

ILYA KAMINSKY

from Deaf Republic

OF WEDDINGS BEFORE THE WAR

Yes, I bought you a wedding dress big enough for the two of us
And in the taxi home
we kiss a coin from your mouth to mine.

The landlady might've noticed
a drizzle of stains on the sheets—
angels could do it more neatly,

but they don't. I can still climb your
underwear, my ass
is smaller than yours!

But you are two fingers more beautiful than any other woman—
I am not a poet, Sonya,
I want to live in your hair.

You jumped on my back, I
ran to the shower,
and yes, I slipped on the wet floor—

I watch you stand in the shower
holding your
breasts in your hand—

two small explosions.

BEFORE THE WAR, WE MADE A CHILD

I kissed a woman
whose freckles
arouse the neighbors.

She owned two pink nipples
which she displayed
like medals for bravery.

Her trembling lips
meant *come to bed*.
Her hair waterfalling in the middle

of the conversation meant
come to bed.
I walked in my barbershop of thoughts

Yes I thieved her off to bed on the chair
of my hairy arms
but parted lips

meant bite my parted lips—
lying under the cool
sheets. Sonya!

The things we did.

AS SOLDIERS WALK UP THE STAIRS

As soldiers clump up the stairs—
my wife's
painted fingernail scratches

and scratches
the skin off her leg, and I feel
the hardness of bone underneath.

It gives me faith.

**WHILE THE CHILD SLEEPS,
SONYA UNDRASSES**

She scrubs me until I spit
soapy water.
“Pig,” she smiles—

“A man should smell better than his country—”
such is the silence
of a woman who speaks against silence, knowing

silence is what moves us to speak—
She throws my shoes
and glasses in the air,

“I am of deaf people
and I have
no country but a bathtub & an infant & a marriage bed!”

Soaping together—that
is sacred to us.
Washing each other’s shoulders.

You can fuck
anyone—but with whom can you sit
in water?

THE VOICE WE CANNOT HEAR

They shove Sonya into the police
car—

one morning, one morning, one morning in March, one dime-bright morning—

they shove her
and she zigzags and turns and trips in silence—

which is a soul's noise—

Sonya, who once said, "On the day of my arrest I will be playing piano."

We watch four men
shove her—

and we think we see hundreds of old pianos form a bridge
from Arlemovsk to Tedna Street – and she

waits at each piano—
what remains of her is

a puppet
that speaks with its fingers,

what remains of a puppet is this woman, what remains
of her (they took you, Sonya) is the voice we cannot hear—

PINCHING THE WRIST

A young soldier presses his gun to Sonya's head. His hand trembles. He forces Sonya to walk. Around her neck a sign I RESISTED ARREST. The town watches. At each door and window, they stop.

For an apple a peek, they display Sonya, naked, under the TROOPS ARE FIGHTING FOR YOUR FREEDOM poster. Snow swirls in her nostrils. Soldiers circle her eyes with a red pencil. The young soldier aims in the red circle, spits. Another aims. Spits. The town watches.

The arrested are made to walk with their arms raised up. As if they are about to leave the earth and are trying out the wind.

I, THIS BODY

I, this body into which the hand of God plunges,
empty-chested, stand.

At the funeral—
Momma Galya's girls rise up to shake my hand.

I fold our child in a green handkerchief,
brief gift.

You left, my doorslamming wife; and I,
a fool, live.

But the voice I don't hear when I speak to myself is the clearest voice:
when my wife washed my hair, when I kissed

between her toes:
in the empty streets of our district, a bit of wind

called for life.
Wife taken, child

not three days out of the womb, in my arms, our apartment quiet. I say
this slowly:

our apartment quiet, on the floor
dirty snow from her boots.

ABOVE BLUE TIN ROOFS, DEAFNESS

Our boys want a public killing in the sunlit piazza.
They drag a soldier, around his neck a sign: *I arrested the women of Vásenka*
The boys have no idea how to kill a man.
Alfonso spits, I will kill him for a box of oranges.
The boys pay a box of oranges.
He cracks a raw egg in a cup,
smells a trickle of oranges in the snow.
And he tosses the egg down his throat like a vodka shot.
He is washing his hands, he is putting on red socks, he is putting his tongue
where his tooth has been.
The girls spit in the soldier's mouth,
A pigeon settles on a stop sign, making it sway.
An idiot boy
whispers "Long Live Deafness!" and spits at the soldier.
In the center of the piazza
a soldier on his knees begs in snow as townspeople shake their heads, and point
at their ears.
Deafness is suspended above blue tin roofs
and copper eaves; deafness
feeds on birches, light posts, hospital roofs, bells;
deafness rests in our men's chests.
Our girls sign: Start.
Our boys, wet and freckled, cross themselves.
Tomorrow we will be exposed like thin ribs of dogs
but tonight
we don't care enough to lie:
A man in red socks jumps on the soldier, embraces him, cuts him in the lung.
The soldier flies about the sidewalk.
The town watches the loud animal bones
in their faces and smells the earth.
It is the girls who steal the oranges
and hide them in their shirts.