

Winner of *Lilith's* 2011 Charlotte A. Newberger Poetry Prize

# SOMETIMES THE DEAD

by BABO KAMEL

My mother is always alive when I dream of her.  
In her downtown clothes the silk scarf floats  
on her shoulder, she waves her white gloves.

On the hill above the cemetery, the empty wooden swing  
sweeps back and forth as if a young girl still rides  
its perfect arc above the graves.

In the subterranean station it is night in either direction.  
Voices of the dead call to each other across the tracks,  
as if each were a name they could return to.

Sometimes the dead cover the mirrors

with their own faces  
so when I look at myself

it's my mother's features I see—  
the way I remember her

in the clamp of letting go.

The dead mourn  
for themselves from the dark terminals

of their eyes, all night  
toss and sweat

under the rose-patterned sheets  
a weed in my own bed

as if I didn't belong there,  
as if the dead were entitled

to as much room as they need.

*Babo Kamel coordinates a program for high-risk students and teaches at North Shore Community College in Lynn, MA. A graduate of Warren Wilson's MFA program, she has been published in various literary reviews including The Greensboro Review, Contemporary Verse 2, The Grolier Poetry Prize Annual and Alligator Juniper.*

#### ABOUT THE JUDGE

*Marcia Falk is a poet, translator, and painter ([www.marciafalk.com](http://www.marciafalk.com)). She lectures widely on Jewish women's poetry and is now writing *The Days Between*, a book of liturgy to accompany the High Holiday season.*

#### MARCIA FALK COMMENTS:

*In Babo Kamel's darkly elegiac poem, the startling image of the dead covering the mirrors with their faces brings to mind two very different associations. One thinks immediately, of course, of the traditional Jewish practice of covering mirrors in the house of mourning. Then, when the speaker goes on to say that she sees her mother's features in the mirror, the image expands in resonance, recalling the twentieth-century Hebrew poem by Leah Goldberg "From My Mother's House." The speaker of Goldberg's poem looks into a mirror handed down by her grandmother and sees, behind her own face, a vision of her grandmother — young, radiant, and beautiful. But whereas in "From My Mother's House" the mirror "passes on the family lore," in "Sometimes the Dead" it points toward a terrible isolation: the speaker disappears from sight, then becomes a weed in her own bed, crowded out by the ghosts inhabiting her room. Where Goldberg's poem is an elegant lyric reverie on a long-deceased foremother, Kamel's is a powerful description of fresh grief.*