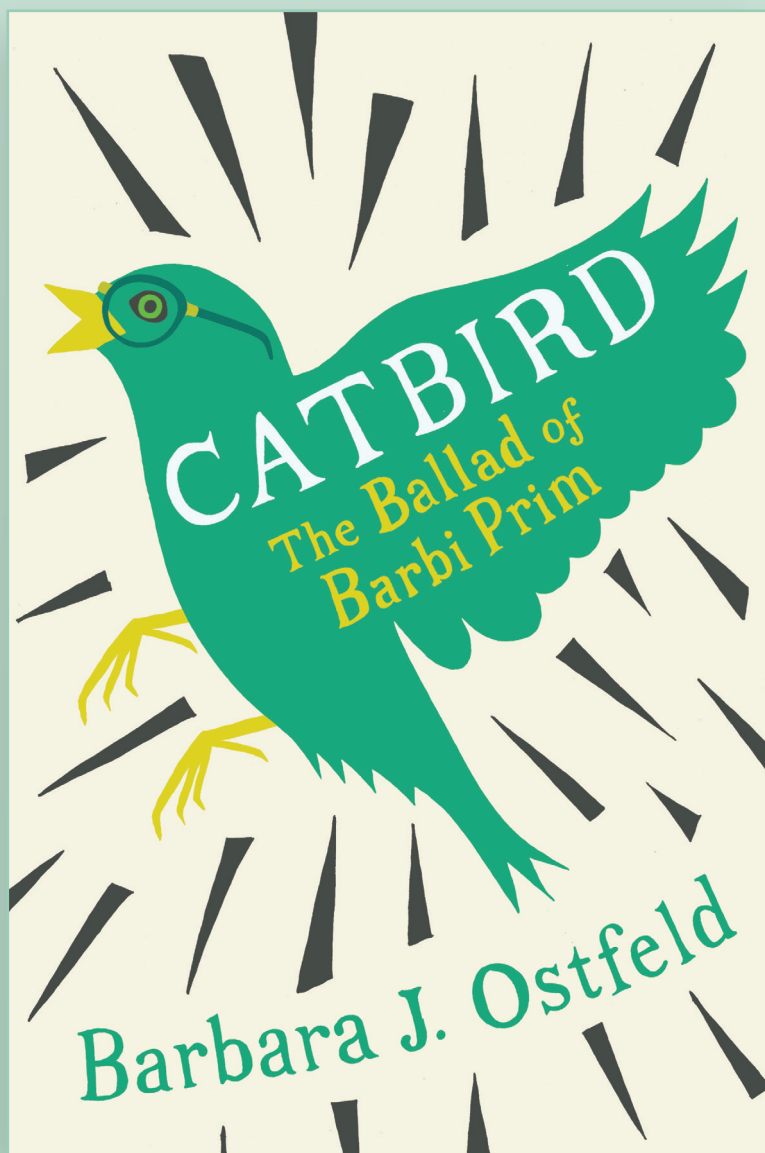


EXCERPTS FROM

*CATBIRD* *The Ballad  
of Barbi Prim*



ERWA

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# Excerpts from *Catbird*

Author's Note	vi
Barbi Prim, Herself	1
Brownies	22
One Book	27
Coffee House Folk Singer	64
“Vergin, tutto amor”	75
My Strapless Dress Meets Joyce	131
The Viper in the F	202
Sephora	262
Singing in the Original Key	291
Breath and Life	333

(BOOK PAGES)

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### *Author's Note*

When I was a little girl, I was fascinated by TV characters, like the obviously Jewish Gladys Kravitz on *Bewitched*. But I knew that she wasn't really a TV star because the stars looked like Samantha—blonde and sleek and charming. Plain women like Gladys were TV's comedic foils or gals Friday.

I knew I would grow up to be a Gladys. It was unfair. Wasn't I a smart girl who could sing rings around any of the Mouseketeers? Yes! Although I wasn't sure that was actually a good thing after my father told me at age eight that I inherited my singing voice from his cousin who was a chanteuse in a whorehouse in Lebanon. (Then he defined *chanteuse* and *whorehouse* and pointed to Lebanon on a map.)

What I was sure about—based on all the evidence—was that I was plump and plain and awkward, and so my fate was sealed.

Or at least it felt sealed for a long time, even though I did sing my way through a stained glass ceiling. Becoming a “first” in a previously all-male career, though, wasn't enough to free me from a quicksand made of fear and anxiety—and the belief that I deserved to go under because I wasn't wonderful enough to be rescued.

But then, well into middle age, I learned how to free myself, and in the process, I discovered what I had known before I learned to judge Gladys and Samantha—and myself.

*Catbird* is for all daughters—of any generation—and for anyone whose gifts or quirks are underappreciated.

—*Barbi Prim*

*Barbi Prim, Herself*

First, I know I am chunky. I have frizzled hair, and my mom cuts it to save money, even though we have money because my dad is a doctor. I have a really big nose, and I wear cat-eye glasses with sparkles in them. Mom makes my clothes, so I wear a style called “European.” But I can really sing.

Because I want to wear high heels when I grow up, I wear oxfords—with white ankle socks, of course. Sometimes I wish I had store-bought clothes, a beauty parlor haircut, and fancy shoes, but I don’t think I should ask for things like that.

Also, I have a hiding place. In temple the air smells like lemon polish, and when the ark is open something opens inside me too. When we read together during services, I feel strong and important. The cantor gives me solos. When I sing, I am not fat or near-sighted. I sing like a long sigh, like magic, like the hot glass I saw the man spinning in Colonial Williamsburg.

I want to wear a long black robe and sleeves that are like an angel’s wings and a collar that puts your face in a painting.

And I want to stand right under the Eternal Light, and I want to hear the Civil Rights words so people can see me nod “yes” to Civil Rights. I want to sing songs with words like *thine* and *everlasting* in them.

I want to be a cantor who will give solos to kids who cry like I do when they don’t get them.

I am eight years old.

*Brownies*

I used to love Brownie meeting days. I loved wearing my uniform to school. On meeting days I looked more like the other girls. Well, I think my shoes didn’t look like theirs. Mine are tie-up shoes, because Mom says that if I wear them, someday I will be able to wear high heels. They have support. Lois and Kathy and Patty and Helen and Mary all wear pumps. And they will probably get to wear high heels when they get older anyway. My opapa owned a dry

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goods store and sold shoes. He wouldn't sell a pair of shoes to someone if they didn't fit right, even when he was poor. Mom always tells me that story when she buys me shoes with laces. I guess the same goes for the thick socks too. No other girls in my class wear thick socks. Mom says that nylon doesn't breathe.

But from the ankles up on Brownie Day, I looked like the other girls. Except Patty Miller, the only one who is fat like me. And she's the only other one with brown hair. Her hair is always in a neat pageboy with a bow in it, and mine is always spreading out. Mom still makes my clothes. She says the seams in store-bought clothes are flimsy.

Mary Anderson's house is nice. We used to go right into her basement, which is finished. Ours isn't finished. It's still cement. We would each take a cup of juice and a cookie. Mrs. Anderson BUYS her cookies from the BAKERY. My mom would NEVER do that.

One day we all sat down to wait for the Brownie signal to be quiet. Helen told us that her mom had a baby growing in her tummy. I told her that the baby is not in her mother's tummy—it's in her mother's uterus. No one said anything. Patty Miller slid away from me just a little.

Then Mrs. Sullivan the troop leader said, "Barbi has said a private potty word that children are not allowed to say."

I knew she was wrong because I've known this word for a long time and it's a body part.

But since then I've been too embarrassed to go to Brownies, so I can't wear my uniform anymore.

My mother started a crafts group in our basement after that. She calls it "Edison Angels" after our school. Only a few girls come, like Sue Suconik, who is Jewish too. We learn to crochet and make puppets out of wooden dowels. Mom makes cookies with apricot filling and ground nuts. The girls keep coming even though they spit out the cookies. Kids don't like nuts or even apricots.

Helen is the first one in our grade to start menstruating. Today she tells us that she has her first monthly. She giggles when she says

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“monthly.” Then the other girls giggle. I don’t, and I think that she should have said, “got her first period.” “Monthly” is a stupid way to say it. Then Helen looks at me and sees that I’m frowning. She tells me that my Brownie troop has sleepovers all the time but a few of the mothers didn’t want to invite the sloppy Jewish girl with the loud mouth.

Dad said I had a big mouth once too, when I took a phone message and then asked him later if he called the man back. I had written the message very clearly.

When I get older I am going to talk like Julie Andrews, who has a perfect mouth.

### *One Book*

The new Oakbrook Center Mall has a bookstore, Kroch’s and Brentano’s. The main Kroch’s and Brentano’s is downtown, but I’ve never seen it.

We are going to the Oakbrook store now, and we each get to buy one new book. It’s not Chanukah and it’s not anyone’s birthday, so this is very surprising.

I think that the car ride will be long, but it seems not too long. Mom puts Sarah in the middle so Simon won’t bother me. This never works, because Sarah pokes Simon while looking straight ahead, pretending to be innocent. Then he whacks her and she cries. Then Dad says he’ll knock our heads together. For a four-year-old, Sarah is pretty fearless. She knows Simon’s going to hit her. I just leave him alone.

The car ride is too short for us to sing, although I’m in a good enough mood to start. Dad is quiet, though, so I’m not starting anything. I want my book. I already finished this week’s library books. Miss Strand helps me pick out books. Sometimes she shakes her head at the books I pick out. She says, “You can make better choices than those, Barbara. These are for ordinary readers.” I always put those back. I want her to like me.

The Oakbrook parking lot is full. Lots of people are shopping. I can tell that Dad is almost angry at being here. It looks a little like

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*The Jetsons* cartoon outside Oakbrook. There are lots of wide stairways and flat cement areas with big, smooth planters. Everything is even and new. The parking lot lights look like they're from the future. There are short cement pillars everywhere that connect to each other with chains. Some baby trees are here and there.

I wish I could go into the stores and look around, but I would never ask. I'd like to see the places where other girls buy clothes, but Mom doesn't go to those places.

I'm still very excited—very. I can feel the fluttering and tightness in my stomach. We find Kroch's and Brentano's just when I think Dad is about to get really mad. Once we go in, though, he goes to look at the books he likes, so it's okay.

Right away I love it here. It's very bright and new. Very clean—not like the library, where I sometimes don't like to sit because of all the people who've sat on the chairs and might have left some dirt behind. There are big squares of lights in the ceiling, so all the books look shiny. The children's section is big. I walk very slowly past the biography section, but there are no new books about Queen Elizabeth I. So now all I have to do is find Louisa May Alcott and I'll be in the right area. I've already read *Little Women*, *Little Men*, *Jo's Boys*, *Rose in Bloom*, *Eight Cousins*, *A Garland for Girls*, and *An Old-Fashioned Girl*. But there will be other books by good authors nearby. And I find another Alcott book! *Good Wives*! This is going to be my new book!

I've found it very quickly, and everyone else is still looking. So I keep looking. All the books are so chunky, and the jackets are so glittery. One cover catches my eye. It's white with a red-haired girl on the cover. She's sitting in a wagon, looking determined. *Anne of Green Gables* by Lucy Maud Montgomery. Those are such ugly names, Lucy and Maud—fat names, like Barbara.

I read the first few pages. I must have it. I like the old-fashioned conversation.

The book says that Anne has grayish-green eyes. Dad says I have grayish-green eyes just like his father did. Anne and I are just alike. I am imagining myself an orphan. I read some more.

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Mom calls us. Her voice is nervous. That must mean that Dad is ready to go. Now.

I bring my books to her and say, “Mom, I really love these books. May I please have them both? I’ll do anything! Really!”

Dad is there too, and he says, “I said one book.”

“Please, Dad! I need these!”

I am expecting Sarah and Simon to start asking for two books too, but they are both quiet.

“No,” he says in the low, scary voice, and I start to cry. I am crying because I have to decide which one and I don’t have any time.

I will choose Anne. Then in the car on the way home I can pretend that I’m an orphan. If Mom asks me to sing, I’m going to say no.

### *Coffeehouse Folk Singer*

A very round man sings the Leonard Cohen song “Suzanne.” I think it’s the only song he knows. He sings it every Saturday night—that and nothing else ever. Sweetly, in tune, without hesitation, but never any other song. Poor man. I nod at him on my way to the main chair, in the center under the light.

My mind goes empty, and I am Joan Baez.

I sing, “Bad news, bad news to old England came.” And then I sing, “Geordie will be hanged in a golden chain.” Followed by “It was Mary Beaton and Mary Seton and Mary Carmichael and me.” Of course I sing “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” Yes, I’m Bob Dylan too.

Joan Baez wouldn’t be caught dead reading *Seventeen* magazine. I hide the copies I buy because I know this. Joan Baez is perfect—she doesn’t need help with her makeup. I study *Seventeen’s* makeup rules until I’m an expert, even with Max Factor liquid eyeliner. That takes practice. I know exactly how to draw the line with my right hand while holding my lid still with my left. And I know that the line should start at the inner edge and should get a little bit thicker until it tapers into a wing just beyond the outer edge. The hard part is waiting for eyeliner to dry. I wear lots of mascara and Yardley slicker in Dicey Peach. I leave the rest of my face bare so its

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washable at any moment. (I've developed a face-washing technique that avoids contact with my eye makeup.) I hate the feeling of any goo on my face, so that's another reason not to wear foundation.

I had Mom make me several long skirts out of metallic fabric with a paisley pattern and insisted that she trim them with ribbons and braids. With these I wear one of my two peasant blouses. My favorite one has bell sleeves and a drawstring neck.

I let my hair be its wild, frizzy self. My nose makes its Semitic statement, proudly or not, but clearly.

My folk guitar skills are basic but adequate, learned from chord diagrams. Chord to chord, so slowly I thought at first the music would die, until they sped up and I could sing above them. That then was that. I played and played. Folk song and Child ballad after folk song and Child ballad. Even with all those years of piano and harpsichord lessons, I am a better guitarist.

To lighten the mood between ballads and protest songs, I sing,

I wish I was a fascinating lady  
with my past kinda short,  
my future kinda shady.

People laugh generously. I have no idea if there is a deep meaning to this song, which I learned from my friend John Emerson.

I sit down. I drink a hot cider and feel triumphant. Yes, I'm a folk singer. Really. And I know more than one song. People clap, and my friends come to hear me. I sing in a dark coffeehouse with floors so dirty that it's hard to know if they're wood or linoleum. People smoke at small tables, and there's an actual haze. The chairs aren't comfortable, so it's weird that people stay for any length of time, but they do.

And the dark is good and the dirt is good and the haze is good and the hardness is good and the bad coffee (that I don't drink) is also supposed to be good somehow.

Oh, and most of the singing is bad.

Why do I love the dark and dirt and haze and cacophony and discomfort of this place? This must be as close as white people like me get to real life.

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*“Vergin, tutto amor”*

There is no physical requirement at the Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music, and no math requirement either. I know. I looked at the school’s tiny catalog. These are assets—huge assets.

I arrive for my audition at the Upper West Side address where the school is located. I like the building. It’s old and shabby. A courtly man in a three-piece suit meets me in the lobby and introduces himself to me as Cantor Behrman.

We take an elevator up to the fourth floor and walk down a corridor into the audition room. It’s a small, unimpressive classroom—less impressive than any high school classroom I’ve ever occupied—which surprises me. This is college! The piano is old and scratched up, so I’m guessing it’s going to be out of tune. Even though this is a music school, it’s no conservatory. But this shabbiness also relaxes me. This place isn’t fancy or formal enough to scare me, even though I might be rejected because I’m a girl.

The other two cantors sitting here are dressed in black—shiny black, with shiny black yarmulkes. Two of them have hollows under their eyes. They look like supernatural characters out of Isaac Bashevis Singer—dybbuks maybe, except for the three-piece-suit guy. They look like they’ve seen horrors, or better days or something. I feel like I’m on a field trip to the Lower East Side.

I see them all look at the hemline of my dress. I know it’s short, I know. I watched over Mom until I saw that she started hemming precisely where I’d put the first few pins. On another recent dress, she’d moved my pins down about an inch and a half, thinking I wouldn’t notice. Who doesn’t notice skirt lengths? But she did a good job on this one, keeping it just as short as I’d pinned it. It’s light blue, with ribbing, baby doll sleeves, and buttons down the front.

My hair is separated into weak, snaky coils and does what it pleases down my back. Dad actually polished my shoes last night. Didn’t say a word, but there they were, laid out on newspaper. My eye shadow matches my dress.

dybbuk: the clinging soul of someone who has died but is unable to move on for one of many reasons

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One of the dybbuks looks fierce, but I smile sweetly at him and then look down quickly.

“Please stand here, Miss Ostfeld,” says Three-Piece, motioning toward a music stand that’s barely upright. “Will you sing something for us?”

I feel quite prepared for the singing part. I’ve already been to Eastman and Oberlin, and for those auditions I memorized pieces from several periods and in several languages. I’m going to use the same material here. I hand a copy of my music to Three-Piece, who clearly will be my accompanist. I see him stifle a smile as he looks at my opening piece, the Neapolitan Baroque song “Vergin, tutto amor.”

*What’s—?* And then I get it. I’ve chosen a long prayer to the Virgin Mary for my cantorial school audition. *Fuck.*

He begins. He plays a bit stiffly but follows me well enough.

No one else has any facial expression, which is what I’m used to. I sing well, just like I had on the big stage at Eastman’s Kilbourn Hall. I go right on, sticking to the script I prepared for my conservatory auditions, and announce a Debussy piece, “Beau Soir” and begin singing: “Lorsque au soleil couchant (When the sun goes to bed) . . .”

After this Cantor Three-Piece asks me if I know anything in Hebrew. I flash briefly back to the School of Sacred Music’s catalog, which offers no guidance about auditions. It never occurred to me to prepare a piece from the Jewish world. I tell him that I do but that I haven’t prepared anything. I wonder if they read my application essay. If they did, they should know that I grew up with my opapa’s classical Reform background, with its absence of Bat Mitzvah and of learning Hebrew.

Three-Piece persists, asking me if I know the kiddush. “Sure,” I reply. He plays a flourish, and I begin, singing it through easily. The dybbuks seem surprised, which surprises me, since I’ve been singing the kiddush since I was seven.

Now I am feeling my oats, so I ask if they’d like me to play my piano selections. At this the hovering cantors lose their unearthly

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pallor and actually pink up. I assume from their reaction that few other candidates have demonstrated keyboard skills. The bench is from some other piano, but the instrument itself turns out to be in tune. I play two short Bach pieces—Inventions, numbers 4 and 8. Will my well-behaved fingers compensate for the fact that I can hardly distinguish between an aleph and a bet?

It's time for the interview, and my heart starts to thump. I feel like a pretender, even though this place looks like crap.

"Miss, uh, Ostfeld," one of the dybbuks starts, looking at my transcript on the desk in front of him to confirm my name. "Why is it that you really want to get into this school? You don't have any boyfriends at home?"

For a moment, I'm surprised. *I HAVE a boyfriend! What the hell does THAT have to do with cantorial school?* But I answer in full brown-nose mode.

"I'm not looking for dates, sir—Cantor. I want to be a cantor like my cantor, Martin Rosen."

They exchange glances, eyebrows lifted. There are small nods, and smaller blinks of assent.

Then they ask about my grades, and my French in particular.

I say that I've always gotten A's in French, to which Three-Piece says, "Your transcript says 3.8."

I'm stunned—caught out. "But it's a French 7 course," I say, fully aware that I'm choking. "It only has a few students in it. . . . They had to put it together for a few of us. . . . We couldn't be accommodated in the advanced—"

"Yes, yes," Three-Piece says mildly, waving his hand. *What a nice man*, I think.

Then he asks me to read some Hebrew. *Okay, I guess they haven't read my essay. I'm doomed.*

"I can't read Hebrew," I say softly, apologetically. "I was never taught. They weren't big on Bat Mitzvah in my temple."

"Here, let's see what you can do. Start here," he says, opening the *Union Prayer Book* and pointing to a passage. Equipped by my many years of Friday evening Shabbat services, I instantly recog-

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nize the prayer. I can say this prayer, but I am not reading it, not really.

I recite the prayer smoothly, from memory, with unanticipated accuracy. The dybbuks nod. I look down and make sure that my knees are still pressed together.

And then the audition is over. They thank me, and I thank them, imagining that once I've left the room they will cackle and then fly off to Lublin for tea in glasses.

When I go to leave, the door sticks. I press harder, twisting the knob farther. The door doesn't budge. I push my body against it. Nothing. Three-Piece asks if I need a hand, and I say that the door seems to be stuck.

He comes to help, and we push together. It jerks open, and I'm popped out into the hallway. It's crammed full of students. I'm face-to-face with the ones right in front of me, who have obviously been pressing up against the door, listening.

As I look at this small sea of men, they begin to part, lining the walls of the fourth-floor hallway. Some of them are abashed, having been caught eavesdropping, and some just smile and look away, and then back. It's quiet, which is surprising considering how many of them there are and how narrow the hallway is. But I can tell that it's a good quiet, a thoughtful quiet. I am at home in this quiet and in this press of skinny super-Jews—seminary students with long hair and frayed jeans. I am their younger sister.

One of them says, "We were just trying to hear the first woman cantor sing."

A great slippery bubble inflates in my chest and then tries to settle. I blink, expecting the hallway scene to vanish. I look again at this host of guys. Their many pairs of glasses reflect the fluorescent bulbs in the hallway ceiling.

My spine tingles, and I know I will somehow be that—the first woman cantor.

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*My Strapless Dress Meets Joyce*

The younger Steinhart daughter is getting married. Not only am I co-officiating, but I am also an invited guest. I have no date, but the party will be fancy, and I'm excited.

From the couch I tell Dr. Glick I'm not going to wear a suit. Since I have to wear a robe to officiate, why shouldn't I wear a dress for the reception, like other women my age? Of course he doesn't answer. Is there a reason why I shouldn't just be a guest? Sit with people my age and dance if someone asks me? I skip past the silence.

"Yes, I know," I continue, as if I do know. "I am not a nun."

I tell Dr. Glick that I have a dress, chosen for me by a very fashion-conscious gay friend. Strapless, knee-length, and trendy—it will be just right. Turquoise chiffon with small black dots. And what woman cantor doesn't have black patent leather heels? I confess to Dr. Glick that I'm excited. I'm going to a party!

"Why, then, do you lie so still?" he asks.

"Doesn't everyone lie like this?"

No answer.

"I guess not," I say.

"Does my body need to be excited too?" And after a pause, I answer myself. "I'm guessing yes. But it isn't. It just isn't. I'm thinking about my dress and about the possibility that I'll be seated with people my age and maybe with some men my age. Am I supposed to shift my position? Unclasp my hands?"

I don't want to undo the couch-lying preparations I always make at the beginning of each session: I smooth down my long-ish skirt. I don't want it to hitch up. I check that my blouse—today one of the made-over dresses from high school—is properly tucked. I don't want it to ride up.

Lying flat and very still, locking myself more tightly into this position, I think I catch a whiff of dog shit. I can almost see broken bottles in my peripheral vision. I tell myself that this would be the time to bring up how I missed my stop.

No, I think. No. And a funny line comes to me instead.

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Now I'm back on track.

And after another pause I say, "Well, maybe I do look sort of like the medieval effigies of Lady So-and-So in the Cloisters up in Fort Tryon Park."

And I start to recount the tale of my first York High School sock hop.

"Barbara Ann," "Hang On Sloopy," "Louie, Louie," and "Twist and Shout." I only knew one dance, the pony. After three dances, I was sweating and bedraggled, and beginning to notice that the other kids were varying their steps with what seemed like infinite creativity. I couldn't imagine how to make anything up, so I just kept ponying, heart thudding and sweat cascading. I had never heard this music before. I listened to Joan Baez and early music albums from Nonesuch Records. I wished I lived in times when people danced galliards or pavaues (not that Jews danced in Renaissance courts). So my ponying legs were simply pumping faster or more slowly, depending on the beat.

I feel myself wince as I tell this to Dr. Glick. I hate this memory. I wish I could tell what his face is doing or if he is even awake. I don't say this.

Weeks later I arrive at the Steinhart wedding. It's at the Pierre Hotel. I'm dazzled by the lights and dizzied by the scents coming from mounds of flowers.

Susan, the bride, is an acquaintance, and I'm inclined to like the kind-looking groom. I deliver the Sheva Brachot into their eyes. I will them to understand each word of the seven blessings. Joyce and her husband, Mike—the parents of the bride—wipe a few tears away.

And I feel as though I've given birth to the wedding moment, and simultaneously as though I am simply a mouthpiece, purchased, like the flowers, to enhance the occasion. What am I expecting?

I sit with people my own age. I talk, although the conversation is stilted.

"What do you do during the week when there are no services?"

"Did you go to school to become a cantor?"

Sheva Brachot: Seven Blessings—the seven blessings chanted over wine at a Jewish wedding ceremony

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“Do you sing opera too?”

I initiate some conversations, but these wind up being short. My cantorness makes my peers uncomfortable. Someone says “shit” and then blushes.

After a second, I say, “Shit is right.”

There is no laughter. No one asks me to dance.

But older people stop to chat and say sweet things. I pay attention to the toasts, the cake cutting, and other rituals. I clap and smile, smile and clap. As the popular music plays, music other young people like, I realize that it is completely unfamiliar. I listen only to classical music in the car. I am a creature of my own making. But my dress is great this time. Other women my age are wearing variations of it. The length is right, the neckline is right, fabric—all just right.

Ah, the final ritual. The photographer asks a few of us to get up from our chairs and to stand behind our tablemates. Flash, pop, and we are released.

I drive back to Great Neck thinking that the night passed well enough. I remove my mascara and examine my skin. “You are fine,” I say to my clean face.

A month passes and Joyce comes toward me at an oneg Shabbat. She is smiling her gracious smile, which I return. I walk toward her and kiss her cheek.

“Shabbat shalom,” we say.

“Barbara,” she says in a hushed voice, “I have something to show you.”

She beckons me to a curtained corner of the social hall. She pulls an envelope from her purse. In this envelope is a photograph of my table at the Pierre. I take it from her carefully, holding just the very edges of the print. I look and see myself. I let out my breath. I look nice.

“Oh, it turned out so nicely!” I say. I hold it out to her, although I hope she’s giving it to me.

“Well, I just wanted to show you, and of course we’ll have it retouched,” she says, pushing it back to me. I look more closely, and then I see: My nipples are visible beneath the fabric.

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I'm thunderstruck.

"We'll have it retouched for the album, but I thought you should know—about that dress. You might not want to— It might not be what you'd wear again to— Anyway, we thought we'd spare you any further embarrassment."

Embarrassment? Is that what I feel in my stomach? No, this is mortification!

The room starts to spin. Am I that shameless creature in Joyce's photo? I lose my grip on the picture, and in an awkward zigzag, it drops to the floor. I inhale slowly and think, *This is the inevitable consequence of wearing a party dress while being a cantor. I will NEVER let this happen again. I will never again show any skin.*

Glancing around to make sure that our exchange is private, Joyce picks up the photo and slips it back into the envelope and hands it to me, looking vastly relieved. I automatically say thank you to her without meeting her eyes.

### *The Viper in the F*

I've been taking voice lessons continuously—singing scales, performing vocal exercises—since the age of eleven. And every time I've ever gone for the high F, I've felt the crackle. It doesn't hurt; I just hate the sound. So I've learned to stop short when the crackle threatens. (I can feel it coming, always.) I can't allow ugly to come out of my throat as did toads and vipers from the mouth of the unkind daughter in the French fairy tale *Diamonds and Toads*. I'd rather sing within a limited range than risk the emergence of a snake—than expose the truth that I'm not a real singer.

And there's another truth I'm avoiding too: I'm feeling invisible to Dan.

If you are ugly, you work very hard. You are a dazzling conversationalist. You remember particulars about people and trot them out to your advantage. You stay thin, or at least keep the fatness at bay. Always you are polite. You make a life's work of ferreting out the most flattering and long-wearing cosmetic brands. You travel

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great distances for good haircuts. You maintain a long, complex beauty routine that must not be attenuated or interrupted. When you speak to beautiful people, you are distracted by your envy and you think, *But I can sing*, knowing very well that one doesn't say such things out loud. Certainly a dazzling conversationalist doesn't.

Once Tali was toilet trained—an event that, in her case, was a small miracle from the Eternal One—I had time to talk to friends in my book club about marital love. We would talk in fits and starts about husbands and their ever-declining libidos. Mostly we laughed, making sure that we all understood the lightness of the subject.

But for me it isn't really light. I'm still trying to be a dazzling conversationalist, still tending assiduously to my makeup and to my weight, but my husband no longer seems to notice. My verbal flirtations now seem to fall on deaf ears.

Dan and I talk about our girls, about work, about people we know in common, but these conversations are no longer lively and bright, like they were earlier in our marriage. Am I making enough effort?

It must be me. Me and my impossibly high standards. Or maybe it's just that I've reached a new, nonsparkly stage of life. Nothing shines forever, right? These changes are common in marriages that are as old as Dan's and mine, right? Dwelling on the ordinary and inevitable process of fading is just a manifestation of my vanity. Everything fades. Besides, what would I do to stop something as unavoidable as the passage of time?

I would be a better singer if I took risks and vocalized beyond the crackling notes at the upper end of my range. This is what a true singer would do. Am I a pretend singer?

Am I also a pretend wife? I would be a better wife if I called the question.

So I am dealing with this truth the same way I deal with my high F. I hazard nothing in my marriage and I hazard nothing vocally.

There is only so much truth, only so much ugliness, I will allow to be exposed.

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### *Sephora*

Arlene likes my makeup today. She indicates this with the two-word comment “Nice makeup.” I tell her that I recently bought some new products at the Sephora store near the HUC building in Manhattan.

When I think of Sephora, I remember the doll section of Marshall Field’s in Chicago. As a kid, I would look at all of the glass-encased dolls of different sizes and imagine playing with each one, each with her separate costume. It’s as if I can still see the taffeta and lace, the pinafores and bonnets of those dolls. Today, at Sephora, I imagine instead my eyes being transformed by a new mascara or a different shade of eyeliner. Maybe my skin will be illuminated by an imported foundation or my lips by a new formulation of gloss!

Popping into Sephora during my occasional New York City trips always reminds me of another childhood scene—stopping at Fannie May for chocolate on the Saturdays when I rode the ‘L’ into Chicago. I still want treats to mitigate anxiety, in this case travel anxiety. Tangible little rewards in addition to the occasional Arlene-suggested Ativan, for when I start to panic on airplanes.

It’s gratifying that Arlene, older than me and eternally stylish, approves of my cosmetics today. Week in, week out, she looks flawless.

On these rare visits to HUC, I want to look elegant and accomplished, if not flawless. As aware as I am that no one in the HUC community is giving all that much thought to my appearance, I persist in the fantasy that HUC folks think, “Ostfeld is looking good.” Therefore I make it a priority to leave no styling act unperformed. I am a symphony of details. Eyebrows plucked and powdered. Lashes curled and thickened. Lips exfoliated and polished. Hair shining with fresh color and the requisite amount of pomade.

Arlene tells me that a Sephora will be opening in Buffalo, and I sigh with pleasure. Imagine! Then Arlene asks me about the word *sephora*, and I laugh! I hadn’t given it any thought, but it’s Hebrew

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for “bird,” and it’s the name of Moses’s Midianite wife, Tziporah. It comes to me that the ancient rabbis described her as beautiful.

Arlene and I go back and forth about the fact that nearly every female protagonist in nearly every book or fable or tradition is beautiful. Then I think about the biblical matriarch Leah. The Torah comments that her eyes were weak, which may have been a way of indicating that she was not beautiful.

Letting the session continue in this vein, I ruminate aloud about the use of powdered malachite as eyeliner in ancient Egypt and about how many powders, oils, and paints it would have taken for Leah to look as good as Tziporah to a bunch of old rabbis.

Arlene asks me to speculate about how the matriarchs might have regarded themselves, their roles. I begin by saying that it seems certain that beauty has always been valued and that mates have likely always been chosen for their symmetrical features, height, and an appearance of health.

Thinking more about it, I wager that Sarah, the matriarch who spent a long life overseeing an enormous and productive herding compound, probably didn’t take time to rub scented oils into the delicate area around her eyes every night. She may have worn colorfully dyed fabrics of the best quality to indicate her status, and her sandals may have had bling, but none of that actually belonged to her—property as she was herself. I doubt that she outlined her eyes in kohl.

Entertaining Arlene, I pantomime the application of liquid eyeliner, dipping an imaginary narrow stick into an imaginary ceramic jar. But since Sarah’s power and authority meant that she had to carefully supervise the women and young men so as to maximize the efficiency of Abraham’s extensive holdings, my guess is that on festive occasions, she brushed a bit of honeyed ochre onto her lips and left it at that.

Arlene and I are enjoying this bullshit, but I stop us.

I say, “It’s one thing to dress up and fasten a diadem to your brow, don your most powerful pendants, and anoint yourself for

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festivals and celebrations, and yet another to do what Queen Elizabeth I did.”

Arlene asks me to elaborate. I tell her that Elizabeth died with layers and layers of white, lead-based paint on her face. It wasn't removed between daily applications! She'd had smallpox as a young woman and was obsessed thereafter with displaying smooth pale skin. The lead in her foundation probably hastened her death.

“How do we navigate the whole makeup thing? Is it about covering up our God-given faces so as to appear godlike? Is it about getting fancy for fun? Is it about deceiving those around us? Is it about wearing a demure mask of feminine submission? What the fuck is it about?”

Arlene asks me if I think that it might be a bit of all those things.

I do, but this is a therapy session, so I guess that the next logical question to answer is, why do I personally use makeup? Am I drawn to the perfectly stacked pastel boxes only because of my OCD? It's that, but not just that. I love the ritual of application, the exactitude of my own array of cunning little containers, and the way I feel when I'm wearing just the right amount and combination. Dressy, powerful, noteworthy, and in control.

I'm not giving that up anytime soon.

### *Singing in the Original Key*

Our new TV must have come from the future. It's an LCD, whatever that is, and now we need something called an HD cable box to make it work right. Scott spent about three hours picking it out at Stereo Advantage while I died of boredom. I don't know or want to know the details, but it's currently being installed in our family room.

The self-proclaimed geek who hooks it up gives us instructions. He seems very proud of the TV, as if it were his baby. It comes with lots of colorful wires, many cables, and two gray remotes. The geek shows me how to change channels with the arrows on one of the remotes. But how will I know which remote to use after he leaves?

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I will never learn how to use this TV, even if I actually develop a desire to watch the cartoon he plays to demonstrate it to us, which features the Grim Reaper. No rabbits, ducks, or mice. Today's kids watch cartoons about Death?

And how can there be this many channels? I ask the geek. He tells me that there are over two hundred channels but doesn't go into why. I tell him, feeling old, that when I was a kid, there were three channels. The geek is incredulous, just as I intended.

When he leaves, I turn off the TV, which was way too loud the whole time it was on.

I ask Scott if he remembers adjusting the horizontal and vertical holds on the back of 1960-era televisions. He does and asks me if I remember fiddling with rabbit-ear antennas. I do. We laugh, and I proceed to dust the new set with a microfiber cloth.

Everyone at Edison School watched the same TV shows because there really were only three channels then. My schoolmates and I had all seen the cartoon featuring Bugs Bunny styled as Wagner's Brünnhilde, with fake eyelashes and fake armored breasts, singing operatically to a horn-helmeted Elmer Fudd.

At age seven or eight, when I realized that I sounded exactly like Bugs-as-Brünnhilde to my classmates, I stopped singing loudly and began to soft-pedal my voice. After being made fun of by other kids, mostly boys, I sang in an undertone, with my mouth demurely opened just a little, staying far away from any operatically high keys. I wanted to be a Vienna Choir Boy, or a kid who sang on Mickey Mouse's talent roundup, not Bugs Bunny in drag.

When I was seventeen and new to HUC, my favorite cantorial teacher tried to cure me of that. "Open your mouth," he said. "Let the sound come out. Sing the music as it's intended to be sung." But I couldn't get all the way there. Not until now.

Until now, I never sang fortissimo. I also never risked singing concert pieces in their original keys. I always sang them in lower keys, unwilling to hazard cracking on a high note. So I never did crack on a high note. I avoided the power that higher, brighter keys impart to synagogue music and performance pieces. I was afraid

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that someone, maybe the Almighty even, might find it too crackly or too loud.

Power does have its risks. But after all these years of therapy, I'm finally willing to risk fortissimo in treble keys, open-mouthed and standing up straight. My inner Barbi-Bugs-Brünnhilde has returned to me in my fifties. The early, reactive primness—the primness that pursed my lips and inspired my unalterable rules—is giving way.

I loved my formality, though. Parts of it do live on—mostly in my knees, which I press together when I sit. And in my hands, which are usually clasped. But I am newly in love with the power I can wield. The radio speaking voice, the brighter keys, the higher truths.

### *Breath and Life*

I catch myself smiling in our bedroom mirror.

My carry-on is on the bed, ready to be unpacked. Since nothing needs dry-cleaning at this point, I hang up my dress and pants, and fold a sweater, setting it on top of a neat stack of sweaters. I dump my dirty laundry into the bin just inside the closet. My tallit bag goes back into the bottom drawer of my nightstand. I unzip the suitcase's waterproof sleeve and take out my plastic pill dispenser and toiletry bag. I walk these into the bathroom. Another mirror gets my attention. And again I find myself smiling. I top off my travel containers of shampoo and curling gel and refill my mini Q-tips container. I put the pill dispenser back into my medicine cabinet.

And just like that, I'm finished unpacking. The stuff, anyway. Now I can unpack the events of the weekend. I smile again, eager.

Scott and I have just returned from visiting Temple Beth-El of Great Neck, where I'd been invited to participate in a service marking the 90th anniversary of its founding. For the occasion, Larry Rappaport came out of retirement to preach. We once again shared the bima, alongside the man who is one of my successors as cantor and also several of Larry's rabbinical successors. I got to sing one more time in front of that stark white Nevelson ark.

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As Larry stood up to give his sermon, my mind called up one of his eulogies, delivered a generation ago. In it he described the decedent, who had been a selfish ass-wipe, as “a man whose windows opened inward.” That’s truth-telling done with poetry.

Larry told the truth then, and he still does now. Unlike so many rabbis, Larry is willing to take even the president to task directly, calling him out by name. It’s so satisfying to hear the truth from a rabbi’s mouth again! How I’ve missed salty sermons!

Larry hasn’t changed much since I last stood beside him, but I have.

During my twelve years of the temple’s ninety, I lived according to innumerable rules—rules that I invented. I was certain that strictly following them would lead to rave reviews of my debut trouser role. But these negative commandments added up to just so many forms of self-confinement. Only recently have I been able to see them for the bullshit that they were.

As Beth-El’s cantor, I could have eaten real food. I could have grown out my hair. I could have worn green shoes. I could have kissed my babies in public.

I’ve changed a lot since then. I knew I had, but visiting Great Neck showed me how much.

Heading back to the bima of Temple Beth-El after thirty years, I left my long black robe in the cedar closet. I wore a form-fitting knee-length brown dress—glen plaid with a deep V-neck. I left my hair down and untamed.

In the oversized pulpit chair, I allowed myself to cross my legs for comfort. I even allowed my spine to come into contact with its tall wooden back. I didn’t fix my features at attention during the sermon. Instead, I simply listened.

This time around, when the congregation applauded one of the speakers, I clapped too. When someone made a little joke, I even laughed out loud with everyone else! And when I stood at my podium to sing, I took great, deep breaths, not the anxious catch-breaths that were all I could manage in my youth.

*trouser role: a part for a woman playing a man in a play or opera*

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In the absence of worry, I laughed, clapped, and breathed deeply. I sang in my own full voice with all its overtones. I loved the vigorous, ringing sound.

And then it dawns on me, here in my bedroom in Buffalo: I sang like the cantor I've always wanted to be! And my singing went beyond the sound. It felt like rediscovering my original brand of certainty and joy.

I zip up all of the zippers on my carry-on and take it into Hana's old bedroom. I try to open her closet, but the sliding door slips out of its track. This door has always been quirky, and it hasn't aged well. After realigning it, I set my bag inside, leaving the door open—there's no need to grapple with it right now.

Before I leave the room, I take a deliberate long look in the mirror on the wall just inside the door. There I am again. Tears come to my eyes, and I smile one more time.

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