

The Long Waiting (for Joseph Kriesler 1919-2002)

by Sean Thomas Dougherty

“Water, be my memory, let me see what I have lost.”
—Mahmoud Darwish (trans Agha Shahid Ali)

In the small room inside my mother's
Chest, a weeping sound that whispers across
The tall grass of late summer, carries my mother
Toward her childhood, my running mother
Running through the sand in summer rain
Toward her father's lifting hands. My mother
Is a laughing sound at five, —mother
She calls to my grandmother, a hunger
Made of kisses. When the cancer ate his hunger
My Poppa, leaning on his bed, told my mother
I can no longer taste the bread. Social worker,
Scholar, he pamphleted for Socialism

Until it swallowed its own people with precision—
The ideology of the century just ended, my mother
Frightened by the frailness of her father's hand—
Social

We are birthed into the sterile light, the social
Weight we enter with the cutting of the chord.
Across

Our bellies, the tied knot our true tribe. Socialism's
Grandeur: the sound of any child sharing bread.
Yiddish

Was a second language for Hungarian Jews.
The rain

Against my grandfather's windows. Summer rain:
The sound of memory's shoes. At the Social
Welfare office

Paperwork piled on Poppa's desk, the names
of the hungry

My grandfather worked to help. The hungry

Men, women, children at the shelter called him Joe.
Hungry

My mother left my grandfather in that room,
a socialism

Of rain falling, four walls of waiting. She sat
with the hunger

Of grief, picked at a plate of sardines, onion, bread.
Hungary

Was a cracked jewel when my great grand-mother
Boarded the boat at twenty—in 1912, arrived
hungry

At Ellis Island: The copper torch burned the night,
Hungary

Became a left place, a last leaving. Alone across
The cold Atlantic, she carted a trunk of books.
Across

Means to depart, or to arrive? My mother reaches
for her father's hand, Hungary?

She asks him, bones, barely breathing, Water
He asks, closes his eyes. My mother feels
the water

Closing above her head. My great-grandmother's
water

Broke in 1919. Five years later, thin and hungry
From fever, she died. My grandfather sips
his water

Slowly, I haven't thought about her in a long time.
Water

In his eyes, my mother puts a cloth upon his chest.
The social

Agency sent nurses that night. On the *George*
Washington, water

Was passed in a bucket. Waterfalls
Of voices that rode into the harbor. Mother,
Do you ever wonder about this woman,
the grandmother

You never kissed? Long after her death,
the husband who disowned his son, water
Of my grandmother's Christian birth? Across
The aisle my grandfather's side was empty. Across

The Atlantic his rebel mother knitted, not prayed.
Across

Is to arrive, or to depart? Someone has entered
the room. Water

My grandfather whispers, his black eyebrows
knitted. Across

The deck my great-grandmother hummed, spray
washing across

The boots of Czechs, Slavs, the moon spoke
Hungarian,

Bathed her black hair with silver light. Across
Her chest an old Magyar touched the sign
of the cross.

My great grandmother reached for a chair—
parochialism

Of the rural poor, the Pogroms, Socialism promised
A world of workers sharing bread. Regina
Moskowitz crossed

With a thousand other seamstress revolutionaries.
Mother

Who died when my grandfather was five. O Mother

What is this ghost womb calling from the sky?
Mother,

I hear you in the kitchen sobbing. My grandfather
is dead: Across

The ocean, is he traveling? He is just a child.
The summer rain,

Is it carrying him towards his mother? Is she
calling him to Hungary?

Is she singing lullabies in Yiddish? Can you hear?
Her eyes are weeping prisms.