

A high spirited romp with language and a tough spiritual struggle with suffering, violence, the text of the Old Testament, and a God who explains that “Heaven is everyone armed and open carry. Come on in.” Finishing this book I turned right around and started over—it was that rich, that good.

—Alicia Ostriker

Author of *Waiting for the Light* and *The Volcano and After*

Sleeping as Fast as I Can is a book where prayers are filled with history, and history is filled with the urgency of the present; a book that isn't afraid of tragedy because it holds music as a shield. For me, Michelson's poems deliver an unrelenting message, one unafraid to transport “home our holy, temporary hearts.”

—Ilya Kaminsky

Author of *Deaf Republic* and *Dancing in Odessa*

Richard Michelson's poems are easy to read and hard at the same time. With clarity and wit their honesty touches deep into pain: of a father lost long ago, of a mother now in her decline, of life, of contemporary history, of Jewish life, of Jewish history, of the violence that spoils it all. But then come the words of blessing in the midst of the dark that understands “Light is our only future.”

—Rodger Kamenetz

Author of *The Missing Jew: Poems 1976-2022*

Richard Michelson is a poet who understands the measure and music in the art of poetry. *Sleeping as Fast as I Can* brings prayers, rants, memoria, and rage against hatred, violence, racism, and anti-Semitism in a bitches brew of language on every page. . . .

—Patricia Spears Jones

Author, *A Lucent Fire: New and Selected Poems*

Sleeping as Fast as I Can

Sleeping as Fast as I Can

Poems

RICHARD MICHELSON

S L / . N T
B O O K S

SLEEPING AS FAST AS I CAN

Poems

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For Jennifer (still, again, and ever)

Do you see that arch over there from the Roman period? It doesn't matter, but near it, a little to the left and then down a bit, there's a man who has just bought fruit and vegetables for his family.

—YEHUDA AMICHAH

Sleep faster, we need the pillows!

—YIDDISH FOLK SAYING

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Prelude

POETRY

Today, let us approach the divine like this elephant lumbering toward the prepared blank canvas. Let us surround ourselves with pails of paint, and plunge our delicate noses directly into the gelatinous rainbow. O dainty Boom Rod, mischievous Paya, have I not flown above clouds these twenty-something-odd-hours to arrive on the unknown side of the heavens. O cheerful Chong, I draw near you, knowing full well the parable of the blind monks, all six of them stumbling to understand how the sighted can label what we see as The Truth. For who among us does not desire inspiration, or to leave our faint mark on white paper. But let me, if only this hour, dare to stand apart from the good-hearted people, these well-intentioned foreign tourists who want so badly to believe in your pachyderm paintings, and the eternal uplifting power of art that they'll ignore the soft tissue of your outer ear, the sharp hook hidden in the handler's left hand, his right controlling your tusks until attention drifts to our own self-portraits, or some distant god.

I

A Pitying of Turtledoves

PRAYER

Today, I am weary of my soul, forever dragging behind me, clanging for attention like tin cans left tied to a coupe fender long after the sacred vows. Just now another Black motorist murdered live on YouTube (shared, copied, spread virally), tomorrow an Asian, Tuesday a Jew; O friends, transgender, and cis, what imagination would lash raw ankles to exhaust-pipes, turn the key and hit the gas? In Rembrandt's *Flayed Ox*, he's mixed bits of lampblack into the ochre and burnt umber; and on my Louvre *lune de miel*, I observed once more a desire to make the grotesque beautiful. Are we here to be God's body, or God's language? O composers, in what key do we set cruelty? O poets, what rhymes with the rape of a child? While wildfires out west melt flesh and southern hurricanes scream the word *mercy*, shall we pray by the side of this road my love; my Lord?

POISONING THE WELL

It was 1348 when the Toulon Jews were first accused
of poisoning wells, my grandfather says. I've refused,

at eight, to wash my hands before dinner, and so a story
about purity, the bubonic plague, and God's glory

is proper punishment; though then as now, persecution
and rotting cadavers seemed to me meager confirmation

of heavenly endorsement. When brutalized, some reach
toward religion; others might apostatize or research

their inner demons. My grandfather abandoned all trivial
delights for Talmudic law; bathing corpses before burial,

purging the house of *chametz* and *kashering* the oven
each Pesach, while I, feather in hand, dusted for leaven.

The city's Jews, segregated in a walled-off ghetto, escaped
pestilence only to face forced repentance or, scape-

goated, to be staked and burned. I think of those pious
today on hearing the President cite a "Chinese virus"

to stoke fear, while trumpeting ignorance. The mobs
attacked to absolve debts, embezzle land, or appease gods.

What fears, I wonder, will my grandchildren understand
me to be quelling, when I demand they wash their hands?

THE WEDDING IN THE CEMETERY

The wedding in the cemetery featured scripture, loud music, two rabbis, and the bride dressed in a shroud

my grandfather tells me. He's inching toward the heart of his lecture, while I'm composing *till death do us part*

punchlines, my pre-teen self not yet grasping the subtext or the year. 1918, he repeats, the Spanish Flu infecting

a third of the world's population, already fifty million dead and in my grandfather's Polish shtetl, superstition

has brought hundreds graveside to congratulate the groom. I think of this now while watching my niece wed via Zoom,

her plans amended by today's pandemic; rabbi-by-remote reciting sacred rites, relatives clicking the thumbs up emoji

or the clapping hands, as ancient Hebraic prayers appear scrolling across a six-foot flat-screen TV. *Love, not fear*

must triumph, my grandfather says once again, as I suffer one fortune-cookie aphorism after another. Someone offers

an on-line toast and we raise imaginary glasses. *L'chaim* still reverberates off of every broken headstone. *I Am*

*That I Am, God tells the assembled. Pity the living guests,
the dead jest, who believe themselves amongst the blessed.*