

## MIRACLES IN A TOWER

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Brenna Silberstein\*

*Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.*

— Percy Bysshe Shelley

[Ilya Kaminsky attended law school at Hastings. The interviewer, Brenna Silberstein describes him as a “tallish Ukrainian with a thick accent, glasses, and two hearing aids.”]

Though I’d had classes with him, I probably never would have really got to know Ilya except that one day, while subsumed in scholastic misery and awaiting a smoothie on Polk Street, I happened to pick off a wall rack a local arts and culture publication, the *San Francisco Reader*. I suddenly found myself staring at Ilya’s picture. The article began, “Today I spoke with an international poet.” The author went on to artfully describe Ilya and his craft in glowing terms. The clouds parted for me and my smoothie in that moment, as, thanks to Ilya, I remembered that it is possible to be simultaneously both a law student and a creative, spiritual, compassionate human being.

And when, in your moments of doubt, you still wonder about this, you really must check out Ilya’s chapbook, *Musica Humana*. It is breathtakingly beautiful, joyful, sensual, and grippingly personal. (And that is not a “loose and irresponsible use of adjectives.” *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Sawyer*, 343 U.S. 579, 646 (1952)). More, if you’re a put-feet-to-those-words kind of person, attend one of the several hundred Poets for Peace readings he and his collaborators have put together through the international humanitarian organization he co-founded, United Poets Coalition (which for the sheer joy of it, I shall abbreviate to UPC, wills and trusts notwithstanding). . . .

I recently got to spend a couple of hours chatting with Ilya about poetry, activism, and why on earth he’s in law school and living in the cozy Tower apartment he and Katie, his wife, call home.

I bless the boat from Yalta to Odessa  
and bless each passenger, his bones, his genitals,

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bless the sky inside his body,  
the sky my medicine, the sky my country.

[— from “Envoia”]

Ilya is conscious, perhaps even self-conscious, of the strange bed-fellows law and poetry make. Legitimacy is, understandably, an issue for a poet in the world of the “reasonable man.” Ilya has consequently led a bit of a double life while at Hastings. (The intention of this article, of course, is to “out” him, and entirely.) Admittedly, his poet’s struggle is not unique to one venturing into law. “I wouldn’t advise anybody to become a poet. You do it because you can’t stop. If you can stop, do.”

Ilya, at this point, can’t stop. Nor would anyone want him to: fellow poets say things like “Kaminsky is more than a promising young poet; he is a poet of promise fulfilled. I am in awe of his gifts.” (Carolyn Forché.) But he takes issue with notoriety and being published as measures of success: “Publishing is a different art. The art of self-promotion.” It’s the product of a consumerism-obsessed society. So what does it say about him that he’s been able to find a place in such a world? “I got lucky,” he whispers loudly, with a wink.

Ilya’s advice to would-be writers: write two books before you publish the first. If the first is successful, your publisher will demand a second before you can even catch your breath. The quality of your work will suffer. He tells the story of a friend who spent ten years crafting her first book. The TLC paid off: it got picked up by a major publishing house, distributed widely, and churned some healthy sales figures. So, when did the publisher want her next book? “January!” Ilya says, shaking his head. Such a pace is not sustainable.

But this is not a poet content merely to cocoon himself in a shroud of words, lucrative or otherwise. Ilya chose the Shelley quote at the top of this article for the UPC website. He may not have a presence on the fiery, underground poetry slam circuit, but Ilya is every bit an activist, and his poetry is informed by his sense of social justice. If he’s written hortatory or overtly political poems, I haven’t read them. But it is not hard to read into what he has written—drenched as it is in his profound sense of humanity, of the intimacy he finds in daily life—a commitment to peace and to community that cannot be separated from his use of language. And he’s unapologetically idealistic. Over cranberry juice in a similarly-colored room he explains to me that “You can change the world with anything! Furniture, probably!” Poetry, definitely. A poet is a voice, I say, like Icarus, “whispering to himself as he falls.” [from “Musica Humana”].

It was as a student of political science at Georgetown that, looking up during his subway commute one day, Ilya noticed that all of his fellow passengers, some of whom he recognized from school, were reading the same article in the Washington Post—all of them. What was that article? It wasn't about the genocide in the Balkans, which was raging at the time and felt so close to Ilya. It was about "Lewinsky, Clinton, and the cigar." The rancid absurdity of the moment caused something to shift for him, and he decided to finally accept a fellowship he'd been offered at Philip Exeter Academy, an ultra-exclusive prep school in New Hampshire. He took a year off from being a student to write, and to teach literature to the children of the nation's elite.

What was that like? The kids were very sharp, under an enormous amount of pressure, and "really missed their parents." He taught the students from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude*, which he describes as a fairytale of twentieth century fiction that mythologizes life. Why did he choose that book? "It's very important for every person to make a fairy tale out of life," he says, entirely serious. "Every human face tells a story. Every wrinkle on a human face tells a story."

It is this kind of tender attention that saturates "Musica Humana." The writing is so clear, so unobstructed, it would make even an legal writing instructor proud. This is not poetry written with a cloud-cast countenance. It is crisp, clarion, and one wonders if Ilya was dancing while he wrote it.

He may well have been. He is impossibly, refreshingly, celebratory. In "Praise," he writes:

O the language of birds

with no word for complaint! —  
the balconies, the wind descending

among a child's drum beats,  
over you, over me, over the lemon trees.

A man who artfully speaks this language of birds is worth listening to. Here is the advice he has for us, friends and fellow students, which I extracted from him after a great deal of coaxing: "Wake up! Life is a miracle! We're here for the last time. We must allow possibilities for magic in our life. The ordinary is beautiful, and frankly, it's all we've got."

I bend clumsily at the knees  
and I quarrel no more,  
all I want is a human window

in a house whose roof is my life.

[from "Marina Tsvetaeva"]

It is a hot day when I interview Ilya. Katie, who was delayed in joining us, comes home a bit wilted from her journey and offers us some ice cream. I assure her Ilya has been an excellent host. "Yes, he practices aggressive hospitality," she agrees happily, which describes well his persistent and exuberant foisting of Pepperidge Farm cookies at me. Beautiful, young, lithe, Katie goes to fetch the ice cream, and I hear a crash and an exclamation. "There are books in the freezer!" she shouts in disbelief, and then lets go with a hearty belly laugh. "Kaminsky, it's gone too far!!" I find this hilarious. He goes to her, eagerly, to see what can be done with the mess. It is easy, amid talk of magic and daily miracles, to imagine them being forever newlyweds.

I wonder what it's like for her to share a home with a man who doesn't always hear the phone ring? Yet, it is nearly impossible to think of Ilya as disabled, however different his life may be. Before I'd really read any of it, the thing that most struck me about his success as a poet was that most of it stems from works he produced in a language, English, that he learned after he lost his hearing. For those of us dolts still struggling with competency in language number two (not to mention literacy in language one) while all of our senses are more or less intact, this is particularly impressive.

But Ilya's work is excellent in its own right; he doesn't need a come-from-behind story to shine. In fact, he was bashful about telling me his story at all. He was afraid I'd make him into some sort of "tragic figure." "I'm just a regular guy," he insisted, a little disingenuously.

Regular or not, if lineage were a strong predictor of personal tragedy, Ilya should probably be watching his back. Stalin killed his grandfather, an economist. Grandma, spared execution, got instead to experience a twenty-year residency in Siberia. His father, a journalist cum businessman, emigrated to the U.S. a decade ago after things in the Ukraine got "nasty" for him and free speech. The family followed Ilya's brother to Rochester, New York, after his brother had followed love there. What was life like in Rochester? "Nine months winter, three months construction work," and very few Russian speakers, says Ilya with his characteristic look of wild bemusement. And how does a hearing impaired young man learn and (I think it's safe to say) master

a second language in a foreign country? “I didn’t have a choice,” he explained simply, as if that were answer enough.

And then, there was genocide. Not in Rochester, but refugees from the Balkans crisis began to pour into that city, many under the misapprehension that the U.S. was going to provide them with some form of financial assistance. (“There are lots of problems with this country,” he says, “but they don’t kill you here.”) Ilya and his literary cohorts decided to help out by coordinating readings and donating the proceeds to help the refugee families. Thus, Poets for Peace was born. “We were the three-minute ‘bright spot’ on the evening news,” Ilya says, shaking his head with the irony of it: families forced from their homes by genocide, and it’s the poetry fundraising event that makes the news.

Poets for Peace has continued to evolve. The group coordinated a few dozen readings prior to 9/11, but the movement has exploded since then. It is a thriving and growing network of artists. Ilya credits UPC with more than two hundred readings in the last two years, in towns and cities all over Europe and the U.S. The local Bay Area chapter sells its chapbook, *Against Certainty*, at readings, donating all proceeds to humanitarian causes. UPC raised more than \$30,000 in NYC alone.

It seems to me all of this—immigrating, activism, writing, publishing, teaching, marriage, and now law school—is a lot of water to have passed under the bridge of a 26-year-old life. I try to ask him what he’s most proud of in his short life, but he nearly leaps out of the chair in agitation. “IT’S NOT SHORT!” he yells, laughing as I, startled, jump too. “Russian poets die at twenty-two!”

This is how we live on earth, a flock of sparrows.  
The darkness, a magician, finds quarters

behind our ears. We don’t know what life is,  
who makes it, the reality is thick

with longing. We put it up to our lips  
and drink.

[from “Praise”]

Ilya’s perspective is unmistakably global. “I was born in the city named after Odysseus/and I praise no nation,” he writes. But, too, he is passionate about the treasure of localism. “I really think the way to preserve national culture is to support local culture,” he tells me. So this is what he and UPC do, by showcasing local writers, local venues, and often local causes. He rejects the elitism and aristocracy endemic to poetry institutions, especially their “New York-centrism.” “We have a big country,” he says imploringly. There are gifted people everywhere. So

much to be said about so many places. So many stories to be told. (Speaking to him, I find myself imagining pastured, Midwestern hills and dales blanketed in wandering, kindly, prophetic savants. Is this America? Have I been missing it all along?) He quotes Whitman for the proposition that “we can only have great poets if we have great audiences.” “I want to build great audiences so we can have great poetry,” he explains.

He discourages the readers in the UPC series from using its success to construct monuments to themselves. Ego takes a back seat to the fund raising the poets do for humanitarian efforts. Community is his grand ambition and a theme he constantly speaks of, though he admits it’s “oxymoronic: community of poets!” Making poetry public may enrich the public, but it can pollute the poet. The temptation for self-aggrandizement is ever present.

So then, perhaps law and poetry are not so distant after all. Ilya sees the same temptation for selfishness in law: “The perception that you can create rules others must follow reflects a tremendous amount of arrogance.” And, more personally, the presumption that we as lawyers have a right to manipulate those same laws to produce the effects our clients desire—this, too, is arrogance. All of this, Ilya says, makes Hastings’ dorm in the Tenderloin a good thing—it helps keep us all a little more humble.

—because the true understanding  
is always silence: my father walks

in the opposite direction  
of my journey: “It’s cold outside, close the window!”

“If I close the window, will it be warmer outside?”  
but the sky was all around us once,

[from “My Father Between *Yes* and *No*”]

Poetry is for Ilya much more than an artful arrangement of words. It is, indeed, *musica humana*. Or, as he explains it, “being able to speak for what it is to be a human being in language accessible to others.” I find this a remarkably coherent definition, and so I begin, notepad in hand, to sickeningly, instinctively, break it down into its elements to memorize for that omnipresent and ultimate final exam: 1) capacity to speak, 2) the human condition, 3) accessible language.

But high up in the Tower, the din of McAllister drifting through a sunny open window, Ilya is already prying me away from his own tidy formula. He begins to explain to me one of his favorite mysteries: “It is

silence that moves us to speak. We speak against silence.” I struggle with this for a moment. Perhaps, I think a little guiltily, this is a revelation only a deaf man could have? But no, he explains: Why is it that humans feel so compelled to speak? Other animals aren’t so inclined. He uses the example of a house cat, who spends its days in quiet contentment. Such an animal needs no audience.

But for humans, our speech is intrinsic to our humanity. We need to speak. Thinking about it, I agree. How many times have I picked up the phone just because I needed to get something off my chest? And yet, Ilya explains to me, “Sometimes the only way to understand each other is in silence.”

This, too, I find digestible. That place in love, where words are unnecessary—are even an obstruction—that kind of understanding I understand. For Ilya, in a twist, poetry gets us to that place of silence. Because “Poetry doesn’t depend so much on language as people think. It depends on the human spirit.” At its best, he seems to say, poetry communicates one human spirit to another, to many others. And then, these at peace, can be quiet together.

Something seems to sparkle in the room at this. It is hot out, and the world is busy, but in this room it feels very quiet. I wonder to myself, am I still at Hastings? Or is there some sort of temple, here, in this tower above the Tenderloin?

Maybe it is both. If this is a place where human spirits can meet, maybe the law and the holy can, too.

