

Piecework
for SHIRLEY SARASOHN
1917-2001

*“You still have your sewing machine?”
my mother asked
two weeks before she died*

*of heart failure. I said yes,
she nodded, satisfied
with all that could be*

*certain. The array of stars and planets
the day she gave me
birth decreed we’d miss each other*

*in the mist of all our differences,
unseemly daughter, stylish mother
linked by a slender thread*

*drawn from the spool, drawn down
around the tension knob, fed
through the obedient needle,*

*piercing the fabric, locking
through loops of thread the wheel
brings up from the bobbin below.*

*A Featherweight, black base
trimmed with triple lines of gold—
her gift when I graduated high school.*

*She’d reserved it used, we went
together to the shop. With this tool
for making dresses, curtains*

*she conferred initiation
into bare uncertainties,
equipping me to be adroit*

*as her immigrant parents were
in New York, Detroit,
Sam upholstering seats for Ford,*

*Pauline mending, making
alterations. The feed dog
rolls under the presser foot,*

*tracks the fabric back and past,
a light touch guides, puts
a sturdy line of stitches in, seams*

*the cotton, rayon, wool,
catches the piping in between,
inserts a pocket, fastens a placket.*

*The Singer pieced batiks in greens
and blues, made a jacket
for me last year. Lined in black,*

*the lining shows the words
twelve friends have given me to map
my presence in their lives.*

*The jacket wraps around me
like a sigh,
like moonlit clouds masking sea.*

*Shirley’s gone. She’s gone,
leaving sewing lessons to me.
What time can’t tear is seamless, strong.*

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for
THAI-PHOON THAI-BOY
1991-2007

I lived with you for fourteen years.

*Not a kink in your tail, lover-boy,
you could drive a woman crazy —
gentle and brutal, sneaky and snuggling,
affectionate prowler slinking through my house.*

*Your padding on piano keys
yielded post-modern avant-garde.*

*Curled together in your basket,
you and sister Chui made a two-headed swirl
of magnificent fur: magnificent.*

*Or, you'd let her prospect for the best spots,
push her out to sit and sun yourself—
you big-toothed, blue-eyed copycat.*

*Once dog and child arrived
you banished yourself to basement,
claimed the furnace as your lair.*

*Poised on my bedroom bureau
you'd stretch yourself against my chest,
purr for a place on my shoulder.*

*Or, playing on the bed, you'd swat
at the halo of my hands
arcing above your head.*

*Cat of large lung capacity,
you'd yowl during daylight*

STOP WHATEVER YOU'RE DOING AND PAT ME!

*and in my ear at night,
pillow-walk behind my head and pull my hair.*

*Nights, you'd crawl with me between the covers,
drape yourself upon my shoulder
dig your fang into my cheek.
Mornings, I'd be hurting nicely.*

*No matter how weak you became, fading,
you kept on leaping to, from heights,
topped the refrigerator in a single spring.*

*I wish I could see you one more time,
airborne at a moment's notice,
lion-like grace.*

*Thai-phoon, Thai-boy, I miss sleeping with you,
how you'd snuggle against my skin,
the curve of your fur a carpet for my dreams.*

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