



Copyright © 2002 Bob Dornberg

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,

I open the windows of an apartment
and shout: I had masters once, they roared above me,

Who are we? Why are we here?
A lantern they carried still glitters in my sleep.

— *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.*

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 —

to the rhythm of snow
an immigrant's clumsy phrases

fall 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.

Ilya Kaminsky

Ilya Kaminsky has won the National Russian Essay Contest, the National Shepardi Prize for Poetry and most recently, the Ruth Lilly Fellowship from *Poetry*. In 1999-2000, he served as a George Bennett Fellow Writer-In-Residence at Phillips Exeter Academy. His manuscript, *From the Province of Gratitude*, was a finalist for the National Poetry Series and for the Walt Whitman Award. Current poems, essays, reviews and interviews appear or are forthcoming in *Salmagundi*, *Doubletake*, *Southwest Review*, *Tikkun*, *The American Writing*, *Literary Review*, *Web Del Sol* and other publications.