
Hombre de Paso:
Just Passing Through

Isaac Goldemberg

The Peruvian Jewish author and poet Isaac Goldemberg aroused considerable attention with the publication several years ago of his first novel, *The Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner*, which provided English readers with a glimpse into the life of the Jewish community of Peru. Now, with his new collection of poems, *Just Passing Through* (Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1981), Goldemberg attempts to bridge two cultures—Jewish and Inca—that are so distinct that possibly only the sensibilities of a poet could establish a connection between them.

Haggadah

The abundance of wine the ritual of those gentle grapes
on my father's joyous table
humble is the yeast for the unleavened bread
the bruised loneliness of the table and its edges
the scattered history of my forefathers
in the scarcity of wine
in the zigzag
of their peddling legs
wheeling and dealing from the patched up Ukrainian landscape
to the mummified bone of a Peruvian graveyard

My grandfather is still the same old urn digger
on his way back from plundering graves
from the world above
from the world below
Ay ayayai the turning of his poncho into the wind
Ay ayayai the broken echoes of his quena*

My father's history walks down the dirt roads
of my country

* Quena: a reed flute made by the Incas.

his exile spirals all the way around my tent
Ay ayayai the high noons of his shadow
Ay ayayai in his shofar the echo of a quena

To you father I give all the silence of my kaddish
the proud majesty of a wheat stalk that will never be
unleavened bread in your hand
the northern seas that fling you door to door
from the world above
from the world below

To you I give all the hinges of my wrapped up bone that you
count and recount from inside the hidden spaces of my urn
Ay ayayai the twisted silence of your Yiddish words
Ay ayayai the broken echo my words in Quechua

Lesson

History taught me some years ago
that Wiracocha*
sent Manko Cápac†
to build an empire on top of a mountain

History later taught me
that Jehovah created man
in the image and likeness of Wiracocha
who then created Manko Cápac
in Jehovah's image and likeness

The Jews in Hell

As the story goes,
the Jews bought for themselves
a private spot in hell.

* Wiracocha: the principal Inca god. † Manko Cápac: the first Inca.

In the first circle,
Karl Marx sits on a wooden bench
using his hand as a fan.
The prophet Jeremiah
fights off the heat by singing psalms.

In the second circle,
Solomon carefully studies
the stones from his Temple.
On some yellowing rolls of paper,
Moses draws hieroglyphics.

Christ dreams of Pontius Pilate
in the third circle.
Freud's clinical eye
follows every move he makes.

In the fourth circle,
Spinoza edits
a history of the Marranos.

In the fifth circle,
Jacob wrestles with a devil.
Cain and Abel
treat each other like brothers.

In the sixth circle,
Noah rides drunk on a zebra.
Einstein searches for atoms
in the space between rocks.

In the final circle,
Kafka tilts his telescope
and bursts out laughing.

Just Passing Through

It's just that sometimes our body
is born so suddenly
then lags behind
as if adrift

It shares other births
leaving proof
that it was made
in solidarity
Our body comes from having sunk
its sad eyes
and picking up layer after layer
in its rush
to dig up full days
It's just that our body knows nothing about
death
till it goes out and risks
its life

One Day

One day
a man wakes up seized
by an unbearable fear
he feels like a monster
eating itself up from inside
a little at a time
He shouts he struggles
curses himself outloud
Reaching out he touches his childhood
floats toward his memories
turns around
comes face to face with himself
crying
tired of knowing
he'll always be
both man and monster
taking up too many spaces
He falls asleep he backs off from his teeth
his nails
he speaks again
changes his name
hides his past

sheds his skin considers
 then rejects suicide
 chases the monster off
 and calms down
 sleeps
 until one day
 when he least expects it
 he wakes up

Just Passing Through

It's obvious no one knows who has died
 They're already rushing to seal up
 doors and windows
 as if no one still lived in this house
 I keep getting lost in its corners
 holding up walls forced down by their weight
 I greet the furniture and its sorrow
 the one smell coming from the kitchen
 I pause now and take stock
 of my years
 Here with all the uncertainty
 of a stranger
 I seek refuge in this house

A Peddler's Memories

What if I were to see her passing this peddler's corner
 with her basket of bread
 her skin dark as a Besarabian wheatfield without
 so much as a smile on her lips
 never stopping on this peddler's corner
 to argue over my prices
 And if I were to see her in my dreams draped with beads
 a tender concubine against the somber walls
 of my palace
 radiant as the tall Judean wheat
 And if I were to see her every morning from this corner

passing always with a large basket under her arm
her heels softly tapping the delicate notes of a Peruvian waltz
to the beat of all my offers shaking the sidewalks
with her peasant hips
without ever glancing at the weight of my goods
and what if I were to see her pass this peddler's corner
slowly draining and embezzling the rest of my days

Anniversary

I tell myself over and over
that those were different times

And there where I dreamed of
living on a ship
that never set to sea
the summer grew even drier
and the world filled up
with men pulled by the tide

The Duties of a Prophet

Nothing special would mark my life if it weren't
for the fact that I died January 2 1944 in Dachau
The balance is made up by the traits
of a thousand year old tradition:
blind
(used to always keeping an eye open)
having too much of a weak spirit
and full of excuses taken
in steady doses
Forced into living by the Commandant's mercy
playing the role of court jester
or obedient page
in the General's entourage
(a role I took on orders from an Absent God)
I was his witness: I improvised a two-faced image
of judge and victim

That's how my history can be summed up
 except for a few rather apocryphal events
 the fruits of either old age
 or dreams
 Caretaker of the cemetery for victims
 men with no future look for rest in my house
 where it's my duty to seal hollow doors and windows

Elegy for Hershel Gosovsky

They must have seen him with neckties under his arms
 every winter in the city
 they must have asked him what's it worth
 how much
 for this summer tie
 on those passing days
 And Gosovsky walking all his life from Jirón de la
 Unión to Colmena Avenue
 must have let them go at wholesale prices
 or let them
 fly from the city rooftops
 at bargain rates
 he would've used them on credit to keep warm
 every winter
 setting up stands full of sunlight on all
 the quiet corners of Lima
 All his life blue-eyed Gosovsky would've
 dragged his feet
 to the whorehouse on Jirón Huatica
 lit up back alleys and shabby rooms with his
 milky circumcised erection
 crawled on his knees to the Banco Popular
 reached up to the teller's window Peruvian coins
 encrusted on his hands
 his body searching for a place to sleep
 each night
 every morning he would've used his key
 to open all the hotels in Lima

until they saw him die face down
with his feet
 his hands
 his whole body

Just Passing Through

Here's where my life begins
shoulder to shoulder
against fate
and those days rushing by in fear
It all hangs on luck:
you lose the fear of death
because there are days in a man's life
that escape it
But it's hard not to give up
when we trip over our feet
at each turn
and we fall down out of reach
with our ankles
split wide open
and then they lay us down on a gravestone
and tell us:
Sleep calmly
the tide doesn't rise this high
It's hopeless: I'm about to unmask myself
but my words stop me
at the tip of my tongue
It's hopeless: here's where my life begins
and I'm just passing through

Chronicles

Then I set out on my journey through history
and now I remember that heroes—I mean those
who thought about life as they were dying—
flashed their ghostly claws

And it so happened that in the end
 I couldn't forget Mariategui's seven poems
 that even though my head had been cut off
 I still kept in my pocket
 (the left pocket)
 two cents worth of patriotism

Then I took the road that neither began
 nor ended in Jerusalem or Cuzco
 finally I discovered that confuciusjesuschristkarlmarx
 were scheming to put out a new edition of the bible
 and that the earth's navel
 could be found inside a barren woman

Solomon ordered that the son of my conscience be cut in half
 and that the head be handed over to the Western mother
 and an ass with two legs to the Eastern mother
 and that's how a lie the size of a nose
 began growing on our culture

A parched, dying voice revealed to me that
 civilization began when Cain committed his crime
 who cared if Wiracocha was born in a Bethlehem manger
 or if Jesus was Lake Titicaca's son
 we didn't need sperm tests
 but tests of conscience
 in the end I, the offspring of Abraham's rape of Mama Ocllo
 paternal step-brother of David the Hebrew Pachacútec
 spun my roots in the Span-Jewish wool of Tahuantinsuyo

Poets: don't waste your words
 today the word is no longer the prophet's sword
 and reason, in this age, further removed than ever
 from the mystery that the universe weaves around us
 is only reflected in the stubborn silence of our dead

It's necessary, however, if you are looking for pseudonyms
 to understand that it makes no difference to be called a lion
 a horse or a cat

that heroes' names already smell like parchments
and that's why it's better to be called ram than Abraham
lamb instead of Jesus or llama instead of Manko.

Just Passing Through

At the end of the day
we all compare dusk
to death.
If a man goes
to meet death,
we let him
keep his shadow,
we follow him
as an eye follows a ship.
If the light rips
the seams of our body,
we abandon him for a second:
if we think we're ready
to join him on his journey,
we slowly tie
our shoes,
repeat our goodbyes,
and assure him that we've never
seen him
go by naked
flashing like metal:
we go our separate ways
facing this day already controlled
by habit.

Isaac Goldemberg is the Peruvian-born author of The Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner. He is now teaching at New York University and is at work on a new novel, La conversión.