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Otzar

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Otzar

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
Nicole Frederique Goldberg

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2023

For my Grandma Jewel, my truest love, who's always hated birds.

Acknowledgements

To my mom and dad: thank you for raising me. Challenging me. Making me feel capable. Loving me. I will follow your lead in every life.

To my sister: Gabby, you have my heart. I could never be me without you. What to say to the person who taught you everything.

To my grandparents: you have always welcomed my curiosity. Thank you for answering questions no one else could. I love you.

To Imogen: thank you for building worlds in our small house. Your imagination inspires me everyday.

To Sarah and Miriam: in all great tales, we are the fools. Here I stand, I'm your man. I love you.

Barbara Ess: I miss you. It's hard to make art without you. Because you taught me how. But I see you everywhere- so I try to persist, in your honor.

And to Ed: you are truly encyclopedic. Your knowledge and critical eye has led me here. Thank you for your dedication to my education and this project. You will always be my favorite teacher.

The Guf, or קְאוּפֶר, is an example of an *Otzar*¹. It describes a heavenly storehouse, intended for treasure. There, treasures are souls which blossom and ultimately fall from the tree of life.

These souls are often regarded as birds, and the Guf, their cage. To the tune of a sparrow's song, angel hands reach down and pluck, selecting a soul for birth. It is said that once the Guf is emptied, and the souls run out, the messiah will come and the world will swiftly end. Birth prolongs the arrival of death with its embryonic beauty, but can simply never prevent it. I do know that, when it does come, the birds may finally stop singing.

I didn't grow up loving birds, in fact I was scared of them. I am like my grandma in that way, and in more ways than the one. But with fear, and distance, often comes sanctity. I saw majesty and fables in their high elevation. What secret, sacred lives they were living. I was raised Jewish, but was taught religion in the form of family and tradition. I was taught to enjoy shabbat. I was taught to worship my family; the way we laugh unattractively and kvetch and find solace in the permanence of our converging lives. And I was taught to remember the lives of my ancestors, in spite of their mysteries or rather attempted erasure. My grandfather and uncle Paul have dedicated much of their time to uncovering these lives: their locale, their passages, their kinships, and their ultimate fates. I know my family was in Zelva, or Pozelva as the Jew's knew it. I know my great grandmother, Ydle Hakner, was an innkeeper, and that she was murdered, along with her son. But I know very little and wonder very much about the interiority of the shtetl, in its most quotidian sense: their conversations and their entertainment, the songs they heard and fell asleep to. Thus I sought, and found, traces of a more collective Jewish experience through folklore, and the production of a film rooted in its structure and universality.

My project began with the *vunder mayases*, or the wonder tales. I was inspired by the character of the Bobe-Ha in Beatrice Weinreich's collection of *Yiddish folktales*. Probably based on the Slavic Baba-Yaga, she is simply a witch, drawn in by the allure of treasure: the golden feather. As is the case with my film. The pearl drives the narrative forth, but not so much so that you lose sight of its objective beauty; it works as both a character and a catalyst. Folklore rests on the icons—the “enchanted rings, golden feathers, and glass mountains.” The stories are silhouettes, with an “indefinite... time and place,” and heroes that proceed without names. Admittedly, I am not and have never been overly concerned with narrative. But the structure of folklore just made sense to me—a tale boiled down to a “string of events” and rooted in distinct iconography, and aesthetic beauty². In my project, I never felt the need to define motives, or ascribe meaning to the characters' lives. I just wanted to build a world, and let life breathe through it. And so it did, with birth, but also death. I didn't know the story of the Guf when I started my thesis, but I know it now. I'm starting to understand where the girl might be going when she closes her eyes, and why the birds stop singing only then.

¹ Dennis, Geoffrey, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic, and Mysticism*, Llewellyn Worldwide

² Weinreich, Beatrice, and Leonard Wolf. *Yiddish Folktales*. Rev. ed., New York City, Schocken, 1997.

