

Music from the Past

Footsteps beat down gray wooden steps.  
Back doors slam to the peddler's call,  
"Straw-ber-ries, to-ma-toes!"  
The horse waits in the alley below.

The scale swings from a chain weighed down  
with eggplants, jewels in this Sicilian  
enclave in Chicago.  
Garlic, tomatoes, peppers and sweet corn,  
the weather-beaten wagon  
carries its bounty through the neighborhood.

Mom plays Chopin on the piano.  
Every Sunday at ten  
we hear Enrico Caruso, Galli-Curci,  
symphonies, blues, jazz and cantorials.

We sing Yiddish, Hebrew, American  
folk and show tunes around the piano.  
Seven musicians in my living room —  
violins, violas, cello and  
my uncle playing bass.

Beethoven painted in oil  
hangs on the wall.  
Every week day morning  
I practice piano exercises and scales,  
music from my childhood.

*Av* (Hebrew month) אב

For some this month is *Tisha B'Av*,  
destruction of ancient Temple  
and other sad days in Jewish history.

For me, this month is personal -  
one *Yahrzeit* -  
I remember my mother

not easily accepting her daughters  
but she brought joy to many  
sharing her music and homemade sweets.

She longed to go to college  
graduating high school at sixteen.  
Four years – no jobs, no Depression dollars for school.

In late 1930s she belonged  
to the ten percent – women with children  
who worked - until her pension began.

## II

My mother hoped to raise a perfect child  
nursing precisely every four hours – the hungry  
cried and waited – experts' advice in those times.

Hard days in later years  
we played piano duets  
instead of using words.

Late at night  
when dad lay fast asleep  
she listened

when I chose to talk  
in my teenage years.  
She rallied relatives raising money

for an aunt and uncle she'd never seen,  
stranded after World War II  
when Romanian leaders said,

“Jews can go to Israel  
if someone pays quickly for each one.”  
She paid to keep kin from paupers' graves.

*Av* (Hebrew month) אב (cont'd)

Once a cousin knocked  
on our basement kitchen door,  
she gave him money she counted on

for bills she had to pay.  
She prided herself on how she looked,  
her make-up and clothes, sometimes secondhand.

Mom said,  
“grandpa always bought his family  
new clothes for Jewish holidays.”

At sixty, she studied two years - Hebrew,  
Haftorah and Torah – celebrating  
her fortieth – feasting and dancing

for the wedding that was only a dream  
for she and dad in those Depression days -  
the best Chicago Jewish musicians played for hours.

At seventy, she started college  
got an associate degree,  
played a piano recital

struggled to learn about computers  
to keep in touch  
with the modern world.

### III

*Av*, Jewish month in summer's heat  
mom liked more than winter's cold  
the 19<sup>th</sup> of *Av*

after weeks of hospice, daughters and family  
her last day,  
Jewish year 5757.

From *Tisha B'Av* to *Rosh Hashanah*,  
for seven weeks Jews read Isaiah, the prophet  
*nachamu, nachamu* נחמו, נחמו  
words of comfort and consolation.

Charcoal

Mrs. K escaped Hitler's ovens, Hungary to Sweden,  
her dark-eyed daughter with long, black curls

her first-born, the joy of her life  
in a marriage, she whispered, not so good

her beloved Esther, dying of cancer  
only six years old.

Mom and Mrs. K talk and sew  
in the dining room.

Charcoal gray, soft wool  
mom made skirts, squares of white and gray

matching jackets with gray pearl buttons  
for my sister and me.

Matsuya

War and friendship,  
a duet in my mind  
Matsuya, my college roommate,  
hid in the closet to dress each day.

She learned Japanese,  
her family's mother tongue,  
in a U.S. concentration camp.  
Internment camps they called them,  
where she was struck with T.B.

Her parents lavished love  
on her younger sister, even smiling  
as she danced around their home  
breaking family rules,  
with never a reprimand or frown.

In the dorm each night,  
Matsuya and I ate supper together  
sharing a few laughs.  
I watched her study constantly,  
sleeping a few hours most nights,  
her quest for her parents' approval,  
her harvest — all A's.

They baked a treat for me, her friend,  
a sweet potato cut in half,  
sweet as cake covered with icing,  
Matsuya hungered for a crumb of love  
from her family's table.

The Wedding Ring

“Never do that again,” he growled.  
She twisted her wedding ring round and round,  
swallowed her soft boiled egg,  
gulped her coffee down.

She twisted her wedding ring round and round,  
behind the locked bathroom door,  
she gulped her coffee down,  
hugged her knees, burying her head like the first time

behind the locked bathroom door,  
Biloxi beach in January, she twisted her wedding ring,  
hugged her knees, burying her head  
first time, the honeymoon.

“Never do that again,” he growled.  
She gulped her coffee down,  
hugged her knees, burying her head like the first time,  
she twisted her wedding ring round and round.