

Poetry by Linda Pastan

Poet

At his right hand
silence;
at his left hand
silence;
ahead of him
the yahrzeit glass;
behind him
silence;
and above his head
all the letters of the alphabet
to choose from.

Fresco

In Masaccio's "Expulsion
From the Garden"
how benign the angel seems,
like a good civil servant
he is merely enforcing
the rules. I remember
these faces from Fine Arts 13:
I was young enough then
to think that the loss of innocence
was just about Sex.
Now I see Eve covering
her breasts with her hands
and I know it is not to hide them
but only to keep them
from all she must know
is to follow
from Abel on one,
Cain on the other.

Life and Literature

In the middle of the century,
in the middle of the middle class
I stood on a dressmaker's wooden stool
fixed forever at twelve
in a constellation
of silver pins.

And once I kissed the milliner's shabby son
while my mother tried on hats.
We saw her face rising
beyond the door whitened in anger,
circled in planetary felt—
he wore a yarmulka.

In the shtetl I would have died
three times in childbirth.
Instead washed clean by soap
opera, my peasant cheekbones rouged
in city lights, they told me:
Rise and Shine.

Tonight I listen to Isaac Bashevis Singer
speak in the Yiddish accent of my grandfather.
How do I write of ghettos
who feel at home in drafty English houses
sipping my tea from porcelain cups
instead of jelly glasses?

O sing a song of assimilation—
that oldest lullabye.
I have tried to forget the words,
but my genes are suspended
like half notes down
its strict, musical staff.