

remembering brodsky

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Joseph Brodsky was a Nobel Prize winning poet and author. He was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1972. He taught at Mount Holyoke and Columbia University for 15 years while living in the United States. On two occasions he was nominated as the American poet laureate. Recently, a friend lent me Watermark, a collection of 48 short essays about Venice written in 1992.

Whenever he had the opportunity (more than 30 trips), Brodsky went to Venice. Its mystery appealed to his sensibilities, inspired him to reflect and write about the transient nature of the human condition. He always came to Venice in winter. He found the cold heightened his senses in this city of water, seaweed, barges, and labyrinth-like passages. This city of melancholy seduced him.

Watermark is a poetic work. As the title implies, water is a leitmotiv. Brodsky writes about reflections, mirrors, dust, chandeliers, identity and anonymity. He weaves an account of his time and thoughts in this unique city, wandering the narrow streets, lost in his own solitude.

Brodsky's writing transports me to further explore and expand my own reflections on memory and personal history that have been at the core of my work.

In his work I discover my own themes and preoccupations. In response to his writing, I want to create a body of photographic images that express my own feelings on time passing and memory. I want to translate Brodsky's universe into a visual narrative that reflects his interior world.

*"People age and die, things disappear: eventually everything survives only through memory."*

The Essential Duane Michals, Marco Livingstone

*Out of Time  
for joseph*

Time stands still in this timeless place; we sense our breath, our temporal existence in the dimness of evening.

Accademia, Santa Maria della Salute, Rialto: the names of the vaporetto stops ring melodious as we travel this ancient city of water and light. I see fragments of buildings as we glide through the night.

The streets lead to the canals, the canals to the streets. The streets end at the canals, the steps descending into the watery labyrinths.

We cannot escape the water.

After a few days of vaporetto travel I begin to feel the sway of the boat on dry land. I wonder if this is an illusion. The dampness permeates my bones.

I hear the ringing of church bells and the occasional gondolier in song. In the blackness of night the palazzi take on new lives. Dark structures standing in the water they loom as the boat passes. Sometimes we are able to see light coming from within: a chandelier, a person, a painting discernable. Are the walls covered in red brocade? Is there music?

Venice at night is silent and bright; the winter sky cloudless while the full moon illuminates the inanimate streets, like a stage set waiting to be filled with players.

Occasionally an echo fills the void or a cat scampers by in the darkness. Otherwise the silence reigns despite the constant sound of the water lapping on the edge of the decaying landing.

The smell of coffee and seaweed fills the early morning air.

The dark train station is devoid of travellers except for the few sleeping in a corner or on a wooden bench waiting for the morning.

Piazza San Marco is abandoned. The hordes are gone. The Cathedral, the Doge's Palace stand timeless in the space of memory. The arcades majestic and cavernous, the stones polished by centuries of passing feet.

A lone policeman sits on his midnight vigil, cigarette in hand.

I return to the hotel, the polished terrazzo floors, the heated room. I leave the cold night and canals behind me. I see my reflection in the hotel mirror reassured of my own temporal existence, however, I am not sure which century it is.

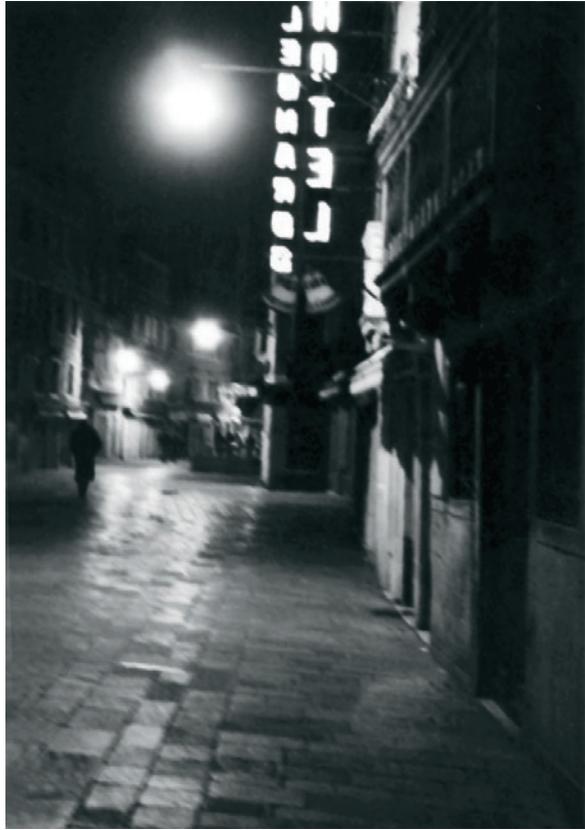
I fall into a deep sleep removed from the cold night air and the canal reflections. I enter my own world of night reflections, dreams soothed by the constant swaying of the boat, like a baby in a cradle enveloped in the darkness of night in a timeless time ... in this timeless place, remembering brodsky.

Ewa Monika Zebrowski















Joseph spoke with a Russian accent, and very fast, as if in a rush not so much to finish his sentences but rather to get rid of them. Invariably, he would end an elaborate explanation or argument with “etcetera etcetera.” His mind was quick, electrically so, and the charge could light up a room. I have never known anyone who could hypothesize as energetically or as imaginatively as Joseph. He had theories about everything, but most importantly about poetry. He is famous for what he had to say about Auden or Hardy or Frost, but he had a great deal to say about the less well known. He was a careful reader of student work and the work of poets like myself. Joseph and I would read our poems to each other over the telephone and give each other advice. I always took his advice. Rarely, I believe, did Joseph ever take mine. His questions were mainly about usage. He was never sure how American or how British he wanted his poems to sound. On the page they could be trying either, but when he read them aloud they sounded like English trying to be Russian. He would chant his poems, gravely intoning each line, allowing it to rise slightly and then trail off at the end. It was a little like hearing a dramatic recitation of the liturgy. The effect was mesmerizing. Several other characteristics of Joseph come to mind, and they have very little to do with his being a poet. One was the way he would sometimes place his arms straight up against his chest with his hands dangling down as if he were a cat begging. Then he would say, “Meow, meow.” This was usually in response to good news - his or the person’s he was with - or when something trivial had gone wrong. Joseph loved cats, he also loved to go shopping, he liked the adventure of it, of not knowing what he would find and absolutely have to have. He especially liked shopping for pens and old notebooks. I remember his delight when he found a stationary store in Rome that still had notebooks from the days of Mussolini for sale. When it came to clothing, Joseph could be titillated by an expensive Armani jacket, but he always would end up buying a new jacket that looked just like the old one. Joseph always managed to look the same, always like himself.

Mark Strand

*letum non omnia finit*

*Colophon*

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artist's book including artist's statement, poem and photography by Ewa Monika Zebrowski

inspired by *Watermark* by Nobel prize winning poet/author Joseph Brodsky

endnote by Mark Strand

includes 25 numbered inkjet prints  
35mm B & W prints scanned and printed on the Epson Stylus 1270 Printer  
on Epson Matte Heavyweight Paper

portfolio & embossing on BFK Rives 25g paper  
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