

SUNDAY IN THE PARK

Today I'm thinking about a summer Sunday afternoon
in van Cortland, my father showing off with a soccer ball
with his European immigrant buddies—obviously,
he really was a star as a teen in Poland—and he'd
never dispute his pals' grand recollections over gin rummy
Saturday nights—not one peep from his lips!—
while I played second base in a pickup softball game
and missed an easy pop-up and a grounder too
because I kept throwing glances his way.

You are dead thirty years.

That day in the park was nearly sixty years
ago, I was twelve, and you were too
strong and near to be a symbol
of anything. Who will remember you
easily heading the ball between makeshift goal markers
past two defenders and a goalie
when I die, too? Who will remember
that I'd caught your eye in the park that day
and realized you'd been watching
me, too, the way, in the old stories, a young woman peeks out
from behind a slightly pulled back curtain through a lattice
at the moment her forbidden lover passes by
below her on the street each day
and sneaks a glance up at her window?

The Work of Our Hands

Whenever I turn up the heat and the force
of the shower to rinse shampoo
from my hair, I think of my mother
when I was three or four at bath's end,
holding one hand over the tap
to create a fountain of spray, as the other sifts
the soap from my hair and keeps my head
from banging against the faucet of the deep
claw foot tub. She was almost forty. At ten,
she witnessed her father's murder in his living room
in the Ukraine, at twenty, she brought
her aging, half-unwilling mother
across Europe, the Atlantic, and half of Canada,
from Uman to Winnipeg, and at thirty-three,
she left her own beloved extended family there
and led her husband and three-year-old son
to New York—1700 miles by rail—to escape a sister-in-law
bent on dismantling her marriage. Outside,
this gray day in fine rain
I again worked the garden plot
I'd spent hours in yesterday, the muddy soil
still infested with the white, worm-like
roots of the thick ground cover.
Bishop's Weed. On my hands and knees,
I bear my cultivator down and yank it upwards
with a twist, my muddy, saturated work gloves
slipping a bit as whole chunks
tear free—soil, dark root tendrils,
and those white shoots entangled
in the wide tines, along with a rising earthy
smell, the rich whiff of an abandoned cellar,
the chill, as I realize I've run my muddy gloved hand
through my dripping eyebrows upward,
along my forehead and my hair,
and, Mother, my eyes are blurred, I'm dreaming
of a thick hot spray of cleansing water:

your fierce independence
absorbed on this occasion
in the work of a pair of deft attentive hands.

The Porch

After Philip Levine

The splintery wooden stairs leading up to the large porch of the sprawling Victorian rooming house is mottled black and bright from the wrought iron light fixture suspended over the center of the octagonal poker table, and the banter of the six players around the table in their wicker chairs reaches you at the bottom of the stairs, so you pause there. You're filled with the joy that comes to a great athlete when his body has astonished him again, a few droplets of salt water glinting from your skin. You'd left your narrow high ceilinged housewares store on Avenue D, stopped in your rented room, where I waited for you, exchanged short-sleeved shirt and slacks and leather shoes for sandals, towel, and bathing suit, and headed to the ocean, where you swam through and beyond the breakers, far beyond the rotted jetties, as the sun set and you vanished in the distance and the darkness of a moonless Saturday night in July, alone except for the eight-year-old boy staring out at the sea from the galvanized boardwalk railing, as he did every week. You're ravenous now at the foot of the stairs and you know that blistering hot chicken soup with kreplach has been ladled out by your wife into the green glass summer soup bowl on the faded formica table and that the six others you play with every week will deal you in whenever you come down to the nickel-and-dime poker game, no small stakes for the seven of you in the 1950's, shopkeepers, garment workers, butchers and grocers, who were taking one or two days off each week from the ten-hour work days of summer in the city. Harry Gold,

let me enter your story as you stand
motionless in the speckled light
at the bottom of the stairs breathing
the rich salty air. Don't go up yet. Let your
mind take you back to the powerful strokes
that pulled you far into the Atlantic,
fearless over very deep water,
or, entirely at your ease,
floating on your back out there, your chest glowing
faintly in the moonlight as your breath reaches in
and out, deeply, and your eyes
open wide to the vast canopy
of glittering and exploding stars.

Try to Remember

Try to remember moments you can't know.

Not just the long slow summers
at the beach. The high rolling waves you rode. The sand crabs' nips.
The time your mother took you to see
Jack Kennedy, hatless in the bitter wind
coming in off the East River as he leaned
over the five-foot-tall labor leader
and warmed the old man's hand in both of his,
hair on fire in the bright winter sun.

You should remember moments you can't know.

Not just your father speeding through the seder,
your mother's off-key voice that cracked
as she tried in vain—every year without fail—
to reproduce her father's *niggun* for the closing song:
kha'sal sid'dur pe'sach ke-hil' kha'-to.

You must remember moments you can't know.

More than the conversations that swerved into rapid-fire Yiddish
when you came into the living room, though you did make out
some of the hushed names and words: Motek, Rivka, pogrom, lager.

Remember the moments you can't know.

The murders, a few months apart, of your great-grandfather
and your grandfather along with two hundred thousand other Jews
in the Ukraine and Poland twenty-six years
before you were born. The way your grandfather
used to look up from his Talmud, walk over to his open study window,
stand there as your mother bounced her ball in the yard just outside,
and count every bounce.

My Father Speaks

You have forgotten me. The claim you're fond of—
that you think of me every day when you shave—
what sort of remembrance is that?
In your prayers you murmur the wish
I rest in peace—peace from what? Are you remembering
my chronic rages, as vague to me now
as the sleet of winter? Or is it only
an odd sense of proper manners, as if
you really believed in prayer? Better
to speak about me to your grandchildren
in the evening and the morning—
that might calm the restlessness I feel
that has only grown sharper
in this shadowy place, or, even
better, to remember when I could still
swim out beyond the jetties, with you
on my back, your little nails scratching
the skin over my collar bones
as you clung to me in frightened and giddy
with all your heart and all your might.
Best of all, swim out beyond
whatever breakers hold you back, now,
think of me and do not be afraid.