

ED FRANKEL  
HONORABLE MENTION

### **Singing Lullabies in Dangerous Places**

In the Chora Church in Turkey, the nine Mourning Mothers,  
carved in stone, sit shawled and gathered close,  
eyes turned down, all slanting to the left,  
as if pulled, or shuddered from behind  
by Herod's unrestrained finality.  
One woman cradles a child and sings a stone lament,  
or is it a lullaby, opposite sides of the same song:  
the painted bird whistles in an open eye.

*You are porous, you told me—life as it comes:  
Where do you put the things you've seen in dangerous places?  
Sometimes I can lull them, fold them into themselves,  
the way some women fold into their own arms.  
Other times they burn me.*

In the Syrian refugee camp opposite the Bab al-Salameh gate  
three days ago, near a border post in Turkey,  
I was sitting around a fire with another group of women—  
mothers with children and without children.  
Here, at the end of the day, having arrived,  
everyone was equal, and finds their own level.  
I sang them Arabic lullabies that I memorized.  
A tall pale woman in a dark blue hijab.  
They looked at each other and smiled at my pronunciation.

“Direct my way with your sight” to that thin place  
where the distance between the visible and the invisible is short.  
Let the cradle song be the balm, the remedy of the moment,  
when there is nothing else to do but hold a woman's hand and sing.

The lullaby braided and matched with her breath,  
left space, and started again when she inhaled,

*Rima Rima little doll,  
this never ending night...*

It followed her breathing, waited, and began another line.

*I'll slay a dove for her.  
But dove, don't you believe it.  
I'm teasing Rima so she'll sleep.*

Coming and going— you are your own daughter.  
You are my child to cradle and hold.  
Lullabies are for mothers as well as their children.

Then she put her other hand over mine and sang to me,  
perhaps made up on the spot, as women sometimes do.  
It dodged sniper fire in the broken streets of Homs,  
remembered fathers who disappeared in the violated night,  
barrel bombs, curfews, checkpoints,  
the strictures of eyes peering over dark glasses  
toward another unrestrained finality.

I went to the place where babies have no words  
and longings come and go.  
The place where night divides—  
Night bone and night marrow,  
into darkling lullabies I remembered that bode hard.

*Go to sleep you little baby; Don't you weep pretty baby.  
Your Daddy's gone away and your Momma's gonna stay,  
Didn't leave nobody but the baby.*

The Mourning Mothers looked up from the stone  
and turned to me.  
I was on a rocking boat.

*Your sail will swallow the wind;  
it will not turn to shadow.  
It will not blacken or burn.*

*But which sail doesn't blacken?  
Which boat doesn't burn?*

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*Painted bird where is your home.  
Whistle for you children but they are gone.  
The cuckoo bird sits in your nest  
You'll build another far away.*

the pretense of belonging—  
and whatever moves both ways at the same time,  
through the lullabies,  
through the burning skin.