

HEADSTONE

Mark Elber



Winner of the 2022
Henry Morgenthau III
Poetry Prize

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Passager Publishes Winner of Poetry Prize for a Writer 70 and Older

Passager Books announces the upcoming publication of *Headstone*, a first book by Fall River, MA poet Mark Elber. The book won Passager's Henry Morgenthau III Poetry Prize for a first book by a poet 70 or older, the first prize of its kind in the United States.

Elber grew up in New York in the 1950s and 60s. "My parents spoke several languages," he said, "and consequently, I grew up with a love of language." He holds degrees from the University of Pennsylvania and Warren Wilson College. Named "Poet of the Year" at the Beat Museum in San Francisco in 2007, Elber is the rabbi of Temple Beth El in Fall River.

Morgenthau Competition judge David Keplinger said, "The work reminds me of the great poet Gerald Stern, who wrote of his ancestors in pre-war Europe and of America after the war, the poems floating from thought to thought. Elber's debut collection is a sustained study of engaged intelligence and marveling. While its title suggests a world already past and fixed behind us in memory, *Headstone* is an illustration, rather, of the aliveness of the past as it courses in us, and we are its walking, talking monument."

Given biannually for a debut poetry collection by a writer age 70 or older, the Henry Morgenthau III First Book Poetry Prize includes \$3,000

and publication by Passager. The prize was named in memory of Henry Morgenthau III who published his first book of poetry at age 99.

Headstone's anticipated publication date is October, 2022. In its 32 years of publishing, Passager has shared the work of more than 1,000 writers, many in their 80s and 90s, in its 72 journal issues and 30-plus books. In doing so, this not-for-profit press has gained a reputation for longevity in a field in which few magazines and journals last more than a handful of years. With *Headstone*, Passager continues its tradition of bringing the compelling writing and insight of older writers to the public.

Headstone is available from www.passagerbooks.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

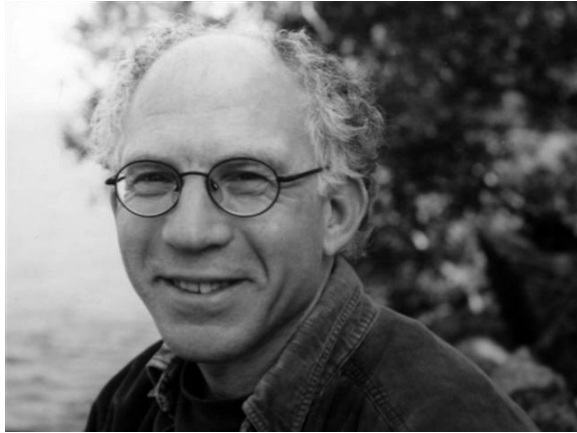


photo by Shoshana Brown

Mark Elber was born and raised in Queens, New York City to Holocaust survivors and grew up hearing Polish, Yiddish, German, Russian, and English spoken at home. Rather than following his father's and brother's path into the medical profession, Mark pursued philosophy, Jewish mysticism, poetry, and music. He studied philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, Kabbalah at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and years later received his MFA from the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. In the intervening years, Mark was involved with forming two rock bands, songwriting, and becoming a rabbi. He is the author of *The Everything Kabbalah Book* and *The Sacred Now: Cultivating Jewish Spiritual Consciousness*. Mark lives with his wife, Shoshana Brown, and their son, Lev, in Fall River, MA, where Mark and Shoshana are the rabbi and cantor at Temple Beth El.

PRAISE

“Gala upon gala” Mark Elber declares in his sumptuous, expansive volume of elegies, *Headstone*. Poignant, candid, fearless (and funny) odes and laments for the poet’s father – and the poet’s own life – come tumbling from this splendid book. Elber’s tapestry of generations and culture begins in Eastern Europe, unfolds through the Holocaust, and finishes in New York and Israel, spanning births, marriages, and deaths. “An epigram wishing I were an epic . . . a narrative wading in a stream of consciousness,” Elber draws us in with wordplay, long Ginsbergian lines, angst, and charm. The miraculous story of how his father saved his life – and how it ultimately saves the poet’s own – makes this book a treasure.

MOLLY PEACOCK, AUTHOR OF *THE ANALYST: POEMS*

Mark Elber’s tender-hearted and incantatory Whitmanian poems catapult us into his Jewish past with fierce determination and loving detail. *Headstone* is a rescue operation, a book of lost worlds, a memorial of grief that turns into praise.

ED HIRSCH, AUTHOR OF *GABRIEL: A POEM*

As this stunning collection begins, it glances backwards on the speaker's 35th year, a kind of Dantean journey issuing forth. "If I could," the voice states, "I'd revive the sound of his voice barely caught on a few bargain cassettes," and perhaps it is this compulsion to look back, to gather up the artifacts of the past, stories and voices in memoriam, that charges the electrifying language of this poetry, so full of emergency and details that spur details and more details. The work reminds me of the great poet Gerald Stern, who wrote of his ancestors in pre-war Europe and of America after the war, the poems floating from thought to thought, often one sentence in length, the lines crafted elegantly in long strands he inherited from Allen Ginsberg and Walt Whitman. This poet, too, is of that same lineage, Mark Elber's debut a sustained study of engaged intelligence and marveling. While its title suggests a world already past and fixed behind us in memory, *Headstone* is an illustration, rather, of the aliveness of the past as it courses in us, and we are its walking, talking monument.

DAVID KEPLINGER, HENRY MORGENTHAU III POETRY PRIZE JUDGE,
AUTHOR OF *THE WORLD TO COME*

Mark Elber is a poet who holds nothing back, a poet of profound connectiveness, who has the ambition to write “These are love letters to the dead” and “The future was yesterday” and the humility to balance that ambition with “Stop writing poetry and start waxing the car.” There will be no question about it. Here is the poem and here is the man. Throughout *Headstone* there are lines that insist I stop and read them aloud, and whole poems of heroic compassion and tenderness toward existence. With one book Mark Elber has given us both an elegy and a hosanna to what it is to be fully human.

RODNEY JONES, AUTHOR OF *VILLAGE PRODIGIES*

Among these fragments reassembled from his life, from the recklessness of an American youth in Queens, from the struggle to understand parents who have endured the Holocaust, and later, in gratitude for a second marriage and for a son, Mark Elber makes poems shimmer with the incandescence of a lifetime.

BROOKS HAXTON, AUTHOR OF *MISTER TOEBONES*

“What stitched together sounds can I offer?” Mark Elber asks in this moving collection. Eloquent through their gritty particulars, the poems of *Headstone* reclaim a Jewish past that, in Elber’s hands, precipitates a resonant present. At their frequent and animated best, they convince with their textures, their rhythms, their emotional precision, and in their relentless, disarming attempt to account for what Coleridge called “the whole ad hominem.”

PETER COLE, AUTHOR OF *HYMNS & QUALMS:
NEW AND SELECTED POEMS AND TRANSLATIONS*

Age-old questions – What are we from? Where are we going? In Elber’s sometimes Whitmanic, sometimes Ginsbergian, always Elberian poems, in their alert detail and distances of time and place contained in spreading lines, in their mingling of catalogue and prayer, ode and anecdote, these questions feel urgent all over again. Elber makes the historic personal; the personal becomes myth and song. There’s great mourning in this book – both collective and individual – but Elber also knows that “the tongue will sing its sweetness” – maybe even in darkness.

DAISY FRIED, AUTHOR OF *THE YEAR THE CITY EMPTIED*

EXCERPT FROM “HEADSTONE”

II

I hear the air raid sirens, Jerusalem 1973

And in the shelter, I meet you worried that I flew back from France to
land in a blacked-out metropolis and drive through the shuttered
streets by the razor-thin headlights left when the blue paint dried
over them

I meet you in Hadassah hospital as I lean on the windowsill staring at the
stubbled hills rolling out in every direction from the four paraplegics,
smelling from thick stitched wounds, whom I turn every hour so
their muscular bodies won't have bedsores and I still see the
catheters and the smell stays with me for months

I hear you over my shoulder, turn, but only the accent remains

I see you in the shelter and by the windowsill, but your face resolves
into another's

And I receive letters filled with instruction

How to be someone I'm not

How to wend my way out of the clouds into a wood-paneled office,
diplomas above my head

How to stop being “pathologically religious”

How to look in the mirror and not recognize myself

Stop writing poetry and start waxing the car

ORDERING INFORMATION

Headstone by Mark Elber

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\$18

Bookstores: Order through Small Press Distribution at spdbooks.org. For consignment sales, order directly from Passager Books at christine@passagerbooks.com.

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