

“Babi Yar” (1961)

YEVGENY YEVTUSHENKO TRANSLATED BY GEORGE REAVEY

No monument stands over Babi Yar.
A drop sheer as a crude gravestone.
I am afraid.
Today I am as old in years
as all the Jewish people.
Now I seem to be
a Jew.
Here I plod through ancient Egypt.
Here I perish crucified, on the cross,
and to this day I bear the scars of nails.
I seem to be
Dreyfus.
The Philistine
is both informer and judge.
I am behind bars.
Beset on every side.
Hounded,
spat on,
slandered.
Squealing, dainty ladies in flounced Brussels lace
stick their parasols into my face.
I seem to be then
a young boy in Byelostok.
Blood runs, spilling over the floors.
The barroom rabble-rousers
give off a stench of vodka and onion.
A boot kicks me aside, helpless.
In vain I plead with these pogrom bullies.
While they jeer and shout,
“Beat the Yids! Save Russia!”
some grain-marketeer beats up my mother.
O my Russian people!
I know
you
are international to the core.
But those with unclean hands
have often made a jingle of your purest name.
I know the goodness of my land.
How vile these anti-Semites –
without a qualm
they pompously called themselves
the Union of the Russian People!
I seem to be
Anne Frank
transparent
as a branch in April.

And I love.
And have no need of phrases.
My need
is that we gaze into each other.
How little we can see
or smell!
We are denied the leaves,
we are denied the sky.
Yet we can do so much –
tenderly
embrace each other in a darkened room.
They’re coming here?
Be not afraid. Those are the booming
sounds of spring:
spring is coming here.
Come then to me.
Quick, give me your lips.
Are they smashing down the door?
No, it’s the ice breaking...
The wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar.
The trees look ominous,
like judges.
Here all things scream silently,
and, baring my head,
slowly I feel myself
turning gray.
And I myself
am one massive, soundless scream
above the thousand thousand buried here.
I am
each old man
here, shot dead.
I am
every child
here, shot dead.
Nothing in me
Shall ever forget!
The “Internationale,” let it
thunder
when the last anti-Semite on earth
is buried forever.
In my blood there is no Jewish blood.
But in their callous rage, all anti-Semites
must hate me now as a Jew.
For that reason
I am a true Russian!