

HEADSTONE

Mark Elber



Winner of the 2022
Henry Morgenthau III
Poetry Prize

M. SINGER

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



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