

THE PART OF ME THAT'S A JEWISH POET ELVIRA BASEVICH

I.

The part of me that's a Jewish poet would like to sit
shiva for the rest of my life, raise a monument to Babi Yar
with the objects on my kitchen table: a book
of Italian poetry, a dirty spoon, an unopened bill from
the electric company. Like a spray of machine-gun fire,
a star-rise pierces the bluffs of St. Petersburg,
climbing the cathedrals that are swept up like roses
thrown on a stage. At the feet of ballerinas
pattering behind heavy curtains, dusk lowers its belly
into the dust of blown-out matchsticks
who still cling to their passports and implausible
interpretations of the Old Testament. In the bathtub,
I pour hot water over my limbs. I await a reprieve—
I dislodge a bullet from the Jewish part of my heart.

II.

Beside a Lake

The part of me that's a Jewish poet would like to
begin training for the Imperial Russian Ballet as soon as possible
to glide over the icy waters that spread in between larches
and smokestacks like raspberry marmalade.
Flying through the air, I'm confetti on New Year's Eve.
I'm Margarita on her broom. The wet eyes of pine needles
shake in the glass vial of the morning, snow falls from
thin, crooked branches. In the nighttime, everything
you loved floats above the city, folds in its leaves for Daphne
sprinting through the tangle, in case I too decide
to run for my life. But, the truth is, I'm braver than anyone I
know or have read about. I've learned to move by watching ordinary objects:
the scaly fragments of bark, the migration
of butterflies, a piece of lace thrown over a sewing machine.

III.

Besides, the part of me that's a Jewish poet does not want refuge.
Under an overcast sky, for a living, I make passersby believe that anything
is possible—as you must have once believed, briefly.

The part of me that's a Jewish poet would like to believe, too.

Over the bed in the ward, a small blue light announces a new soul.

Besides, I've a new routine. I sit on a park bench talking to myself.
I fold the corners of staircases and climb into my future.
I read the pages of the Haggadah,
as if I were licking sprinkles off an ice cream.
I trade in sentiment as cheap and colourful as the flowers sold in train stations.
Tormented by nostalgia, as by a blackguard
and hungry seagulls, the part of me that's a Jewish poet
is lost in a parking lot in Detroit. I cannot fake it.
I leap without convincing anyone that I'm a snowflake or a swan.

IV.

At least I am not in love with anybody. But, all the same,
the same part of me asks, aloud, with Amichai—
"Hey you there! (Do you love me?)"—
At least I am not waiting for it to rain frogs
and locusts, in spite of the shattering
of glass and bone, and the torch-lit marches, as midnight
strikes in America. And yet, I can still hear you
whisper in the night, "Yes, I love you. I love you. I love you."

Exeunt

The part of me that's a Jewish poet puts
her lips to a mezuzah and presses her mouth down hard.
I want him to feel my breath
through my teeth and spit and gaping nothings.
I make my presence known to the appropriate offices.
On a clear day in December,
a white rosette splits its body as it falls from the sky.
This is how it begins for us.