

DEAF REPUBLIC



P O E M S

Ilya Kaminsky

What happens when the citizens of a country no longer hear one another?

DEAF REPUBLIC opens in a time of political unrest in an occupied territory. Though the setting is uncertain, we recognize ourselves—our time and our country—in these harrowing events. This astonishing parable in poems unfolds episodically, its narrative provoked by a tragic opening scene: while breaking up a protest, a soldier shoots and kills a young deaf boy—and the gunshot renders the entire town deaf. In the prevailing silence and against the soldiers' brutal crackdown, the citizens coordinate their dissent with sign language, illustrated across the book. The story then diverges to follow the private lives of townspeople encircled by public violence: a newly married couple, Alfonso and Sonya, expecting a child; the daring Momma Galya, instigating the insurgency from her puppet theater; and Galya's puppeteers, covertly teaching signs by day and by night luring soldiers one by one to their deaths behind the curtain. At once a love story, an elegy, and an urgent plea, *Deaf Republic* stands as a warning and a powerful questioning of our own collective silence in the face of our time's atrocities. "The deaf do not believe in silence," Ilya Kaminsky writes. "Silence is the invention of the hearing."



Ilya Kaminsky was born in the former Soviet Union and is now an American citizen. He is the author of a previous poetry collection, *Dancing in Odessa*, and coeditor of *The Ecco Anthology of International Poetry*. He has received a Whiting Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, and was named a finalist for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. His work has been translated into more than twenty languages.

"Ever since the world-changing publication of *Dancing in Odessa*, I have been eagerly awaiting Ilya Kaminsky's second collection. What I find in *Deaf Republic* is conscience, terror, silence, and rage made to coexist alongside moments of tenderness, piercing beauty, and emphatic lyricism. It hurts to read these poems. It hurts to read them and find the world I belong to stricken by a contagion of silence."
—TRACY K. SMITH

"Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic* is evidence of a profound imagination, a capacious critical intellect, and a brilliant heart-on-fire working in unison to alchemize personal and transpersonal history in order to create a dream book for any and every citizen. This gorgeous long poem is aggrieved, inconsolable, and yet ecstatic, comic, and indefatigably in love with the world. Fables, fairytales, lullabies, love songs, and reports from global daily news all feed into it, but a reader will also discover throughout the deep magic. *Deaf Republic* is a book of wonders."
—LI-YOUNG LEE

"I read *Deaf Republic* with feverish excitement and deepening astonishment. There is rage in these pages, urgency and force and also a great, redeeming beauty. Ilya Kaminsky's lines buzz with a kind of electric freshness; reading them is like laying your hand on the live wire of poetry. He's the most brilliant poet of his generation, one of the world's few geniuses."
—GARTH GREENWELL

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ACT TWO

The Townspeople Tell the Story of Momma Galya



Story

Townspeople Speak of Galya on Her Green Bicycle

Momma Galya Armolinskaya, 53, is having more sex than any of us.
When she walks across the balcony

a soldier *oh* stands up,
another stands,
then the whole battalion.
We try not to look at her breasts—

they are everywhere,
nipples like bullets.

Wanting to arrest her,
the soldiers
visit her theater—and come back to her theater every night.

By day, Galya aims empty milk bottles at security checkpoints:
on a green bicycle
she flies over the country like
a tardy milkman,
a rim of ice on her bottle caps.

Galya Armolinskaya, the luckiest woman in our nation!
Your iron bicycle tearing with bright
whiskey anthems
through an advancing rank of soldiers into

daylight. You pedal barefoot wearing just
shorts.

And let the law go whistle.

When Momma Galya First Protested

She sucks at a cigarette butt and yells
to a soldier,
Go home! You haven't kissed your wife since Noah was a sailor!

Madame Momma Galya Armolinskaya, what would we give to ride away from our
funerals
beside you, in a yellow taxi,
two windows open,
leaving loaves of bread
in the mailboxes
of the arrested.

Momma Galya Armolinskaya,
by the avenue's wet walls, yells:
Deafness isn't an illness! It's a sexual position!

A young soldier patrolling a curfew
whispers,
Galya Armolinskaya, yes, Galya Armolinskaya
whipped a Lieutenant with the leash of his own patrol dog
and there were thirty-two persons watching
(for a baker
insisted
on bringing his sons).

On a night like this God's got an eye on her
but she isn't a sparrow.
In a time of war

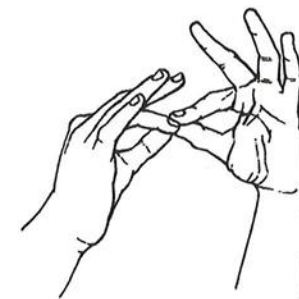
• she teaches us how to open the door
and walk
through
which is the true curriculum of schools.

A Bundle of Laundry

In Central Square, an army checkpoint. Above the checkpoint, Alfonso's body still hangs from a rope like a puppet of wind. Inside the backroom of the checkpoint, the infant Anushka cries.

In front of the checkpoint, two of Momma Galya's puppeteers climb a park bench and start kissing, hands full of each other's hair. The soldiers are cheering them on and taking bets on how long they will last. The girls smile. *Stop talking while we are kissing!*

Unseen, Momma Galya exits the checkpoint with a bundle of laundry stolen from the Sergeant's clothesline, Anushka hidden in the linens. Snow pours out of the sun.



Kiss

What Are Days

Like middle-aged men,
the days of May
walk to prisons.
Like young men they walk to prisons,
overcoats
thrown over their pajamas.

Galya Whispers, as Anushka Nuzzles

In our avenues, election posters show the various hairstyles
of a famous dictator—
and I, at 53
having given up thought of a child, I—(turning to my neighbors and shouting, *Come here!*
Come here!
Marvelous cretins!

She just pooped on the park bench, marvelous cretins!
Parenthood
costs us a little dignity)

—thank God.

Wind sweeps bread from market stalls, shopkeepers spill insults
and the wind already has a bike between its legs—

but when, with a laundry basket out in the streets, I walk,

the wind is helpless
with desire to touch these tiny bonnets and socks.

Galya's Puppeteers

Behind the curtains of the theater, a puppeteer glides her lips over the soldier Ivanoff's penis. He puts one hand on her hair and pulls her to him. She moves the hand away, still kissing him. When his hand is in her hair again, she stops, raises her eyes to him and signs, *Be good*. He takes another swig from his vodka. She takes him in her mouth and closes her eyes. Slides, faster and faster.

Beautiful are the women of Vasenka, beautiful. When she licks the palm of his hand, he laughs. When finally he passes out, she strangles him with a puppet-string. As the soldiers lined up downstairs raise a toast to Momma Galya, they don't see the puppeteers drag the body out back.

Beautiful are the women of Vasenka, beautiful.

Hello, love. The door opens and she motions another soldier to come in.



Be good

In Bombardment, Galya

In the twenty-seventh day of aerial bombardment, I
have nothing except my body, and the walls of this empty apartment flap and flap like a lung.

How to say I only want some quiet; I, a deaf woman, want some quiet, I want some quiet;
I, in the middle of

the nursery where earth asks of me, earth asks of me
too much, I

(before I give up my hiccupping heart and sleep) count
our strength—a woman and a child.

This body I testify from is a binoculars through which you watch, God—
a child clutches a chair,

while the soldiers (their faces are molded from inside by words) arrest all my people, I
run and the flag is the towel the wind dries its hands on.

While they tear off the doors to my empty
apartment—I am in another apartment smiling as the child clutches a chair,

wobbles
toward you and me, God.

I clap and cheer
her first steps,

her first steps, exposed like everybody.

The Little Bundles

While the days of June like middle-aged men
walk to prisons
I cut Anushka's hair:
on her shoulder
on her shoulder
the little bundles pile up.

•

I am mortal—
I nap.

•

Anushka, your pajamas—
they are the final meanings of my life.

To get you into your pajamas,
Anushka!

So much to live for.

•

To bed, Anushka!

I am not deaf
I simply told the world

to shut off its crazy music for a while.

Galya's Toast

To your voice, a mysterious virtue,
to the twenty-six bones of one foot, the four dimensions of breathing,

to pine, redwood, sword fern, peppermint,
to hyacinth and bluebell lily,

to the train conductor's donkey on a rope,
to the smell of lemons, a boy peeing splendidly against the trees.

Bless each thing on earth until it sickens,
until each ungovernable heart admits: *I confused myself*

and yet I loved—and what I loved
I forgot, what I forgot brought glory to my travels,

to you I traveled as close as I dared, Lord.

Theater Nights

On the stage of Galya's theater, a woman bends to cover her coy knees, showing the audience of soldiers the burlesque of her cleavage.

Around her, the stage darkens. The puppeteers drag another strangled soldier into an alleyway.

In the center of the stage Momma Galya strikes a match.



Match

And While Puppeteers Are Arrested

silence?

it is a stick I beat you with, I beat you with a stick, voice, beat you

until you speak, until you
speak right.

Soldiers Don't Like Looking Foolish

Morning. Someone scribbles the names of the arrested and nails the list to the wall.
Some names are illegible, just a squiggle, a mustache.

We see Galya's finger tremble down the list.

After detaining every woman on Tedna Street *for what Galya's girls did to soldier Ivanoff*,
the army begins to bomb a new store each morning *for what Galya's girls did to soldier*
Petrovich, for what Galya's girls did to soldier Debenko.

The streets empty.

A vegetable kiosk explodes, a tomato flies toward us and falls apart in the wind.



Story

Search Patrols

I cover the eyes of Gena, 7, and Yasha, 9,
as their father drops his trousers to be searched, and his flesh shakes

and around him:
silence's gross belly flaps. The crowd watches.

The children watch us watch:
soldiers drag a naked man up the staircase. I teach his children's hands to make of anguish

a language—
see how deafness nails us into our bodies. Anushka

speaks to homeless dogs as if they are men,
speaks to men

as if they are men
and not just souls on crutches of bone.

Townpeople
watch children but feel under the bare feet of their thoughts

the cold stone of the city.

Lullaby

I look at you, Anushka,
and say

to the late
caterpillars

goodmorning, Senators!
This is a battle

worthy
of our weapons!

Firing Squad

On balconies, sunlight. On poplars, sunlight, on our lips.
Today no one is shooting.

A girl cuts her hair with imaginary scissors—
the scissors in sunlight, her hair in sunlight.

Another girl nicks a pair of shoes from a sleeping soldier, skewered with light.
As soldiers wake and gape at us gaping at them,
what do they see?

Tonight they shot fifty women on Lerna Street.

I sit down to write and tell you what I know:

a child learns the world by putting it in her mouth,

a girl becomes a woman and a woman, earth.

Body, they blame you for all things and they
seek in the body what does not live in the body.

Question

What is a woman?
A quiet between two bombardments.

Yet, I Am

Yet, I am. I exists. I has
a body.
When Anushka

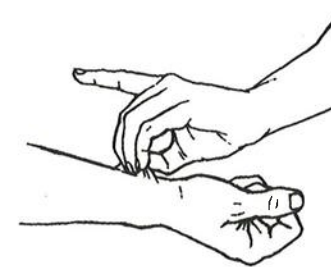
takes my finger
in her mouth, she
bites.

How do we live on earth, child?
If I could hear
you, what would you say?

Your answer!

On earth we can do
—can't we?—

what we want.



Earth