

Mannequin Renewal by Jessica Suphan

Description and rationale

In a small, sheltered home of modern day United States, an older man named Josef paints those slaughtered in the Holocaust on mannequins. But his solitary passion is interrupted by a high schooler named Lydia; she bursts into his home in a flurry of excitement and hope. Her aunt sent her to Josef, with the teenager hoping he'll help her create a birthday present for her elderly grandmother. Her sweetheart, Lydia's grandfather, was lost in a concentration camp. Josef takes on this custom order. At her grandmother's birthday he experiences the bittersweet effect his art can have on the family of those long lost, and is inspired.

Josef turns to the internet with an offer, and quickly gets swamped by people asking him to paint their loved ones. In the years that he works he is inundated with nightmares. Falling to the ground and going still, a sharp pain following a gunshot, colors slowly fading into darkness. Twenty years since the beginning of our story, Josef is still painting. A young man appears before him, the sweetheart of Lydia's grandmother that he painted long ago. Josef is dying. And the sweetheart, named Efraim, is here to escort him into what lies beyond death. Many people are excited to meet him; Josef made many people feel real again. In taking Efraim's hand Josef is released from his body. And in stepping through a portal into the afterlife, he is witness to thousands of silvery ghosts coming to greet and thank him.

Last year my story was long and tragic, probably one of my best works. This year I wanted to do something different that was still emotional. To relax myself I've gotten into the habit of painting, and I've recently started painting little mannequins. Nothing as elaborate as my protagonist, but I have. This year, I wanted a story that wasn't tragic but still made people feel things. Because the Holocaust was a tragedy. No one can deny that, no one can say it wasn't deliberately horrific. But it didn't end in 1945. The Holocaust is an ongoing discussion for as long as it affects those within it and their descendants. My goal this time around was to show some of that conversation. Turn the story on people whose experience with the Holocaust wasn't as direct victims. Because no matter how someone is affected, they should be portrayed. I wanted a story that revealed how people not in the camps survived, and how their experience and coping can change the world and individual lives as much as the memories of those who died. My hope, my challenge to myself, was to bring something sentimental into the world that made people think not only of those who died, but also of those who survived and their stories' worth too.

Mannequin Renewal

Hundreds of eyes watched him paint, but Josef didn't mind. They watched him wet his tiny brush and frown, watched him get up with his paint cup, and new eyes watched him as he entered the kitchen connected to his studio. The water was too dirty... He gently moved a mannequin away from the sink before dumping it out. Nearly fifty years, only sixteen shy of his full life, had brought the eye amount higher and higher, until over two thousand mannequins watched him. Little ones like on his chipped table, medium ones, and those who stood their full twelve inches populated every room. They leaned on books and stood atop them, guarded the paints that had given them life. Charlie alone had eleven standing on the table above his dog bowl. The basset

hound snuffed his ankle as Josef went past before he licked his duck toy and the part of his ear that lay over its face.

If they covered the house, the mannequins smothered his workroom. But how could he work somewhere that didn't have evidence of his lifelong project? Josef moved a tiny girl to stand beside his coffee cup before he set the mug of clean water down. "Now, before we go farther, let's get you named..." The mannequin that was so far only dark flesh tones got lifted as Josef looked to the blown up picture propped beside him. A young man stared back; scrappily bald and head lolled to one side, as if he did not have the strength to keep it up. Like so many before him. All these years had given Josef a certain type of sight. With picture after picture he had picked up on body language trends, and though the man's last thoughts didn't project themselves into his mind like others had, Josef knew his mindset. This was a man who had been relieved to finally die. Horrible, but something he felt the truth of. He turned the mannequin upside down by its stand and grabbed his pencil brush. "Mena..." Pink paint formed letters in the color of love. "Chem... Ams... Erdam... Ski." There. The i was a little crooked, but Josef knew better than to fix it; trying to fix often brought ruination. So he lay the young man's mannequin on its back and picked up the photograph. "Menachem Amserdamski, let me make sure I know your cheekbones."

His sketchpad was near its end as he flipped to a clean page. Soon it would retire to a shelf in the one-room library, joining some two hundred tattered others who had seen him through the years. How could he throw any of them out? Each one had endless practices in them, as Josef began to create curve after curve upon this empty sheet. Each one contained faces and snippets of those lost to horrors. He couldn't throw away the faces of the worst atrocity, any more than he could stop hunting down photos taken seconds before gas chambers or moments after a shooting. Josef sat back and looked around his room. Children stood so small and frail beside the giants that were adults next to medium teens. Some had flat hands on backs or approximately intertwined; keeping families together was important.

He would not finish his task before he died. There were too many dead haunting barren fields and remembrance museums, he would need ten lifetimes to paint every one. But that was alright. As much as he did this out of memory, he did it for himself too. He had never thought he would paint every victim, not even when he first applied paint to mannequin as a teenager. What he got done would be enough.

Bm-bm-bm. What? Josef straightened up, legs cracking as he pushed himself to stand. "I hear you!" Who would be knocking at his door? It was mid-afternoon so not a salesperson, they usually waited until people were reliably home, maybe students selling something?

When he opened the door a student did smile at him, though he'd been picturing elementary schoolers rather than a girl in the midst of highschool. "Good, good afternoon!"

"Good afternoon to you, can I help you?" She shuffled, eyes down, and Josef stepped back with a wave of his hand. "Would you like to come in?" The world was as crazy as it had always been but this was Brownswood, bad things didn't happen in a small town like theirs. Besides, it was

safer to have people inside than out. Did he know her? Maybe, she looked familiar, something about that thick black braid that lay over her shoulder spoke to him.

“Oh, um, I don’t want to bother you that much until you agree.” Until? His poet’s mind latched onto it and dissected the implication of inevitability in an instant, a throwaway action after so many years of making a living from words. Brown eyes lifted with a grin. “Sorry, that was weird of me, I should’ve told you sooner. I’m Lydia! My Aunt Wendy said she talked to you at the food stand?”

Of course, that’s where he knew her from. The girl at the food stand whose braid thumped against her chest with every movement. “Right, Wendy, she said you wanted help with a gift or something?” Nothing more though; Wendy Stiphaly had always been mysterious and dramatic, ever since their first meeting in college at least. “Come on in, I agreed when she asked me, though I don’t know if I can actually...?”

Lydia almost skipped into the house, eyes wide as she looked around the small living room and Charlie huffed from the suede chair he’d dragged himself onto. “Oh you definitely can.” She pulled her bag in front of her, rifling around. “Sorry, it’s in here somewhere, shit!” An arm shoved a purple folder up and the plump paper brought itself down with its own weight, dragging the minutiae of life out with it. Lydia dropped and swept it all close as Josef carefully lowered himself. The Picture Of Dorian Grey could fit in his pocket but instead he handed it to her. “Shit, shit I’m so sorry, this isn’t how I wanted it to go...”

“It’s alright young lady, it’s alright.” Yellowed paper was curled before he even touched it, and Josef turned it over. What did they have here...? Tight zigzags covered the grinning young woman’s dress as she stood with her head resting on the shoulder of a man her age. Even in black and white his suspenders looked jaunty. They stood in a street festival of some sort, with a book in his hand that wasn’t around her waist. “Who are they?”

Confusion hummed as Lydia looked up. But then she grinned, and took it back with fingers so thin they might snap. “My grandparents!” Dilated eyes stared into his; somehow they froze him, keeping Josef on the ground despite his protesting knee. “I want to make my grandfather. Please?” What? He frowned, searching, and her words sped up. “Please please please, it’d make her so happy, she lost him in a camp and I wanna give her a mannequin for her birthday.” Oh. “Of course.” They stood, and Josef took her hand to pat it. “I would love to help you.”

~

“Grandmamamama!” A tiny child streaked past him as Josef sipped his lukewarm soda in the corner. Maybe it would help his headache, he’d had such a nightmare last night for some reason, full of blood and screams. Lydia’s grandmother Beverly grabbed the boy, laughing, and Josef offered a smile when their eyes met. A smile flickered across her face before she kissed her grandson. She’d been kind when he appeared with her granddaughter, accepting Lydia’s explanation that still kept from spoiling the present’s surprise. The two of them had carefully packed it right before the afternoon party; it rested atop a table now, its white bow shining. It’d only been two months before her grandmother’s birthday when Lydia came to him so they’d had to pack as many hours into each week as they could, but the outcome was as good as any of his

others. Wendy beckoned him over but Josef avoided her eye. No no, he felt safe in the corner with no one looking at him, here he would stay. “I wanna you to open the presents!” The elderly woman laughed as the toddler scrambled into her lap. “Yes yes, of course dear, let’s do that.” A few more rounds of screaming happened while everyone drifted over, chattering smattered with a few glances towards him until Lydia pulled Josef over to sit with her. He sank into a corduroy couch and returned Wendy’s toast with her half-eaten chocolate cake. The frail matriarch of the family smiled at the six adults in the old living room and their plethora of children. “Who wants to go first?”

“Me!” Lydia leapt up, almost tripped on Gigi the calico cat, and raced over to the pile of presents. “Josef helped me make it.”

As soon as it was in her lap Beverly tore into the paper, long loose sleeves flapping. With flimsy color framing her face she stared for a long moment. What was it? Deep concern slowly dawned upon Josef. Had they gotten something wrong, perhaps they had packed the wrong one? But no, a tiny hand flew to a thin mouth, and something ineffable set Josef’s senses on fire as Beverly heaved a sob and weakly gestured for Lydia while she hugged painted wood to her chest. He had to do this again.

~

Okay, so he put in his password...what was it again? Josef consulted the sticky note beside his computer before he carefully plugged in the code and opened his email. No, he still didn’t want it to save anything for when he logged in next. He didn’t need to help the government’s spies. Large text sprung up all about the screen, and he shooed away a few titles while Charlie plodded over and leaned against his leg. Two more! Could he see both of them at once? No, but that was fine. Lydia had helped him set up a facebook page after the party, and even after just a few weeks he had emails pouring in. There had to be at least twenty of them. He had been simple with his text despite Lydia’s hopeful comments about how exclamation points made things more exciting. Dear friend, I have been painting those who perished in the Holocaust for most of my old life, and would like to now share it with the world. I paint mannequins with paint and I use registry pictures the Nazis took before or after their personal tragedy. I would be happy to use a different picture if you have it. Would you like one of your family member or members? They are completely free, this is my passion. Below, I have pictures in some albums of my many mannequins. I hope you like them and can see them. Josef.

That charge in the middle of Beverly’s birthday party had begun to peter out days later, but then the emails started coming. People put all sorts of things in there, all of them aching with need. He could help them. Josef set the first email’s requested picture on his table and turned his chair around. He loved his art for its own merit, but this was something new. His wooden chest complained like it always did as he opened it, whining in protest, and from the tangle of limbs within Josef withdrew a medium mannequin. Taub Haar. From the moment he first got the idea to paint victims in the cool breeze of Switzerland he had been hooked on it. Merla, Moses, and Jakob were never ones he’d had to paint though; the family his parents had hidden in their musty root cellar beneath the wooden basement had moved overseas to safety a few months before they did, so could he not memorialize those who weren’t so saved?

Ting-ting-ting-ting. He tapped his paintbrush against the cup, and ran the dark bristles the size of his fingernail against his hand just to check. No, no color was in its water. Taub Haar, Taub Haar, Taub Haar... Josef carefully selected and began to layer dark grey pants onto the mannequin's spread legs. Charlie slid down to bumph! on the floor. The world narrowed to the little wooden being in his hands, and Josef lost himself in the meaningful rhythmic strokes.

~

Screams rang around him and his knees hit metal as he gasped. "Haahh!" Mouth gaping he was drooling, inhaling, but that made him cough as his throat tightened up. Dizziness blotted his vision with black. Silver flickered at the edges of his eyes, softening shards.

~

Josef wrapped Chiel in green tissue paper, than wrapped him again, and glued down bubble wrap before he placed the mannequin into its box. He'd take him to the post office after the next one. His email list was still growing every day, but newcomers would have to wait their turn as he went in order. The door opened with a krrrrrrrr and he shivered. It was of his nightmare last night, doors screeching open in time with humans. "Josef!" He paused with his hand opening the chest's dark lid as Lydia raced in with a grin. "Guess what? Look, look! Oh wait here I can get it, what size do you need?" She took the top, so Josef sat and requested an adult before she shoved a typed letter in his face. He held it out next to his new print of Ginerva de' Benci.

Dear Lydia,

Your short story style memoir was fascinating, as I'm sure you could tell. Would you be interested in interviewing with my journalism class about your grandmother and Mr. Josef and how you see the Holocaust through them? Be sure to ask your parents for permission too.
Sincerely, Mr. Bensworth

"You got this today?" He looked into a grin as she snatched the paper back. At the noise Charlie huffed, and waddled over with his Star Trek bow tie dangling loose from his neck. Josef adjusted it while Lydia bounced around him.

"Yeah! It got hung on my locker at school, isn't that great? Do you want me to see if you can come in and talk? Oh no Charlie, did you trip on it?" She hit her knees and Josef startled, but thankfully the teen was too absorbed in baby talk to notice.

Should he? He almost physically shied away from the idea but instead just smiled that little smile that always calmed himself down. "Oh no thank you, but I appreciate it. I trust you to tell our story well, do bring the interview in once it's done." She hummed agreement and hopped onto the wooden stool she'd claimed as hers weeks ago, and he passed his sketching of Veneta Anend with her beauty mark over to Lydia. "What do you think? I want to make sure I have her birthmark in the right place."

She leaned over it, hair tumbling off her shoulders. The girl straightened up and looked to the photo propped against an old radio he had found and planned to give away years ago, before she bent back over the sketch. How, after all these years, could the rare someone looking at his work still make sickly apprehension fester in his gut? "It looks right to me! How are you gonna keep it in shape? Like, not look like a mistake?"

Josef huffed a chuckle as he pulled his tiny basket of flesh tones closer. “Very, very carefully. How has soccer been going? Keep an eye on the picture, do tell me if I’m starting to go too low with the chest’s flesh if you may.”

~

Cold. Wind whipped his back and legs, blue sky a brief glimpse before kra! rang out and he fell back. Something knew he must have hit packed earth, but he felt nothing. Silver fluttered. His hand gripped the shovel’s handle as he wavered. Bent over he couldn’t scrunch his shoulders to protect his neck against the rain, but he couldn’t see either and that was the bigger problem right now. Black splotches fizzled yellow at the edges as more heat than his body had held for weeks swelled up. He couldn’t. A man yelled at him to keep digging. Being out in the rain made them more irritated, he should. For his own good he should. Long ago he might’ve dwelled on what ‘for his own good’ actually meant but now he just stumbled. Now he just crumpled. Now he just lay down.

A flurry of colors danced before his closed eyes, like something children used to draw on the broken pavement of Kraków Ghetto. They swirled and dipped, intertwining before darting away, like young lovers caught in an embrace. Spritely green darted and leapt among its vibrant friends. But they began to dim. Green brighter than spring grass was first, like someone had pinched it to make it darken with a wound. Red turned crimson and yellow because jaundiced. Purple dimmed to plum while once-orange wallowed in rust, the blue of a winter sky now muddy denim. Denim turned ocean-deep blue. Crimson lapsed into garnate as mulberry flooded plum and jaundice faded to flaxen. They all, in their own way, deepened closer to black. Color still wove, still jumped, still dipped and kissed, as their light dimmed and they became nevermore.

~

Where had he put his brush...? Josef set down his decaf coffee and pushed himself up with his table. Old legs got themselves straight as every bone cracked. “Mmmm...” His house hadn’t changed much in the last twenty years, save for more wooden friends about. Lydia had gone off to college years ago, but he had remained. Of course he had, and he would continue to, as he did through his parents’ deaths. The bookshelf he braced his wobbling hand on had held up since they moved in, tongues tangled by English, and the plays that filled its shelves were a collective portrait of aging. He had carried the same knowledge through all those years too, all the way from airy Switzerland; leave the house as little as possible. Being in public might draw attention. There it was. Josef took his brush off a Social Security check and returned to his work table that Charlie drooled against in his sleep. Wait. As he sat Josef frowned. Where was his coffee? Hadn’t he just had it, or had he thought to get it while he was up? He scanned the table, his room, but never mind. He could always make more later. His hands shook as he picked up Lipman Stiel’s adult-sized mannequin. Nearly done, it took him longer to finish each person nowadays, and as black spots bloomed in his vision Josef paused again. They would pass. They always did eventually. Sure enough they cleared, though as they faded silver trembled at the edge of his vision. But when he turned his head the shards didn’t dart away playfully. Instead they stayed, and their edges dissolved into each other until a young man in silver tones stood before him. With his hands in his dress pants’ pockets beneath his sweater vest, he almost looked normal. The eyes though. Cheer was a single layer pressed between hundreds of grief. Still he smiled and stepped closer, opalescent hand outstretched. “I’m Efraim Tropper sir.”

Efraim Tropper... The dizziness was back today, was it because of this ghost? Acceptance of this reality filled him; what, after all, were his mannequins and those he'd given away but wooden ghosts? Josef blinked at the graphite hand with its bright silver sleeve through the tiny black spots that swarmed before his eyes. Efraim Tropper? Who? "Oh, Beverly's sweetheart!" To shake a ghost's hand was warmer than he expected, like holding light. His eyes ran over the young man. Oh, dear, not a good idea. Josef retracted his hand and massaged his temples as if that would make the floating parts of his head come back together. "Apologies for forgetting, it's been so long..."

"Yes, it has." Efraim's indulgent smile leaned towards him from the waist. "A very long time. How are you feeling?"

Josef frowned as another swirl of silver fragments began to spin near the window. "I...who is that?" It must be someone else coming in, was it not? What was the question? Oh, right. "I have felt better, it's true, but it'll pass."

Efraim sucked in breath and aching eyes turned back to him. "Not quite this time sir." A jerky shrug rolled through his body, enough of a spasm that Josef would be concerned if he wasn't a ghost already. Instead his concern was split. Not quite this time, there had been no inflection on any one word so not as bad? Or this time was specific, special? The softening shards had the rest of his concern as they bled into each other and a little girl hopped away from his dusty windowsill. Efraim spun, stumbled, caught himself on air. "Dora! Be a good girl now, I told you to stay there. Go back. We can exchange greetings later, alright."

Dora... The name twirled like her nickel-colored hair ribbons as she rushed over. Warmth enveloped his whole body as she threw her arms around his neck, and Josef hugged back out of instinct. Dora, Dora... Every touch of her insubstantial skin pulled at something unnamable inside him. "Dora Shifford...?"

Ghost children's screeches could break his ear as well as living children's could, and Josef turned his recoil into taking a better look at her. "Yes!" Her face was far too lean to dimple. But it would if it could, though her skeletal face and frame still broadcasted the brightest glee. "That's me! You made me!"

That's right, he did. Six years ago? Two? Ten? Regardless, he had and now she was here in his arms. Josef looked to Efraim who was busy shaking his head. "Not quite this time?"

A blank expression stared back at him. "Oh! Yes sir, sorry, but all that won't be passing quite the same this time." As if it had been waiting for attention to turn on it again, his dizziness swept his head up into a snow globe's storm. Josef closed his eyes and a hiss leaked out between pale lips. "Easy sir, it's alright..." A warm hand touched his arm until Josef rallied his strength and sat back up against cooling wood. He was alright... Efraim's pewter eyes stared into his, brimming with concern. "Would you like to come with me, us, now sir, so you don't feel anything of it?" "Anything of what?" Something deep and tight in him knew, and a different part of him was okay with it, but those were entirely separate parts from the one that watched Efraim with all the

gentle confusion it could muster while he trembled. Dora opened her mouth but the young man older than both of them touched her head.

His other hand took Josef's. "You're dying sir. Just a few more minutes and you will. No one actually feels their death, we get severed from it a moment or so before it happens." Efraim's hand was warm but it wanted something too. Each of his pores beneath it lifted up, suctioned at to let something leak out. "But none of us all want you to feel anything of the fright and confusion that usually happens after it, when a person is all alone."

"But what about Charlie?" He looked down to the grey-muzzled basset hound who looked up at him, brown eyes big and ears covering his feet as he licked Josef's leg. "I can't leave him." Efraim crouched before the dog as Dora plopped down. She hugged Charlie around the neck, and giggled at his sloppy tongue. "That's okay! He's really really old, we can take him with us!" Well that settled that then, didn't it? "So long as it won't hurt him." At Efraim's reassurance Josef nodded. "Very well then, thank you." The nod brought about black spots, and he blinked as they hopped across his field of vision. "Yes, I do think it's time."

Efraim's grin popped up with the rest of the wavering ghost. "Lovely, trust me, this is the best way, you have so many old friends eager to meet you. You've done a lot for our families, truly. And for us." His hand touched Josef's again as pewter stared into the old man. "You've made a lot of people feel real again. Come along, let's go."

The soft vacuum lifted his pores again and this time all of Josef went into it. Like when he had vacationed in Maine one year, he was lifted with the swell and away from breath.

He looked down at silver-toned legs and smiled. "I am..." The word did not come because there was no need for it; he knew, and had already accepted it.

"Yes, you are." Efraim moved his hand to the man's arm and beckoned with the other, but Josef ignored him. What was happening to his dear Charlie? No dizziness stalked him when he turned his head, and when he closed and opened a hand as an experiment no shaking came either. Just lovely. He was going to enjoy being dead. Dora pet Charlie with long, gentle strokes from between the eyes down his spine, and kissed his head.

A silvery basset hound stood up with more faith in his legs than Charlie had had in years, knee deep in his own body's head, before a wagging tail delivered him to Josef for licks. Josef's smile almost hurt as he pet him; almost, and he knelt with ease to scratch the boy's ears like slate tiles. "Hello there old boy, feeling better?" They both were; what magic death was.

Dora popped up and took his hand, a wide grin on her little face. "Ready to go?" Were they? Josef looked down to Charlie who was sniffing towards Efraim, and when he looked to the young man a soft silver circle stood beside him. Like an old full-length mirror it was soft around the edges, hints of green about it. Efraim's encouraging eyes didn't falter when Josef looked in them. "Yes...yes we are. Charlie, come."

Baseball-sized paws padded beside him as the flecks of green revealed themselves to be grass allowed a sheen of oxidized copper. Josef took the helping hand Efraim offered, while Charlie hopped up and in with a delighted bark. Grass waved around them. Each blade was a welcomer, he couldn't hear it but he could feel it. "Look Josef! Here they all come!"

He looked up at Dora's tugging while she bounced. Across the grassy field, hugged within a broad circle of mountains and towns, hundreds of familiar silvery forms ran to greet them.