

Under Alien Skies by Yossel Birstein

My little brother

Translated by Beni Gothajner

The Yiddish word and the Yiddish song
are held in stocks of sorrow and pain.
Such a store is the soul of each
who takes part in our weeping.
May they shine, the word and the song that dress
young spirits with dreams of happiness –
my little brother is a small mound of ash.

The walls of home, persecution beyond,
smiled sadly upon his seventh year,
a weak little body with an adult's head
overgrown with curly black hair.
Mother would say: My golden crown,
reward for my grief, if grief brings a return –
my little brother is a small mound of ash.

He laughed on summer days. He had ideas:
a blade of grass becomes a tree. God has a beard.
Winter he cried, from cold and fear
and loved the firewood that warmed the house;
the familiar home, sure as the seasons
ripened his sorrowful Jewish reality –
my little brother is a small mound of ash.

The street raised us. Often we pitied
the maimed hands in prayer raised.
But curses chased God's blessing away –
the gas poisoned and fire razed.
Mother would say: grow bright, grow tall,
be the window of light in our dark hall –
my little brother is a small mound of ash.

The Yiddish word and the Yiddish song
are held in stocks of sorrow and pain.
Bent of back and with dragging pace,
see how belated the prophet returns
to light up the word and the song, that dress
young spirits with dreams of happiness –
my little brother is a small mound of ash.