



HART HOUSE REVIEW 2006

**ZAIDA'S BLUES**

Your stories are stones that I expect to sink  
when they get to the heaviest part. Your voice.  
It has combed that start again and again. Her  
hair and how you hover there,  
crabbing at soft food like bone.  
Her hair. You arrive there and  
let your voice fade to that  
singular shade—milk on sun—so go on.  
Talk about the gun, because your voice, it  
itches. With trains, and red, and ditches.  
And the vulture that lives in your throat,  
it will not do you good.  
Finish what you said you would.

Start with how you try and shoot two Germans  
for what they do to your redhead girl. They  
chase you with rifles and you run and run and run  
for five years, to survive. Your family dies. You are twenty-two  
when you come to Canada.

It's cold like Poland and no one talks. Except for  
the Eaton's girls whose lipstick is called blood red, who offer  
you bottled maple syrup and other things you can't afford.  
And you prefer tinned food anyway, because it's familiar and  
easy to hoard.

This country is a postcard you can't afford, and your past is  
a sword in circus man's mouth, your life an impossible trick.  
You are guilty when you breathe and content when you are sick.

You take a job in a hotel, making traveler's beds.  
And all the while, the pretty lipstick girls in your head and  
you think about how blood is not that color,  
at least not when the body is dead. It's much less red.

To get her out of your head, you go to the automat after work and

chew on so many pieces of cherry pie because you don't know when or how to stop ordering; and because this country will not tell you what to do. You keep opening the sachets of sugar and pouring them in, copying the people around you, so much sugar that it makes you feel sick, but everyone here does it, and you want very badly to appear Canadian, like them, slick.

As you hunch past them all jangly walk, the remnants of rickets, you stare at these men with women, their suits and opera tickets, and go to piss blood in the washroom, some other disease that won't go away.

Their evening has only begun and yours is done. Milk on sun. You burn back to your table like the half-dead bird some cats drag in. Under your uniform you are too thin.

You can run from Spadina to Lansdowne in fifteen minutes.

Your room, your walls. There is a tiny hole from where the mouse inches out like squeezed paint from a tube every night. It just stands there as the sound of the rooming house slips in and gathers like little teeth chattering. This is the sound of dread. In bed, you eat sugar sandwiches, and drop the confetti of sachets everywhere so tiny mouse feet can soothingly claw and dance the paper.

One day you meet a woman who will accept the tattoo on your vein, that darkens on days when the snow and rain look too much like Poland.

She has your same history and has a day off from the factory where she sews animal skins. She makes whole from pieces because, like you, she does not know what else to do. In this country.

So you splurge on the streetcar and take her back to your room, not caring if anticipation leaks out as a scream. In the light her hair is auburn and your cheeks are streaming with dreams. In your room you remove the teeming fur coat and put your mouth on her box corner shoulders. Then, you want to comb her hair like



she is a doll  
and you want to hold her small parts for safekeeping. But she peels off  
your clothes and scolds you. This country is not for weeping.  
She does not want to live in the past and  
it happens very fast. She is dry and her skin smells of old  
buildings.

You want to please. Because her because her tattoo,  
that glows blue, like new, lets you believe that  
she knows you,  
and can make your grisly mind as new  
as the powder blue Chevrolet that the landlord screams up to  
your curb in.

Still. You continue to wake up crying  
so she felt that she could do nothing  
except marry you.  
And keep telling you what to do.

*Forget the redhead girl, the curfew, your mother's challah cloth,  
the way her hands braided the dough, the matzoh bread risen low  
the sound of nighttime knocks on the door like hammer blows and  
the smoke over Sobibor that could have been you.*

Your voice stops. Because over this story presides your old  
bird of deletion that pecks at the most final part.  
It is not in your heart  
to say more and the kettle on the stove whistles loud rain.

You pour this tiny drop of milk, so the tea won't lose its colour.

*First Place - Hart House Poetry Contest*