

Cave For the Generations

Behind consumption in the beard,
my great grandfather coughed in Warsaw.
Heat fetid, ice cut,
he gesticulated with rude words
sitting fixed in the same inward village,
language decaying, afraid to wear
a skullcap outside Rue Gracht.

My grandfather sensed the hexagon of walls
decaying in soot,
fading to muted Chagalls.
He left on a German train, masking fear
in suit and tails scraped from selling cigar butts.
Cry out sooty tears on the ocean liner to America,
cry for everyone still waiting on the stairs,
who still knit the saved yarn and drink the sour milk.

Brooklyn reminded him, a patchwork
of gray dirt pool hovels and shrill
families, fists on knees, cabin rage,
men hacking up the tenement stairs,
no time for fathers to speak of daughters.
He applied a trowel to the inside of a brownstone
smoothed out a gray wall for the generation moving in.

My father spread fingers on the smoothness, cool to the tip.
The secret of mortar passed on.
He used the apprentice money
to buy a pair of track shoes.
He ran the muscular numbers of America,
220 and 440, shorts with wings.
The black overcoats he wore helped him live
inside New York, the light of jazz
Smoking a Gitane cigarette by river lights
he felt he finally owned some place.

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