

ILYA KAMINSKY

Author's Prayer

If I speak for the dead, I must
leave this animal of my body,

I must write the same poem over and over
for the empty page is a white flag of their surrender.

If I speak of them, I must walk
on the edge of myself, I must live as a blind man

who runs through the rooms without
touching the furniture.

Yes, I live. I can cross the streets asking
"What year is it?"
I can dance in my sleep and laugh

in front of the mirror.
Even sleep is a prayer, Lord,

I will praise your madness, and
in a language not mine, speak

of music that wakes us, music
in which we move. For whatever I say

is a kind of petition and the darkest days
must I praise.

Praise

*. . . but one day through the gate left half-open
there are yellow lemons shining at us
and in our empty breasts
these golden horns of sunlight
pour their songs.*

– Montale

Time, my twin, take me by hand
through the streets of your city;
my days, your pigeons, are fighting for crumbs–

‡ ‡

A woman asks at night for a story with a happy ending.
I have none. A refugee,

I go home and become a ghost
searching the houses I lived in. They say–

the father of my father of his father of his father was a prince
who married a Jewish girl

against the Church's will and his father's will and
the father of his father. Losing all,

eager to lose: the estate, ships,
hiding this ring (his wedding ring), a ring

my father handed to my brother, then took. Handed,
then took, hastily. In a family album

we sit like the mannequins
of school-children

whose destruction,
like a lecture, is postponed.

Then my mother begins to dance, re-arranging
this dream. Her love

is difficult; loving her is simple as putting raspberries
in my mouth.

On my brother's head: not a single
gray hair, he is singing to his twelve-month-old son.

And my father is singing
to his six-year-old silence.

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.

‡ ‡

I believe in childhood, a native land of math exams
that return and do not return, I see—

the shore, the trees, a boy
running across the streets like a lost god;

the light falls, touching his shoulder.
Where memory, an old flautist,

plays in the rain and his dog sleeps, its tongue
half hanging out;

for twenty years between life and death
I have run through silence: in 1993 I came to America.

‡ ‡

America! I put the word on a page, it is my keyhole.
I watch the streets, the shops, the bicyclist, the oleanders,

two women strolling along the water front.
I open the windows of an apartment

and say: I had masters once, they roared above me,
Who are we? Why are we here?

the tales they told began with:
“mortality,” “mercy.”

A lantern they carried still glitters in my sleep,
confused ghosts who taught me living simply.

–in this dream: my father breathes
as if lighting a lamp over and over. The memory

is starting its old engine, it begins to move
and I think the trees are moving.

I unmake these lines, dissolving in each vowel,
as Neruda said, my country

I change my blood in your direction. The evening whispers
with its childlike, pulpy lips.

On the page’s soiled corners
my teacher walks, composing a voice;

he rubs each word in his palms:
“hands learn from the soil and broken glass,

you cannot think a poem,” he says,
“watch the light hardening into words.”

‡ ‡

I was born in the city named after Odysseus
and I praise no nation

but the provinces of human longing:
to the rhythm of snow

an immigrant’s clumsy phrase
falls into speech.

But you asked
for a story with a happy ending. Your loneliness

played its lyre. I sat
on the floor, watching your lips.

Love, a one legged bird
I bought for forty cents as a child, and released;

is coming back, my soul in reckless feathers.
O the language of birds

with no word for complaint! –
the balconies, the wind.

This is how, while darkness
drew my profile with its little finger,

I have learned to see past as Montale saw it,
The obscure thoughts of God descending

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

