

Selection from

Moments Without Names: New & Selected Prose Poems
by Morton Marcus

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Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press since 2001, the Series publishes one to two books annually. It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.

THE REQUEST

Suddenly Bjorling's voice on the stereo: "As a request, I should like to sing for you Schubert's *Serenade*." The crowd applauds and with a cascade of piano music framing the lyrics, he sings.

But my tears had started—hot, unexpected—at hearing his words, for I was aware that the man making this announcement on the stage of Carnegie Hall in 1958, his voice clipped and formal with a foreign intonation, would be dead within two years.

Who made the request and what motivated it? A shared melody with a loved one in a long ago Vienna or Shanghai? The memory of an age moldering behind closed doors, where the faces of baroque cherubs and the tiles of upswept Chinese roofs were cracked and broken long before they were the wreckage of cities under siege?—long before millions of arms and legs twitched in mass graves? Or maybe not that. Maybe the singer—thick-chested, square-faced—having witnessed wars and depredations, was requesting permission to sing one more song for everything that was gone.

Whatever the reason, after the applause and encased in the piano's melody, the voice streaked through the hall, entered the recording apparatus, and now cleaves the heated air in my living room years later, rolling back the present on two sides to make way for its arrival from the past, like a deluge of sunlight tumbling through an opening in the clouds to the valley below, letting us glimpse for a moment a possibility of redemption in a tumult of wings.

But what's this!—the voice unexpectedly summons up the image of my father in the photograph I'd long forgotten: he poses from the waist up in a business suit, his right arm

extended, as if delivering an aria, and I realize that he looked enough like this tenor I've idolized for years to be his brother—the same stocky build and beefy features—and the words I'm hearing now are coming not from the tenor's lips but from my father's half-remembered face, that face I'd seen only twice, and then for barely several minutes, and whose only words I can remember, "So, you're my son," expressed neither approval nor disapproval, just an affirmation that I existed—a statement made not for me but for himself.

But now, Father, your voice is so clear. Sing to me the old songs of love and loss and continuing on. Let your voice soothe me, an old man myself now, older than you ever were, but more in need of a lullaby on this battered earth than I ever was as a child. Sing from the past about what seems irrevocably gone but always returns, so once again I can believe in the guiding presence of fathers and the healing power of song.

Jussi Bjorling was a great tenor with the Metropolitan Opera in the 1940s & '50s.

THE MOMENT FOR WHICH THERE IS NO NAME

On the sixteenth floor of one of the tall old buildings in the north end of the city, the windows of an apartment look out over the bay. The apartment is empty, the floors and walls bare. There is only a chalked circle on the living room floor. The circle traces the spot where an armchair once stood, an armchair in which an old man regularly sat watching the smokestacks come and go in the harbor in the same way he had watched the swaying forests of masts when he was a boy.

The circle was drawn by the old man's grandson while the child's parents were supervising the movers.

Tomorrow the new tenants will arrive, and before they move in, they will clean the apartment. In the course of their cleaning, they will erase the chalk.

That is the moment for which there is no name.

THE WORDS

When we sleep, the words inside us slide from their hiding places like thieves and assassins in a Renaissance city.

It is after midnight, but there are all these figures, muffled in cloaks or slipping from one pillar to another in black capes, who whisper and bicker, or come upon one another unexpectedly in the dark.

One stabs another in a shadowy arcade, and leaves the body where it falls. At the edge of a piazza, four ruffians, growling and cursing, carry off a drunken student in a burlap sack.

The facades of townhouses are still and dark, although whimpers and sighs and raspy snores flutter from the partially open windows, their meanings blurred by the fountains burbling in the squares.

The quiet everywhere is stippled by these sounds, as if the buildings were restless and muttering.

A shout. Lights flare at windows. Torches dot a piazza. It seems the body has been found.

But the sounds are confused, the reports garbled. Is it war, disease, the birth of an heir in the prince's palace?

A bell booms in a cathedral tower. The sound rushes in all directions over the tile rooftops.

A mile or two down the road leading to the city's west gate, a peasant in a cart lets his donkey guide him home as he sings of love, death, and the joys of a simple life.

ELEGY FOR THINGS TO COME

1.

There must be many staircases under the earth: moss-soft, fibrous, narrow and steep—a mulch of brown leaves packed together.

The dead climb back and forth on these stairs. It's an arduous journey, but they don't mind. When they're called, they come.

Alone in single rooms when alive, ignored by the noisy crowd, many of them have achieved a stature they could never have imagined.

We think of them milling around in buried cities, drinking the blood of the living when we sleep, or taunting us with pranks that ruffle our afternoons. But they watch over us, guiding us around corners, listening to our sorrows and fears in the night, and ushering us into each new day.

This is another of my grandfather's tales about a town on the other side of the world, where buildings were pounded to rubble in an almost forgotten war, and no one was left to tell the secrets of the dead to the living so the dead would remain alive.

2.

I had a friend who grew up in an English mansion. There were paintings in all the halls: landscapes, battles, the hunt, but mostly long-faced ancestors with imperious expressions, wearing waistcoats, doublets, and shimmering gowns. They were standing inside the walls, my friend said, and he imagined them climbing down from their places every night and trudging through hidden passageways to moldering, candlelit kitchens, where they ate and drank and gossiped about the living they'd seen come and go all day. My friend would never venture downstairs after the lights were out. He knew the frames were empty, he said, as if they were windows admitting an endless white light that lay everywhere beyond the house.

3.

Death is a place far to the north, where the telephone lines carrying our questions and whisperings are buried in the drifting snow.

The wires neither spark nor twitch.

No puddles seethe from their heat.

They just disappear into the snow like so much fishing line that someone left an hour or a year or a century ago, and that deep below passing fish may nibble on before they flutter into the enclosing dark.

4.

All we can hope for in the end is to be a face with an unchanging expression on a painting smoldering in soot-smearred rubble, or to resemble a figure among painted flowers on a water jug who a young girl, just before she turns toward home, traces for a moment with her fingertips.