

The New Criterion

Poems November 1986

Daughters denying the dreams of their father

by David Bergman

Mother and her sisters tried to disabuse
their father of his dream—someday returning
to see the place where he was born, a village
so small no map has deigned to give it a dot.

Their objections were reasonable enough:
in his eighties, he was far too old to leave
on the long, harsh trip to Lithuania
should the Soviets issue him a visa.

Besides, if such a village still existed
(and with two world wars and a revolution
they had cause to doubt), it had probably changed
beyond human powers of recognition.

“Surely by now everyone you knew is dead,”
his daughters told him, “Even the boys with whom
you’d gone to school. Dead or moved away. Or else
they’ve long forgotten you and your family.”

Against such arguments he was left no choice
but admit defeat. It was true what they said.
And he tried to freeze the animate faces
from his childhood into a final repose.

But they wouldn’t rest, and for minutes or hours
or entire afternoons my grandfather,
with grandchildren tumbling loudly around him,
would be lost to us, lost in his reveries.

He was back among the invisible life
of his youth, leaping over the leaf-choked ruts
and hedges, smelling the barley fields at dusk
or the damp musk of pressed serge in the workroom.

In his ears were the cackles of old women
dickering over the price of gabardine,
or the drone of flies as plump as ripe berries
and men arguing Talmud with the rabbis.

At ninety, he no longer spoke of going,
and his daughters rejoiced at their victory,
never expressing what they really dreaded,
the vision of the unchanged world of his birth:

houses blue and golden as a Marc Chagall
where girls open their arms to patchwork fiddlers.
A bridegroom's glass shatters into prickly stars,
and their father is lost to them forever.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 5 Number 3 , on page 47

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