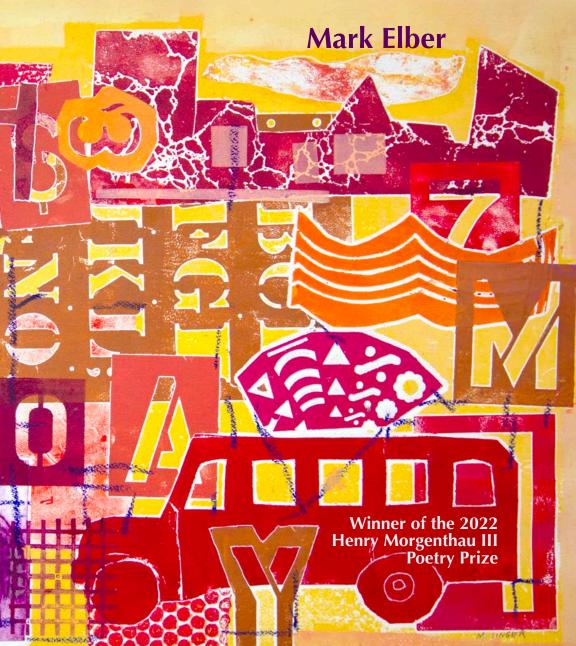
HEADSTONE



My Father's Hands

held the blue globe, displaying the distance between our births the slow trek of continents, the vast wet and dizzying spin my mother singing to herself at the sink

his hands gripped the steering wheel white walls and wide turns the fat-assed fins of late 50's Detroit the AM channel's chatter, songs squeezed between commercials his foil-lined ashtray buried in the mentholated butts of Kools subways rattling overhead

a collision of cultures between the front seat and back the schoolyard banter native to New York and an accent importing a world half an atlas away

refusing reparations for his snuffed-out generations my father's hands split the unruly Atlantic gently stroked my cheek

Family Secrets

When the dawn bombs blitzed Poland Gutting buildings, blasting the past off course

My parents, destined to never cross paths, Sixty-two miles and a deity apart Suddenly veered towards each other

When black moustaches severed Poland between them and the white lab coats of the Reich were steeped in poison gas

When paranoia was proof of sanity, my father stored a stiletto in his calf-length boots

Walking the night forests of forged identities and stolen lugers from Cracow to the Russian East

Before the ghettos were wrapped in barbed wire And the crooked cross plunged its crippling stake wherever it could He kept walking under moonlight, surviving on roots

Watching other Jews herded in a town square He weighed the risks of capture and compliance And continued

With Berlin breathing down his neck, he reached his home finding himself drafted into a Soviet uniform Kissing his parents goodbye

Scraping the whiskers from his face Leaving his copper hair open to the sky Leaving the terrified attics and their tremble

To ride the military trains, suture the skulls of soldiers at Stalingrad Where the woman who would hemorrhage me into the New World And name me in memory of his parents Handed him his scalpels

February 5, 1922

On my father's 14th birthday, the ink was drying on Rilke's notebook *The Sonnets to Orpheus* having found the fingers to release them

Nine years before Dali's clocks began to droop, weep, drape the landscape The German mark was being unmoored and all Europe would pay

When heads of axes were being buried in the thick bark of trees Forearms bulging in the grip of angry muscle My father's inflammatory hair, his polyglot silence Were simmering in the eastern ends of Poland

Before broths began to thin
Tubers dominate dinner
And the beer halls turn rowdy
In the year of the birth of the Soviets
In the year Ulysses spoke English in Paris with a brogue

Ode to Accents

When I open my mouth people hear Second Avenue Deli, pastrami on rye, sour pickles, rattling tracks of the local to Shea Stadium, Queens Boulevard staring at Manhattan's skyline

I affect the sound of falafel, bourekas, babaghanoush, but everyone hears latkes sizzling in the background

When my parents opened their mouths people heard borsht, stuffed cabbage, gefilte fish, Slavic winters

Each "w" a "v," each "th" a "t"

They never spoke to me in their mother tongues

Preferring the language of my native New York, hoping I'd blend in, like they couldn't

Our names bore our ancestors on our backs from one exile to another A covenant of sound stretching back to the craggy hills of Jerusalem, the caves of Qumran

A shibboleth awaiting its resurrection

The words of my parents
A living link to the world turned to ash by 1945

Beard

My grandfather's beard smothered his chin, his cheeks, his eyes burning above his chiseled face one photograph survives cropped from a family portrait when the world feigned innocence weeds wild on the sloped plains collars buttoned closed with a tie

This is the man who lives on in my son's gaze the laugh he allowed himself now amplified behind closed doors a 14-year-old singing to himself lyrics that sprint down the stairs, dance dizzy in a loose bathrobe

My grandfather's beard never scratched my flesh, never leaned down to bless me with a whisper in an accent concocted from broken borders, forded rivers, the uprooted, a continent at war with itself, the shudder of artillery

He bore the uniform of the Austro-Hungarian army that would gut him the next war around had the Germans not got there first —

hate is a zealous god

The God of Surprises

slipped loose at the shoveling at the slow sliding down cheeks earth landing on the wooden casket

I gripped a shovel's neck dropping its steel-cold handfuls into the gaping ground soil swallowing the past

the God of surprises woke me early splashing me with sunlight and an absence a father once filled a voice I can't retrieve, advice I couldn't heed a love too often camouflaged in conflict

those party photos peopled by the dead where smiles and toasts "to life" called across a table a hall filled with song, laughter, loud talk in Polish mixed with Yiddish

who would guess how they were orphaned, what will propelled them to walk on with hope buried alive all around them they could not plaster over the fissures in the façade undo the wars that forged them the mass graves, the smoke and ash that is a birthright I pass on second-hand

my son must sense something imported from Poland beneath my Borough of Queens English an undertone of exile God stunned silent "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'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



