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Special David Ignatow Section

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David Ignatow

(1914-1997)

In the winter of 1973, I enrolled in a night-school English composition course at the State University of New York at Buffalo. The class met three times a week in a trailer that could have doubled as a meat freezer. I cannot recall my instructor's name; nor did he teach me very much about English composition. He wanted to teach poetry instead; more precisely, he wanted to teach the poetry of William Carlos Williams and David Ignatow. David's book *Whisper to the Earth* (which contained thirty-two prose poems) had recently been published, and that book still remains my favorite. It was the kind of book you bought for friends, even for your parents. It was obvious to me then that here was a poet who could speak clearly to many different kinds of people; here was truly an American voice.

So what can adequately be said of his passing? It is of course impossible in a paragraph to do justice to his poetry; to fully explain how many poets he influenced; to recount all of his kindnesses to young poets; and to explain how important he was in making the prose poem an acceptable form in this country. More than once he mentioned to me that he felt his prose poetry had not been taken as seriously as his verse poetry. What follows is a selection of six of his "classic" prose poems from *Against the Evidence: Selected Poems 1934-94* © Wesleyan University Press. All of these poems will be familiar to anyone with a knowledge of American prose poetry, but it is my hope that placed side-by-side these poems will encourage the converted and the uninitiated either to reread or to enjoy for the first time the prose poems of David Ignatow.

Ironically, perhaps the best introduction to these prose poems is David's verse poem "Between the Living and the Dead":

> If there is anything else to life besides living it
> we would know, wouldn't we, by something
> going on inside, like a loud hum of urgency
> or an illumination of our insides day and night?
> But since we just sit or eat and then go
> to the toilet or make love and get dressed,
> are you disappointed? Do you wish to rebel?
> Will you write out a protest?

And I wish I knew what I could say.
I also am sad and so write it out
and leave it all behind for others
to give it thought that it will make a bond
between the living and the dead.

P.J.

David Ignatow

THE DINER

For Sartre

If I order a sandwich and get a plate of ham and eggs instead, has communication broken down? Is there a chef in the house? There's no chef. I get only silence. Who brought me the ham and eggs? I was sitting at the counter when it arrived. I don't remember anyone bringing it. I'm leaving right now to find another place to eat in, a bit more congenial than this silence, with no one to witness that I ordered exactly what I say I did. But now the door is closed and I can't leave.

Will someone please open the door, the one who gave me the ham and eggs instead of a sandwich? If I'm dissatisfied and want to leave why must I stay? Can the proprietor do as he pleases with anyone on his property? Am I his property too? What do you know! I have to eat what's given me or go hungry. I have to be nice about it too and say thank you to the silence. But I want to know why I can't have what I want that's such an innocent wish as between a sandwich and a plate of ham and eggs? What have I said or did I say what I thought I did or am I in my own country where my language is spoken? Where am I? Why can't I leave this diner? This is not my country. I don't belong here. I never even got a passport to come. I don't remember leaving. I don't remember crossing the border and I'm the only guy here at the counter. Something phony is going on. Somebody is trying to drive me nuts or rob me or kill me. I want to go back where I came from. I was on the road hungry, driving. It was dark and I hadn't eaten my dinner.

You know, it's quite possible I made these ham and eggs myself instead of a sandwich. It may be I'm the owner because no one else is here and I have the key to open the door, exactly like my car key. I must have arranged it that way. Now when in hell did I buy this diner and who needs it!

David Ignatow

TALKING TO MYSELF

About my being a poet, the trees certainly haven't expressed an interest, standing at a distance. I'd expect that at least they'd try to learn something new besides growing their leaves, old stuff by now, and anyway it's done by so many others. Wouldn't these trees want to know what they'll be doing in a hundred years, what they look like now, how they stand, what's their name, where they are and what they actually do in winter and in summer, deaf, dumb and happy as they are? Not happy, simply willing to go on as always. Not even willing, just doing what comes naturally. To them I might as well be dead or a tree.

To stay among the trees as if I were at home, arrived from a long journey, I am digging a place for a burial with my feet.

David Ignatow

MY OWN HOUSE

As I view the leaf, my theme is not the shades of meaning that the mind conveys of it but my desire to make the leaf speak to tell me, Chlorophyll, chlorophyll, breathlessly. I would rejoice with it and, in turn, would reply, Blood, and the leaf would nod. Having spoken to each other, we would find our topics inexhaustible and imagine, as I grow old and the leaf begins to fade and turn brown, the thought of being buried in the ground would become so familiar to me, so thoroughly known through conversation with the leaf, that my walk among the trees after completing this poem would be like entering my own house.

David Ignatow

A CLOUD CREATES

A cloud creates the face of a man who, happening to look up, recognizes it as his own. The face under stress of the wind begins to disintegrate into wings, and the man sees in himself the ability to fly. He stretches forth his arms and waves them up and down as he begins to circle and dip as a birdman would in the currents of the wind, and then the face vanishes and the wings drift apart, too, in shreds and patches. The clouds darken, as they will; thunder rolls from their colliding with each other. Lightning flashes. He knows he is at war with himself, the reason for which he cannot go into at the moment.

There is no consolation, not until the rain ceases and the sun emerges and once more clouds arrive, white, brilliantly lit, and so for him full of hope. He has not attempted to sort out his, as it seems, random feelings since sighting the face. And though there is no order to his feelings, of that he is certain, he needs none, not while the sun rises and sets and weather prevails. It is from weather that he derives, and so he has no faults. He is without fault, he is of the weather.

David Ignatow

A MODERN FABLE

Once upon a time a man stole a wolf from among its pack and said to the wolf, “Stop, you’re snapping at my fingers,” and the wolf replied, “I’m hungry. What have you got to eat?” And the man replied, “Chopped liver and sour cream.” The wolf said, “I’ll take sour cream. I remember having it once before at Aunt Millie’s. May I bare my teeth in pleasure?” And the man replied, “Of course, if you’ll come along quietly,” and the wolf asked, “What do you think I am? Just because I like sour cream you expect me to change character?” The man thought about this. After all, what was he doing, stealing a wolf from its kind, as if he were innocent of wrongdoing? And he let the wolf go but later was sorry; he missed talking to the wolf and went in search of it, but the pack kept running away each time he came close. He kept chasing and the pack kept running away. It was a kind of relationship.

David Ignatow

FATHER AND SON

A black man is hugging me around the throat from behind with his forearm as he demands in a rapid undertone my money. I think of his embrace as nearly an affectionate one, as if from a son who has come up from behind to demand his stipend for the week in a playful imitation of a mugger. I turn carefully as I would to a son for whom I have the greatest affection and say gently, "The money is in my breast pocket," and I make a motion toward it with my hand. He strikes my hand, as if carrying on the game of mugger, in case, as in the game, I was reaching for a gun. I say again gently to my black son, "The wallet is in my breast pocket." He does not smile. He lets me reach into my jacket to bring forth the wallet, which I do, and he snatches it from me. The game between us has become serious. I am in danger, but I react with calm.

Is this my son, this tall, husky young man who is extracting the bills from the fold and now returning the wallet? I am cautious. I did not train him to be a killer or threatener, but he is serious about the money, and he pockets it all. I have an empty wallet that I return automatically to my breast pocket. He and I look at each other. I think I have a smile on my face, and I think he sees it and is mildly astonished, and maybe understands it or is curious to see a smile. We look at each other for another moment. There is curiosity between us. This is not my son but another man's, and he is acting towards me as a stranger. We are strangers, but we are to each other in the relationship of father and son by age. He opens the door to the elevator and orders me in. Will he kill me in the elevator? I look into his face; he must realize what I am thinking. He holds open the door, waiting for me to enter, not threatening me, simply waiting, and I enter. The door closes behind me. I look through the porthole to see him looking back at me. Is he taking a last look at the man who could be his father whom he has subjugated to his will? I think I am still smiling. I think he is smiling back as the elevator begins to climb.