

Caged Bird

by Katie Beswick

In the narrow Msida yard where my daughter's ancestors grow lettuce: a greenfinch.
My girl reaches her hand and makes an open-close motion, little paw fist.

This house winds in a
 knotted
 spool
 all
 back
 on
 itself.

Mela... (It's true...)

A wailing sound.

The bird flits in its cage. No escape. Its chest, pounding panic, rises and falls. Rises and falls.

Mela. (Look.)

In the jelly heat, kittens luxuriate on the back step.
Rolling over they expose concave bellies, crepe paper
thin and too warm.

Mela! (Oh, they stink!)

At the back of the yard, a coop stuffed full of so many hens that who can count them? Black, white, brown. This one has a bald pink neck where her feathers have fallen out, or been torn away. There are doves too. Stuffed in smaller coops inside the bigger one, unable even to spread their wings.

Cats sleep on the roof.

See the elderly aunt in the blue dress, with thick knuckles? She could have married her kind boyfriend, if her father hadn't been the type of brute to snatch boyfriends by the lapel; to ban her from the cars of boys until she was too old to be asked anything but the time...

Mela, mela. (That happened. How sad.)

On the kitchen counter, mounds of eggs. The aunt counts a dozen into a brown paper bag, presses it into my hands. She says,

Qatt ma kellek bajd daqshekk tajjeb (You've never had eggs this good).

One of the uncles eats lunch — his face sags, collapsing at him from the same mirror above the sideboard where, as a child, he'd poked out his tongue, stained red with juice from sweet cherries. Another unmarried aunt adjusts his hearing aid.

The tabletop is apple green. Paint still missing from the corners where a cousin peeled it away, and then was punished — but that was then, when the table was brand new.

Mela. (Some things stay the same).

This morning out front a young man in his black baseball cap held up a tiny cage where a canary hopped from perch to floor and back again. Oh! an aunt cried, taking the cage from his hands and lifting it into a slice of sun falling through the shadows.

She opened the cage door.

A canary, ascending.

Mela! (How beautiful! How lucky!)

**Mela* is a Maltese word that can be used in a variety of ways to produce meaning based on specifics of intonation, gesture, context, facial expression, and mood.