

Will Wells

Babushka

I had no name for what Grandmother wore.
Almost a scarf, it fluttered there, a flag
of foreignness which she refused to lower.
It formed a nexus of arcane power,
accessory to her vast repertoire
of Yiddish insults and special curses.
It rode above them, a phonetic mark
super-scripted for added emphasis.

She removed it at bedtime, then undid
her lattice-work of braids. And what unfurled
was long red hair which she took pains to brush
before the mirror, flashed back to the girl,
Emma, courted by Selzer who dealt in junk.
Her preference was young Levi, who wept
and waited, too timid to compete for her —
the first of many sorrows that she kept.

She'd rise at five to bind her hair again
beneath a fresh kerchief, magician's cloth
under which doves with clipped wings lay hidden,
but fidgeting and pecking at her brain.
When grandchildren rampaged her house, she swore
That new storm-troopers had barged in to smash
the few belongings she had worked hard for.
She peeled a stick and dealt us each a smack.

Long past the men she'd set her cap at,
she set her jaw and worked, angry at dust
that swirled and settled, swirled and settled,
the constancy of doing what she must.
Her laundered scarf was exile's counterweight,
familiar as the rustle of her skirts.
Her last remnants of faith were saved for it.
She tugged upon the knot until it hurt.

Near Fossil Butte, Wyoming

My wife rubs a quill across a sandstone slab,
abrading lake sediments cemented down
in the Eocene. Ridged vertebrae stab
through, strung like abacus beads summed in stone.
The feathered end flicks aside loosened dust
till a fossil fish swims into focus,
fine membranes of each fin engraved in rust –
iron leached by ground water's slow stylus.

I probe an outcrop, seeking the layer
of mortality, the stark addendum
of a lake boiled up by volcanic flare
then imprinted in a stony album.
I chisel to pages that are still stuck
and split catastrophe into good luck.