

## PROSE

### from **Awakening**

by Isaac Babel

(*The narrator, the boy Isaac, grew up to be the highly acclaimed writer, Isaac Babel.*)

- 1 All the folk in our circle—brokers, shopkeepers, clerks in banks and steamship offices—used to have their children taught music. Mr. Zagursky ran a factory of infant prodigies<sup>1</sup>. He charted the first course, then the children were shipped off to Professor Auer in St. Petersburg.
- 2 I was taken to Zagursky's. Out of respect for my grandfather, Mr. Zagursky agreed to take me on at the cut rate of a rouble<sup>2</sup> a lesson. And he had the devil of a time with me, for with me there was nothing to be done. The sounds dripped from my fiddle like iron filings, causing even me excruciating agony, but father wouldn't give in. Infant prodigies brought wealth to their parents, but though my father could have reconciled himself to poverty, fame he must have.
- 3 But what went on in my head was quite different. Scraping my way through the violin exercises, I would have books by Turgenev or Dumas on my music stand. Page after page I devoured as I deedled away. In the daytime I would relate impossible happenings to the kids next door; at night I would commit them to paper. In our family, composition was a hereditary occupation. Grandfather Leivi-Itzhok, who went cracked as he grew old, spent his whole life writing a tale entitled "The Headless Man." I took after him.
- 4 Three times a week, laden with violin case and music, I made my reluctant way to Zagursky's place on Witte Street. The door to the sanctum would open, and from Mr. Zagursky's study there would stagger big-headed, freckled children with necks as thin as flower stalks and a flush on their cheeks. The door would bang to, swallowing up the next child.
- 5 In this crew I was quite out of place. Though like them in size, in the voice of my ancestors I perceived inspiration of another sort.
- 6 The first step was difficult. One day I left home laden like a beast of burden with violin case, violin, music, and twelve roubles in cash—payment for a month's tuition. I was going along Nezhin Street; to get to Zagursky's I should have turned into Dvoryanskaya, but instead of that I went up Tiraspol'skaya and found myself at the harbour. The allotted time flew past in the part of the port where ships went after quarantine. So began my liberation. Zagursky's saw me no more: affairs of greater moment occupied my thoughts.
- 7 The heavy waves by the sea wall swept me further and further away from our house. From the harbour I migrated to the other side of the breakwater. To learn to swim was my dream. How slow was my acquisition of the things one needs to know! But swimming proved beyond me. The hydrophobia of my ancestors dragged me to the bottom. The waves refused to support me. I would struggle to the shore pumped full of salt water and feeling as though I had been flayed. The struggle continued till such time as the local water-god took pity on me. This was Yefim Nikitich Smolich, proofreader of the *Odessa News*.

<sup>1</sup> *prodigies*: children who have exceptional talent

<sup>2</sup> *rouble*: Russian money

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- 8 Silently, out of the corner of his eye, the old man had been watching my duel with the waves. Seeing that the thing was hopeless, that I should simply never learn to swim, he included me among the permanent occupants of his heart. I came to love that man, with the love that only a lad suffering from hysteria and headaches can feel for a real man. I was always at his side, always trying to be of service to him.
- 9 He said to me:
- 10 “Don’t you get all worked up. You just strengthen your nerves. The swimming will come of itself. How d’you mean, the water won’t hold you? Why shouldn’t it hold you?”
- 11 Seeing how drawn I was to him, Nikitich made an exception of me alone of all his disciples. He invited me to visit the clean and spacious attic where he lived in an ambience of straw mats, showed me his dogs, his hedgehog, his tortoise, and his pigeons. In turn for this wealth I showed him a tragedy I had written the day before.
- 12 “I was sure you did a bit of scribbling,” said Nikitich. “You’ve the look. You’re looking in *that* direction all the time; no eyes for anywhere else.”
- 13 He read my writings, shrugged a shoulder, passed a hand through his stiff gray curls, paced up and down the attic.
- 14 “One must suppose,” he said slowly, pausing after each word, “one must suppose that there’s a spark of the divine fire in you.”
- 15 We went out into the street. The old man halted, struck the pavement with his stick, and fastened his gaze upon me.
- 16 “Now what is it you lack? Youth’s no matter—it’ll pass with the years. What you lack is a feeling for nature.”
- 17 He pointed with his stick at a tree with a reddish trunk and a low crown.
- 18 “What’s that tree?”
- 19 I didn’t know.
- 20 “What’s growing on that bush?”
- 21 “What bird is that singing?”
- 22 I knew none of the answers. The names of trees and birds, their division into species, where birds fly away to, on which side the sun rises, when the dew falls thickest—all these things were unknown to me.
- 23 “And you dare to write! A man who doesn’t live in nature, as a stone does or an animal, will never in all his life write two worthwhile lines. Your landscapes are like descriptions of stage props. In heaven’s name, what have your parents been thinking of for fourteen years?”
- 24 At home, over dinner, I couldn’t touch my food. It just wouldn’t go down.
- 25 “A feeling for nature,” I thought to myself. “Where am I to find someone who will tell me about the way birds sing and what trees are called?”

- 26 I glanced out of the window. Across the cement courtyard, Mr. Zagursky, my music teacher, was advancing. It must be admitted he had taken his time in spotting my truancy. More than three months had elapsed since the day when my violin had grounded on the sand by the breakwater.
- 27 Mr. Zagursky was approaching the main entrance. I dashed to the back door, but the day before it had been nailed up for fear of burglars. Then I locked myself in the privy<sup>3</sup>. In half an hour the whole family had assembled outside the door. The women were weeping. Aunt Bobka, exploding with sobs, was rubbing her fat shoulder against the door. Father was silent. Finally he started speaking, quietly and distinctly as he had never before spoken in his life.
- 28 “I am an officer,” said my father. “I own real estate. I go hunting. Peasants pay me rent. I have entered my son in the Cadet Corps. I have no need to worry about my son.”
- 29 He was silent again. The women were sniffing. Then a terrible blow descended on the privy door. My father was hurling his whole body against it, stepping back and then throwing himself forward.
- 30 “I am an officer,” he kept wailing. “I’ll show him.”
- 31 The hook sprang from the door, but there was still a bolt hanging onto a single nail. The women were rolling about on the floor, grasping father by the legs. Crazy, he was trying to break loose. Father’s mother came over, alerted by the hubbub.
- 32 “My child,” she said to him in Hebrew, “our grief is great. It has no bounds. Only blood was lacking in our house. I do not wish to see blood in our house.”
- 33 Father gave a groan. I heard his footsteps retreating. The bolt still hung by its last nail.
- 34 I sat it out in my fortress till nightfall. When all had gone to bed, Aunt Bobka took me to grandmother’s. We had a long way to go. The moonlight congealed on bushes unknown to me, on trees that had no name. Some anonymous bird emitted a whistle and was extinguished, perhaps by sleep. What bird was it? What was it called? Does dew fall in the evening? Where is the constellation of the Great Bear? On what side does the sun rise?
- 35 We were going along Post Office Street. Aunt Bobka held me firmly by the hand so that I shouldn’t run away. She was right to.

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<sup>3</sup> *privy*: washroom