

David M. Katz

Tea with Cavafy

People think of me —
I would have them think of me —
As a poet, without qualification, as I
Attested by stating that as my occupation
On my passport. There's a difference, though,
Between that face and who I truly am,
Between my tortoise shells and homeliness
In three-quarter profile and the words
That are speaking with you here and now.
Note my faded window screen, the ghosts
Of my city in its weave of fleur-de-lis.
It allows me to sleep, but also enables
The light to caress my spirit at dawn.
I have moved the screen aside, drawn
The heavy drapes to admit the glow,
Like the moon that pulls the waves away
In front of a porthole. Simply stated,
That muted glow is who I truly am,
And who I truly am, you may imagine,
Is a man sitting quietly in his study,
Enabling each thought, each image,
Each word to emerge slowly, arising
Between you and me, gentle visitor.
Out of the glow, black letters of a phrase
Will settle in your mind as if they came
Directly from my living lips, conjuring
A lover I was yearning then to see
For a few fateful moments one afternoon
When I was in despair of losing him.
Though he is gone, my words are here for you,
As present as this heated pot of tea.

Seventies Rejection Note

*It will be many years before
this poem will mean anything
to anybody.* He wrote that,
And only that, in a garbled hand,
On paper with a deckled edge.
So it's a visionary poem,
I first thought, to shield myself
From hurt. It's praise for entering
The avant-garde, since I'd composed
A letter to the future from
That sorrow of a year, honoring
A poet we admired who had
Just died, half-starved, of laryngeal
Cancer, coughing from Gauloises
And funnelling pints of Pernod
Down his gullet, much too young,
Yet old enough to be my father.
My second thought about the note
Seems closer to reality:
The editor had placed a curse
On me for all eternity,
Had thrown my modest elegy
Down like a detested hat
And jumped on it repeatedly.
Young though I was, I could laugh,
When I'd cooled off, at how absolute,
How Delphic his dismissal was.
I've dined out on the tale until
Today. He died two days ago,
And as I scan his swollen verse
And the eulogies of sycophants
With debts to him outstanding, see
An excess of causticity
In the tone of all the prose he wrote,
I know that he would never get
The jokes I tell about that note.

Legend Must Do

I was born on the Lower East Side of New York
To shopkeepers just off the boat from Galitz
In the Russian Pale. My grandpa's wrapped
In a story now, in the wooliness of legend.
Among the men we have woven into
A generation, he was drafted into the army
Of the Czar. His palooka of a sergeant
Was easy game, and grandpa took a pint
Of vodka out and got the sergeant drunk.
Weaving along the side of a ditch
In a dizzy march, the two moved on,
The officer fell in, and my grandpa deserted
Into the woods. I have no idea
Whether any of this is true, but
Legend must do when the facts are few.
My grandpa had an accent, opened up
A tailor shop, was father to my mother
And her sister (a Communist! "Milk
For babies!" she shouted for the poor).
That's all I remember except for the lumpy vests,
The slight white frame, the scar of the appendectomy
He revealed to me, shaving by the frigid toilet.
"They cut out half my stomach, boychick."
He smoked Phillies and died when I was eight.