

THE FIREFLIES OF BELMONT AVENUE

For Jules Chametzky (1928–2021)

I see you as a boy, ten years old, at your father's butcher shop on Belmont Avenue in Brooklyn, the words *Kosher Meat* spelled out in Hebrew across the window, the chickens dangling in the window, the words unbroken, the glass unbroken, the butcher unbroken. I see you watch your father as we watch our fathers, scanning the Yiddish newspaper at the counter, Lucky Strike glowing in his mouth, as you wait for his words to rise and fall like fireflies or embers, learning how words fly or burn, when to cup your hands to catch a word, when to jump away. The customers would lean across the counter to buy chickens from your mother.

I see you again at eighty. I watch you as we watch our fathers, as I would watch my father and his cigarette, the organizer who could rouse the crowd, waiting for his words to fly or burn. I am a boy from the old neighborhood in Brooklyn, and you are the teacher, slicing up Hemingway like a chicken boned across the page. Yet, for me, a poet without the first strand of gray in his beard, your words are always fireflies. I would cup them in my hands, and see them glow, as I see them now, even as I lift my hands to let them go.