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Boarding

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Boarding

Boulders lime-washed white bulged erratically
from the inside walls of the cellar, and squared off
in a corner, a room wall-papered on cardboard, a pink field
peppered with baby roses, a room for boarders. Copper pipes
ran above the bed, its mattress, battered
by decades of use, and though forbidden,
my brother and I would swing on the pipes and flop onto the bed,
adding our slight weight to the leftover dreams and sweat
and dread still haunted the bedding, always made up
with a spread of cheap peach satin.

How many
had she taken in, my Polish grandmother, a landowner
at last, how many Stasius, Josefs, Mareks, just off the boat
and hell-bent for the mills with deafening looms and floors
the size of pastures?

And how could we kids
grasp millworkers happy to work for ten cents an hour, breathing
in cotton dust? Two flights away on the second floor, we each
had our own bedroom, and only relatives visiting
from Pawtucket, Ipswich, or wherever, slept in the cellar bed,
just as our family vacationed only
where family could put us up.

Still Mike and I
played on the pipes, ignoring the water inside
flowing elsewhere, never conceiving
of the distances we would eventually travel
before the idea of immigrant bodies in the cellar would dawn on us
as mildly desperate, or considering what broken pipes
would have meant to our babcia, who in her entire life
would never herself stay in the number of hotel rooms
we might occupy in a matter of months,
an experience as wasteful to her as throwing
money in a sewer.