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Hand to Mouth

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro

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ROCHELLE JEWEL SHAPIRO

HAND TO MOUTH

What you need is a good *frask in di punim*,
one you won't forget. What a *groyse moyl* on you.
A daughter, the third no less, to tell her father
she won't eat canned peaches with sour cream on top.
When the Cossacks galloped into Berdichev, murdering Jews,
murdering my brothers, I had to hide in the Black Forest,
live on roots and berries, my shit a *farshtunken* river,
peaches and sour cream a faraway dream, like America.

Look how the peaches shine in the syrup, how light glows
off the cream like from the *kop* of Moses in those paintings
that make *goyim* think Jews have horns,
like they need another reason to murder us.
Pick up the spoon. Eat or you'll get such a *frask*
in di punim, one you won't forget.

Father, dead these forty-three years, here you are,
sitting at my kitchen table in your sleeveless undershirt
and Bermuda shorts that hang low over your growling belly.
You lean forward, your blue eyes watching to make sure I eat
every bit on my plate. I still flinch at the threat of your big hand.

I flinch when I think of you, at four, shivering
in that forest, hiding in the underbrush,
hearing the panting, the snarling of the Cossacks' dogs

hunting for Jews, your small pug nose and your throat
filled with the smoke of your burning village,
the burnt pine trees hanging from the reeking sky
like fishbones, America as far away as peaches, as sour cream,
as your third daughter, whose cheeks still smart with your *fraks*.