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Impossible Math

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ELIZABETH GRAVER

## *Impossible Math*

*DYO* WHICH IS *Dio* which is *Dios* which is God (but only one, not three), the unnamable, the One Without a Name. My grandmother, Rebecca (née Cohen) Baruch Levy, was born a Sephardic Jew in Istanbul (called Constantinople by her people at the time) in what might, by the Gregorian calendar, have been 1903, but since they went by the Hebrew and Ottoman calendars, her birthday sits just out of reach.

This much we know: one *día in primavera*, an *ija* was born.

What did she speak as she grew towards words? What *didn't* she speak? At home, she spoke Ladino, but they called it *Spanyol*, or *Espanyol*, or *Spanyol-Muestro*, a medley of fifteenth-century Castilian Spanish, Hebrew, Turkish, French, Greek, Portuguese, Catalan. These days, it's called Ladino or Judeo-Spanish or Judezmo or Judéo-Espagnol and is listed in UNESCO's *Atlas of the World Languages in Danger* as "severely endangered," along with 526 other languages, among them Awa pit, Lilloet, and Ak.

If I cannot speak my grandmother's *lingua de leche*, I can say a few phrases. I have found—rare luck!—a teacher fifteen miles down the road.

*De la spina nase la roza.* From the spine is born the rose.

*La pasensia es pan i sensia.* Patience is bread and science.

*En el aniyo del Rey Shelomó est á esktrito,* “*Todo pasa.*” On King Solomon’s ring is written, “Everything passes.”

If meaning sometimes feels like impossible math (bread + science = patience?), still I reach, stretching my tongue and mind around sound and sense as fugitive and present as my grandmother’s voice on the brown, unspooling cassette tapes from 1985, when I asked her question after question, but never enough. *What I had with all of them, you have no idea!* At her Catholic girls’ school, she spoke French, and in the streets of her childhood, she spoke Greek, Turkish, Armenian, and in the privacy of her own thoughts, I don’t know what she spoke, and in her dreams I haven’t the faintest idea, though as for myself, I once slept-talked in French after years of study, *un cadeau lumineux* because I was excellent in (if not at) French, nubile and lilting with a gamine’s head and almond eyes and a flat belly and just enough words to make love (bright gift).

*La letra kon sangre entra*—the letter enters with blood—which is to say that learning is hard and always of the body (full of flab), so maybe it’s true that *la mijor palavra es la ke no se avla*—the best word is the word unspoken. Still, like me, my grandmother was a talker. When she left Turkey, she went to Spain, and when she left Spain, she went to Cuba, and when she left Cuba, she went to New York, where there was *Eengleesh*, which gave her more trouble than all the other languages combined (she wanted a chicken but asked for a kitchen, wanted bread but got a pen). Still, she never stopped talking, slipping between, among, inside her many tongues, a seal sliding from water to rock and back again, slick nose, brown eyes, and if there was pleasure in the flips, turns, and slippery slopes, it was always followed by the labored, limbless, barnacle-scraped haul to stone, where she lay breathless, heaving. And begin again.

Throughout it all, *Dyo*. Good fellow, he was there for her (if not for me, but I don’t mind), in temple, kitchen, word and wordlessness, and

she'd cover her eyes and wave her hands above the candles, drop herself inside his mute embrace. Sing. My own eyes are uncovered, my tongue clumsy but hungry. I'm not looking for *Dyo* but for my grandmother. It's been years now. *Donde? Où?*

In her old age in Beverly Hills, Florida, she made friends with a priest and, like Mary's little lamb, followed him to church one day, and then another day, because he was a very nice man and gave her rides. *Dyo* was everywhere or nowhere by then (she'd lost a leg, two husbands. Her six siblings, six children, eleven grandchildren all lived far away). *Toda pasa.*

Of Baby Jesus, my grandmother always said, Oh he was so *bee-yoo-tee-ful* and fat, you have no idea! They had statues of him at her childhood school, baby and mother, Madonna and child, he in her arms, plump ankles, a dimple chiseled in his marble cheek. He cupped his mother's chin, and if you stood by their feet, you could hear them singing.

*You don't believe me?*

That's how real they were.