

Under Alien Skies by Yossel Birstein

My grandfather was shamed by the clamorous world

(for R. Rotberg)

Translated by Miriam Leberstein

My grandfather was shamed by the clamorous world
so, in the manner of a *lamed-vov* (1)
he curled his back into the shape of a “c”
until called to his martyr’s death by God.

Now he trembles above me, a luminous witness
his brightness too heavy for me to bear.
Quite possibly though, I’ve already become him
even if no one has noticed it yet.

Very likely it’s so. I can tell by the cold
that pursues and afflicts me, with estrangement and doom
and by the way that my body has curled
the better to bear the world’s heavy load.

So I conjure the daylight away from the window
that my grandfather too used to hold in disdain,
let my brow rest on the books lining the wall
whose timelessness lies hidden under dust.

Suffused with the sadness of *Koyheles*, they know (2)
that the burden of wisdom means suffering as well
so within their covers they conceal the cries
of a nation that vanished, in wind and in smoke.

Their prayers left unsaid, tears left unshed, fast shut they remain,
darkened by the dark fate of the nation
that vanished, without purpose or sense—
who knows on what day, on what night?

I lean against the books and listen
to the covers, whispering together
how for a long time now they’ve heard in my step
the expression of my grandfather’s soft lament.

I’m watchman here too, and stand by my watch,
and brush off with a feather duster

the quiet dust, from generations of the grief
that lies concealed in the holy books' darkness.

Maybe I still seek a spark of consolation there
maybe once more I want to hear a cheerful voice
whether the prophet's, telling a tale of the valley, (3)
or just a *Cheder*-boy's, declaiming the sweet *alef-beys*.(4)

But all I can hear is silence commanding
"Learn the ways of the *lamed-vov*:
bend your back, and bend your body,
so you can bear the world's heavy load."

1. The Hebrew letters *lamed-vov* are the numerical equivalent for "thirty-six", and refers to the 36 righteous individuals who, according to the Babylonian Talmud, exist in every generation, and whose existence prevents the destruction of the world. They are of humble demeanor and usually remain anonymous. The Yiddish for such a person is *lamed vovnik*, and the Hebrew *lamed vov tsadik*, but Birstein uses the shortened form.

2. The Book of Ecclesiastes (*Koyheles*), read during the holiday of Sukkot, contains many reflections on the theme of the inevitability of death and the futility of human endeavors, epitomized by the motto, "Vanity of vanity, all is vanity."

3. Probably a reference to 37 Ezekiel, 1-14, where the prophet recounts a vision of a valley of dry bones, which are reassembled and resurrected.

4. In traditional religious *cheder* schooling, the Hebrew alphabet was recited by heart by the youngest beginners.