler* Dempsey
or the *Mad-Capped* Maxie Baer. Grandpa a No-Name
by the time any adversary aimed for the moon.
When he visited our farm, he'd dance with me,
the two of us spinning by the chicken barn.
He'd lift me as high as the lilacs. Ask his perennial question:
Who is the 16th President of the United States?
Abraham Lincoln, I'd answer.
I would descend from his arms. Cram a lavender blossom
into his shirt pocket. He'd jab at my pigtails,
become Max the Kid Harris. With hard-knock-hands,
his left hook rising toward the clouds.

An abstract painting with a rich palette of colors including red, blue, purple, orange, and yellow. The composition is composed of various geometric shapes, circles, and brushstrokes, creating a complex and layered visual texture. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and depth.

**“Sometimes a soul will come along and feel the sacred
in the ordinary, and if they write poetry, the poetry,
like this does, carries the recognizable weight and
texture of truth.”**

DAVID KEPLINGER, HENRY MORGENTHAU POETRY PRIZE JUDGE, 2020



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