

Under Alien Skies by Yossel Birstein

Your generation too lived out its years in longing
(On the first anniversary of Pinkhas Goldhar's death)
Translated by Faith Jones

It's summer again in this beautiful country
the bird sings, the sun blinds
but my neighbour's brick fence
is as wintry as always.

Still a stranger on my own doorstep
I see how my neighbour turns away from me.
Affected, I try to disguise
my strangeness, which I can't seem to shed.

I don't know how – but I manage to do it,
as everyone does. There's another lure:
I bow before a sorrowful word
and stay bowed, but go on living.

Going on means what? Why, nothing at all,
and look, I have already returned
to the grass around you, one year old;
to the stone above you that records your name.

Even your name flickers now like a wick,
but there's nothing to do about that.
Life is solitary; so is death,
especially for those buried far from home.

I stand over you, holding a blade of grass,
tough, thorny, this stuff we trample.
It's probably got its reasons, the grass,
for not wanting to let my hand stroke it.

This land is strange to me, so ancient and strange.
A simple blade of grass can baffle me!
But I'm not upset, I won't be embarrassed
though to take it all in is still hard.

Forgive me for being so shattered today.
I didn't mean to come here like this.

But I remember when you too were in tears
and nobody noticed your crying.

You're crying no longer. You have probably felt
quite at home with the earth for a long time now.
The grass around you is already a year old;
there's a stone above you – that your name be remembered.

And what of the life you spent, striving after
the joy that they forgot to grant you?
Your generation too lived out its years in longing
yet the next one won't remember you.

Forgive my despair. I'm a mourner,
I say the *Kaddish*, and end with *Amen*.
May this poem serve for a memorial candle
and go on lighting up your name within me.

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