Yad VaShem

three small girls

dressed in the grey of the poor

make their way to a cousin’s house

propelled by panic and the words

of an absent mother

do not stop, do not wander!

their cousin

is a criminal, a bad man, a smuggler and thief

and therefore knows the back routes.

i am carrying a long stick

stout and straight

when i see the cousin

he is releasing a bird from a cage

i raise my stick

and a bluebird lands on the end

only a meter from my hand.

the three girls stop

say nothing, their faces tight with bewilderment

i hold the stick out toward them

they approach close

and the bluebird snaps its head

from side to side.

it regards the girls from each eye

and never from both

until eventually their attention wanders.

The girls turn to their cousin

who stares at them seriously

knowing that this moment is not one of those

in which his lack of cares

may lend lightness to his steps

he is already considering a route

in darkness, out of the country.

he must choose a destination

where the light may remain

now that he has three charges

nothing will be easy.

i flick the stick gently

and the pigeon rises, as grey as the children

and returns to its owner’s hand

instead of letting it back into the cage

he throws it high on the wind

and with a snapping of wings

it rises in a swirling turn

and disappears into the forest

behind the barn

dragging reluctance like the train of a kite.

one by one, he opens the cages

robins, wrens, thrushes and falsely-painted sparrows

sense freedom, only somewhat wanted

they rise, their wings snapping like the first

their grey raiment absorbed by sky

and disappear.

all but one —

the white of cliché

which sits stubbornly on my shoulder

finally i threaten it, and it too greys

and flees, but not far

it sits there on the roof of the barn

and waits.

i hand my stick to my brother

i will not be leaving.