

More Money than God

my father said, again and again, shaking his head
in disbelief at any ostentation; the neighbor's gold-
plated knocker (we still banged fists) or my own lust
to own the seductive canvas or the waxed bronze bust.
It is not only the idea --which should hold all the pleasure--
but the poet's pencil marks on paper which we treasure
above the memorized poem. And so I fan my flushed face,
signaling the fast-talking auctioneer, who has traced
the provenance, and picks up the pace, multiplying offers.
And who now does my father's bidding? Heaven's coffers,
perhaps, are for the destitute; but why did he have to die
to escape the lousy crime-ridden, never-to-be-gentrified
neighborhood of both our births? The cost of living,
he would argue, is not the worth of being alive.
But still he checked each lottery ticket which littered
the empty lot next door, praised their silver latex glitter,
praying to the beautiful unscratched, like little gods.
Money talks, he taught me. But nobody beats the odds.

Dead Negro

Nothing is where I left it. The empty littered lot next to my father's hardware store has turned up two blocks to the north. Even the store itself, which sold its last hammer and nail to the contractor who tore it down, putting this substandard duplex in its place, is missing. And the neighbor's children are now the neighbors, and the chalk outline of my father is rained from the gutter where he settled down with the bullet that killed him. Somewhere else, the murderer is murdering somebody else, but everything is the same

in the poem where the poet misplaces his keys. My old Jewish neighborhood is filled with blacks, and the African-American neighborhoods are busy with Asians, and the Mexicans are everywhere but here, in this dark bistro, in the Soviet era city of Pskov, six hours south of Saint Petersburg. There is a Dead Negro on the bar menu. The dead Jews, my father among them, rise up in protest like the benevolent protectors they once were. They are looking for the picket line which is no longer where they left it. And the leftists have moved to the right, and God is looking for God everywhere.

Nothing is where I left it. Not my hammer and sickle, not my Star of David, not my well-thumbed book of poems. My wife and children are nowhere to be found. O Amichai, can you help me to find my keys in the pockets of the Palestinian boy moved into my Brooklyn home. His sister is missing and his mother is not where he left her. It's enough to start anyone drinking. I'll have a Dead Negro somebody says from the next booth, a black man, maybe the one that killed my father, but in this light I can't tell; everyone looking exactly the same.

Elijah vs. Santa

Weight advantage: Santa. Sugar and milk at every stop, the stout man shimmies down one more chimney, sack of desire chuting behind, while Elijah, skinny and empty-handed, slips in invisible as a once favored, since disgraced uncle, through the propped open side door. Inside, I've been awaiting a miracle since 1962, my 9 year-old self slouching on this slip-covered sofa, Manischewitz stashed beneath the cushion. Where are the fire-tinged horses, the chariots to transport me? Where is the whirlwind and brimstone? Instead, our dull-bladed sleigh rusts in the storage bin beneath the building's soot-covered flight of cellar stairs. Come back to me father, during December's perfect snowfall and pull me once more up Schenck and down Pitkin, where the line wraps around Church Hall. Show me, again, the snapshot of the skull-capped boy on Santa's lap. Let me laugh this time and levitate like a magician's assistant, awed by my own weightlessness. Give me the imagination to climb the fire escape and look up toward the Godless Heavens and to marvel at the ordinary sky.

Cezanne Forgets His Wife's Funeral

The day Rilke missed his daughter's wedding,
 the lesser poets, pens capped, were making love
 in the Bavarian countryside, or feeding the chickens
 on their fathers' farms. But Rilke is bent over, chiseling
 each syllable, although the chisellers who run the world
 pay by the pound. Here, in the cherry orchard
 of his patron's chateau, he pauses, listens for the nightingales
 singing their Keatsian songs, masking the pitiful sound
 of his grandmother dying. *What's your excuse?*

my wife asks, as the curtain falls and applause fades.
 My daughter is flowerless, my son robbed once more
 in the bottom of the 9th, is unconsolated. *Bastard*,
 Rilke's son-in-law mumbles under his breath.
 And then louder: *Bastard. What's your excuse?*
 my father says, sitting among the clogged traffic
 of good men heading home after honest labor.
 Artless in his Dodge, he's steering toward death's exit.
 He has no use for words. Home, he holds my mother
 and then me, in his tired arms. All my life I've craved
 his certainty, his uncomplicated embrace.

And now I want to pull over on this highway's
 broad shoulder and praise him, celebrate with sounds
 his daily presence in my life. *Hold me*, my wife says
 in this poem, composed in honor of her beauty.
 But in truth I am late again, running lights
 and thinking of Cezanne, who is smiling
 as he folds up his easel. *Hortense, come quickly*,
look, he calls out; only then, remembering.

Art Gallery: Summer Internship

What shall I ask of this sixteen-year-old girl,
born in the final years of the twentieth century,
who has tattooed her great-grandfather's camp number
onto her forearm? No, she is not my neighbor,
or grand niece, but only one more of too many
applicants hoping to beef-up their college resume.
Beauty, she explains, is her calling, why
she was put on this earth. And at sixty I try
to remember my teenage self, averting my eyes
in the temple, or around the dinner table. Did art
ever save anybody? I want to argue, even one
of those children, younger than you, who drew
such dazzling yet delicate butterflies at Terezin
while their interned teachers' extolled creativity?

Still, we make art everywhere, anonymous
or signed, and wonder why else our own fragile lives
are worth living? And so I am looking beyond her
at red flowers and blue sailboats, and even the beautiful
ugliness of some well-crafted canvases speaking about,
let's suppose, the meaning of mass slaughter, or
a personal death in the artist's family that leaves us
well-satisfied and momentarily happy to be alive.