

TOVA BENJAMIN

From My Great-Grandfather Yoyl Solski on Politics

A socialist can forgive many things:
prison after days at sea
interrogations with small children
hungry from travel
but I'll never forgive that old Jew
who called the Canadian border
to tell them I'm a communist

I knew him from the same small town
where the factories shot buttons to the sky
where the floors & ceilings of apartments
were close enough to converse
where we never, ever prayed
for fear of heaven
I was there when his mother refused to leave
He was there when mine did the same
From Siberia I heard he was in Uzbekistan
From Uzbekistan I heard he was in Siberia
When we had a death, three miscarriages
news came that he had five, a stillbirth
disintegrating in the earth when he left
I saw him on the ship & I said landsman!
We never spoke the names of the dead
even if they were our mothers
even if they died at the same time

But three days of seasickness
& emotions were running high
It's possible I spoke out of line
somewhere between Europe and the shore
It's happened even to the saintly among us
and this yidele, this mamzer
this stick of flesh with eyes
a thousand umbrellas should open inside him
and shatter that sack of bones he calls survival!
To say a socialist is a communist
when you know such a socialist
is only, has only ever been, a socialist
when you rose up in the same roads
and rocked in the same boat

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when your mothers
of blessed memory
were killed the same way
can you imagine
this landsman had it in him?