

## MY MOTHER'S HUMMING

My mother hums all the time. It's what makes my mother my mother. It is her signature. Once, a lady from the old neighborhood recognized my mother's humming in a rest stop on the Ohio Turnpike.

"Leila?" the woman asked from the next stall. "Is that you?" My mother hadn't seen the woman in twenty years, and didn't recognize the woman. It could have been an embarrassing moment, but my mother just smiled and pretended to remember her, without missing a beat. Just about nothing fazes my mother. Later, as we drove north of Youngstown, she recalled the woman's name and laughed for three miles straight.

Because of her humming, I never lost my mother when I was young. I simply had to remain very still and listen for her quiet melody. As a child, I thought she hummed her song just for me--it was, I assumed, a homing beacon, a call home.

Her song had no distinguishable melody, it was just a song, her song. As far as I can recall, the humming stopped only once, when my grandfather died. My uncle had called from the hospital to tell my mother. She hung up the phone and stood with her arms at her sides, looking around as though she were confused, then sat down on the floor and cried.

I wanted to say something to her, but I was frozen where I stood. The silence of the room, and the absence of song in the air, scared me.

My mother was born in Germany but for the longest time I thought she grew up in Ohio. Her family escaped before the war, and she had grown up in Philadelphia. She hadn't moved to Ohio until after she married my father. Since then, she has lived in Michigan, Illinois

and Pennsylvania. I imagined my mother as a product of Ohio somehow, like my brothers and sisters. They laugh and sing the line from a song they learned in kindergarten--"Ohio, where the residents keep on raising presidents"--and I can only smile with them. I was born somewhere else.

I can imagine my mother growing up on a farm, from "good stock" as they say out in Ohio. I can see her standing in the yard by the edge of a cornfield, watching the orange sunset, humming.

She says she remembers a Nazi rally in 1938. She went with her class.

"I sieg heiled. I didn't know better."

Her aunts and uncles were killed in the camps.

"We were lucky to escape."

"At the station. We took what we could"

"The suitcases on the platform, who would claim them?"

"I did not want to leave Germany," she says.

"I did not want to go to a strange land."

My mother laughs a lot, she has a good sense of humor. Sometimes I can't believe how happy she can be, considering everything. If someone is laughing or humming a song in our house, it's usually my mother. I guess she doesn't dwell too much on the past; this is her home now. She belongs--whether she's in Ohio or not. As long as she is alive, my mother will be humming; Canton and Akron, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh--Dachau, Treblinka, Auschwitz, Birkenau-- Chicago, Toledo and Kalamazoo.