

adagio
& lamentation



poems by

naomi ruth lowinsky

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Naomi Ruth Lowinsky

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by



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Adagio & Lamentation

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look mother

I Am

a dark temple where your true spirit rises...

Audre Lorde

For my mother

and my mother's mother

Acknowledgments

Some of the poems in this collection have been published in the following literary magazines, sometimes in an earlier version.

After Shocks (Anthology): “on the anniversary of her first marriage”; *Angel Face*: “Tamar”; *Atlanta Review*: “one spring” “adagio and lamentation” (formerly titled “scenes from childhood”); *Backwards City Review*: “goatsong”; *Colere*: “what we did today in Venice”; *Earth’s Daughters*: “offerings of fire” (formerly titled “god of the dream”) “ice cream” “last time” “what broke?” “daled for dad”; *Edgø*: “almost summer” (nominated for a Pushcart Prize); *Euphony*: “ghost story”; *Forkroads*: “how Simon Rodia showed me my craft”; *Many Mountains Moving*: “before the beginning and after the end”; *Meridian Anthology*: “great lake of my mother”; *Nexus*: “midsummer passages at 12 and 50”; *Paterson Literary Review*: “at 19 before she became my mother” “Oma” “thief of stories age 10”; *Psychological Perspectives*: “voices from the ashes”; *Rainbow Curve*: “human remains”; *Rattle*: “on the anniversary of her first marriage” (republished in 25th Anniversary Issue.)

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With Gratitude

To those who helped shape this collection through its many incarnations:
Leah Shelleda, Diane di Prima, Lucy Day, Jane Downs, Tracy Koretsky,
Susan Terris

To my step-daughter Lisa Safran, who set some of these poems to beautiful
music, and whose music helped me find the book's name

To my husband Dan Safran, who listens with an open heart and an excellent
ear, and whose love sustains me

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To my children and grand-children who bring me deep joy and open new
doors and windows

To the Deep River Poets, the Cloud View Poets, and the members of the
board of Psychological Perspectives, who tend the creative fires.

Oma

I wish you could stop being dead
so I could talk to you about the light so we
could walk among the vineyards as we did
forty years ago near St. Helena and you

could tell me again how the light of late
afternoon is so different from the light
of morning I was too young
to grasp your meaning but I believe

you said it is all about the fall of shadows
that when you paint it is not light that streams
from your brush but deep purple violet blue
you shaped emptiness and there was light

Oma come visit me sit at your easel as you always did
your brush poised your eyes as fierce
as a tiger's show me how to create
the luminous moment among so many shades

of sorrow so many dead how to gather the light
of all the windows from all the houses of our lives
to make this bright trail I still follow along the gleaming
floor of the room in which you showed me how

to draw out the french windows to the unseen
garden a river of light that lifts

the Persian carpet into the air

section one

before the beginning and after the end

last time

last drink
of water
last glimpse of the horses
grazing on the hill
last light
in your blue
eyes with the glint of yellow

last air
in your lungs are you
falling
into the dark are you seeing
the light
has your mother
who used to call you
ten times a day
greeted you yet?

are you breaking
into a million fragments
are you flowing
into the ocean
being swallowed by a great fish?

are you a new
baby
head crowning
in some other world?

some ghosts hang around
make trouble
won't let the beautiful daughter
grow up
every time she sees herself
in the mirror
she is cast into a nasty light

other ghosts become
shape shifters
house rattlers
pine cone throwers
ecstatic frogs
at the bottom of the pond

some ghosts cause the trumpet vine
on the back fence to flower

for the first time

section two

what broke?

adagio and lamentation

when my father's fierce fingers made Bach flow
our dead came in and sat with us a ghostly visitation
and my grandmother sang lieder of long ago

this is how prayer was said in my childhood solo
piano arguing with god adagio and lamentation
when my father's fierce fingers made Bach flow

music accompanied us into the valley of the shadow and lo
Bach was torah Mozart was our rod Schubert led us into contemplation
my grandmother sang lieder remembering long-ago

my child's soul was full of glimmerings the glamour of the gone the glow
of candles borne by children into the dark German woods the illumination
of the evergreen all this I saw and more when my father's fierce fingers made Bach flow

my mother's dead sister my grandfather in a cattle car woe
permeated shadows stirred the curtains took up habitation
in my grandmother's body filled every song she sang with how she longed for long ago

long gone now my grandmother my father although
sometimes I call them back by villanelle by incantation
come my fierce father play for me water my soul in Bach's flow
sing my sad grandmother your song is my covenant with long ago

section three

great lake of my mother

regarding Iris

blue eyes are hers dark almost violet like the fierce
painter's eyes of my mother's mother and she slips off
her rainbow bridge making sense of the vision I had
as a girl of a being of light crossing over the water

she says she was there at my birth she
and her sea sister Thetis it was dawn
on a summer Wednesday far from the transit camp
Lag Westerbork where my father's mother gave up

the ghost and Iris a small recently discovered
planet rose on the eastern horizon she the forgotten
goddess who carries a box of writing implements draws color
out of the glistening air is good at delicate negotiations between

those who belong to forever and those who are just
passing through gathered blessings for me from the sea
full of secrets full of wandering fish from the dead
who gave me sea horses to ride goat song

and shimmer my baby body was touched by the purple
of ghosts their blues their deep maroons and I was gifted
with every pleasure of voice of tongue of kicking feet full
of my mother's sweet milk all joy to her who had longed for a child

and my mother's mother painted my sea shell sleep and the red begonia
which glowed on the dining room table it was California and the yellow
hills stirred their big lion bodies and my hands reached out to touch
the light ah! I can see her face who is lilac and rose whose nipples

are apple blossoms who flings her green breasts at the dreaming sky
even now sixty years later as I sit on a wooden porch I can see
how she draws violet and orange out of trees words with their long
roots out of the seas and at the horizon she gathers me gold and silver
out of the summer air

section four

what flesh does to flesh

one spring

approaching 60 things went suddenly luminous
slow stories told by trees of wind and rain
went wild with green voluminous
the rhododendrums and the lilac in the lane
she saw herself in mirrors closer to the girl she'd been at eight enchanted
by the language of the oak than to the woman in the middle she
who lost sleep about money wore sorrow like an apron ranted
about love

even the white towers of the city she can see
from her car even the freeways on her way to work
even the bridges the haunted neighborhoods where lurk
the ghosts of who she was young lover in the dark
of the eucalyptus grove new mother with toddlers in the park
the houses she called home the hamburger joint of her first employ
even these fragments of what's so long gone

stun her with joy

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About the Author

Naomi Ruth Lowinsky was the first child born in the New World to a family of German Jewish refugees from the Shoah. Many in her family were lost in the death camps. It has been the subject and the gift of her poetry and prose—to write herself out of the terror, into life.

Naomi had a special tie with her only surviving grandparent, the painter Emma Hoffman, whom she called “Oma.” Oma showed her that making art can be a way to transmute grief, a way to bear the unbearable. The cover of *“Adagio & Lamentation”* is a watercolor by Emma Hoffman—an interior view of the Berkeley home where Naomi visited her often as a teenager. Oma tried her best to make a painter of her, but Naomi was no good at it. Poetry was to be her vehicle.

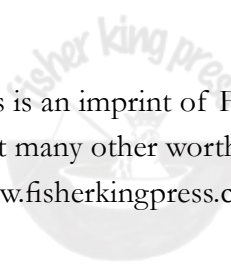
“Adagio & Lamentation” is Naomi’s offering to her ancestors, a handing back in gratitude and love. It is also her way of bringing them news of their legacy—the cycle of life has survived all they suffered—Naomi has been blessed by many grandchildren.

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poetry

Naomi's words and images meander through shadows and light, between demons and angels, yet the poetry is always accessible. In this moving collection, she often goes back in time, to the days when her family lived in (and escaped from) Hitler's Europe. The journey helps inform who she is today, including the indelible scar worn by anyone whose family has borne witness to genocide.

—Stewart Florsheim, author of *The Short Fall from Grace*.

"(W)e are all/each other's/raw/material" writes Naomi Ruth Lowinsky in her wise and moving book *Adagio and Lamentation*, the "we" born not only of others but histories and places, all of this inspiring our very human connection over time to vitality and imagination. Lowinsky's music is poignant and haunting, moving the listeners and readers of her poems with the miracle of arrival that is all new life and the celebration of thriving.

—Forrest Hammer, author of *Call and Response, Middle Ear, and Rift*.

Naomi Lowinsky's poetry is both fierce and tender, political yet intimate; and, for her, the political is personal. Lowinsky's poems "voices from the ashes" and "great lake of my mother" are particularly moving. Her work is deeply lyrical and transformative. It makes you think and feel. It makes you wish you'd written these poems. *Adagio and Lamentation* is a stunning and memorable book.

—Susan Terris, author of *Contrariwise, Natural Defenses, and Fire is Favorable to the Dreamer*.

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