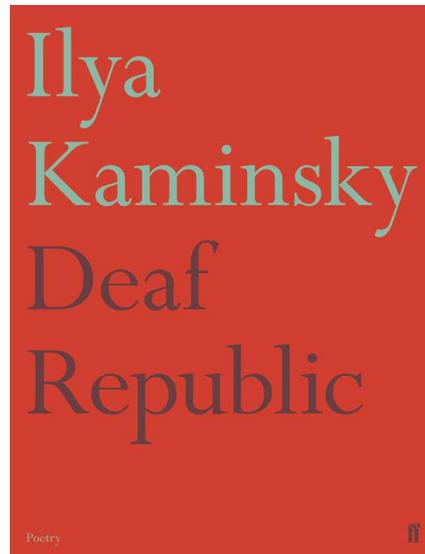


Deaf Republic **by Ilya Kaminsky**



Ilya Kaminsky was born in Odessa, in the former Soviet Union, and now lives in the US. [Deaf Republic](#) is his first poetry collection to be published in the UK. He is the author of two previous collections published in the US, *Musica Humana* (Chapiteau Press, 2002) and *Dancing in Odessa* (Tupelo Press, 2004). He is also co-editor of *The Ecco Anthology of International Poetry*. He has received a Whiting Award, a Lannan Literary Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship, and was named a finalist for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. His work has been translated into more than twenty languages.

ilyakaminsky.com

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Reviews

Kaminsky, who is hard of hearing himself, has the citizens of this republic speak with hand gestures and signs—some of which punctuate and animate the poems—as they resist a world of misunderstanding and military violence. “Our country woke up next morning and refused to hear soldiers,” he writes. Deafness, here, is an insurgency, a state of being, a rebellion against a world that sees deafness as “a contagious disease.” There is also humor, or at least a profound set of ironies: “each man is already / a finger flipped at the sky.”

Evident throughout is a profound imagination, matched only by the poet’s ability to create a republic of conscience that is ultimately ours, too, and utterly his own—a map of what it means to live “in a peaceful country.” (*The New Yorker*)

“The deaf don’t believe in silence,” proclaims a supplementary note in Ilya Kaminsky’s *Deaf Republic* (Faber), shortlisted for this year’s Forward prize for best collection. “Silence is the

invention of the hearing.” Falling somewhere between poetry collection and morality play, this unusual book’s episodic vignettes form a narrative that explores how we think about silence – as rebellion, but also as fearful failure to act: “We lived happily during the war / and when they bombed other people’s houses, we / protested / but not enough”. Kaminsky, who lost most of his hearing at the age of four, left the former Soviet Union as a teenager and was granted asylum in the US; his tale of upheaval in an occupied territory speaks to our current political anxieties. But *Deaf Republic* imaginatively succeeds through its use of deafness as extended metaphor, when voices clamour and truth becomes “fake news”. Like the townsfolk he writes about, who invent a sign language as a riposte to atrocity and unrest, Kaminsky’s fluid yet fragmented verse drama is a novel response to conflict and miscommunication, hoping for peace rather than “silence, like the bullet that’s missed us”. (The *Guardian*)

‘We Lived Happily during the War’

And when they bombed other people’s houses, we

protested
but not enough, we opposed them but not

enough. I was
in my bed, around my bed America

was falling: invisible house by invisible house by invisible house –

I took a chair outside and watched the sun.

In the sixth month
of a disastrous reign in the house of money

in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money,
our great country of money, we (forgive us)

lived happily during the war.

‘The Townspeople Circle the Boy's Body’

The dead boy’s body lies still in the square.

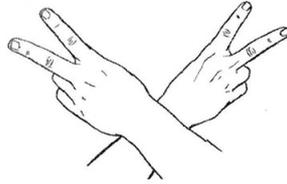
Sonya spoons him on the cement. Inside her – her child sleeps. Momma Galya brings Sonya a pillow. A man in a wheelchair brings a gallon of milk.

Alfonso lies next to them in the snow. Wraps one arm around her belly. He puts one hand to the ground. He hears the cars stop, doors slam, dogs bark. When he pulls his hand off the ground, he hears nothing.

Behind them, a puppet lies on cement, mouth filling with snow.

Forty minutes later, it is morning. Soldiers step back into the square.

The townspeople lock arms to form a circle and another circle around that circle and another circle to keep the soldiers from the boy's body. We watch Sonya stand (the child inside her straightens its leg). Someone has given her a sign, which she holds high above her head: THE PEOPLE ARE DEAF.



The town watches

'In a Time of Peace'

Inhabitant of earth for fortysomething years
I once found myself in a peaceful country. I watch neighbours open

their phones to watch
a cop demanding a man's driver's license. When the man reaches for his wallet, the cop
shoots. Into the car window. Shoots.

It is a peaceful country.

We pocket our phones and go.
To the dentist,
to pick up the kids from school,
to buy shampoo
and basil.

Ours is a country in which a boy shot by police lies on the pavement
for hours.

We see in his open mouth
the nakedness
of the whole nation.

We watch. Watch
others watch.

The body of a boy lies on the pavement exactly like the body of a boy –

It is a peaceful country.

And it clips our citizens' bodies
effortlessly, the way the President's wife trims her toenails.

All of us
still have to do the hard work of dentist appointments,
of remembering to make
a summer salad: basil, tomatoes, it is a joy, tomatoes, add a little salt.

This is a time of peace.

I do not hear gunshots,
but watch birds splash over the backyards of the suburbs. How bright is the sky
as the avenue spins on its axis.
How bright is the sky (forgive me) how bright.

Discussion Ideas

- To what extent do you 'live happily during [a] war'? Is this a poem about guilt or acceptance or complicity ... or something else altogether? Does it accuse you or reassure you?
- What mood are you left in after the end of 'The Townspeople Circle the Boy's Body'? Are you surprised by your reaction?
- If you've not read the whole book, the publisher's blurb explains its story thus '*Deaf Republic* opens in a time of political unrest in an occupied territory. It is uncertain where we are or when, in what country or during what conflict, but we come to recognise that these events are also happening here, right now. This astonishing parable in poems unfolds episodically like a play, its powerful narrative provoked by a tragic opening scene: when soldiers breaking up a protest kill a deaf boy, the gunshot becomes the last thing the citizens hear – in that moment, all have gone deaf. Inside this silence, their dissent becomes coordinated by sign language. The story then follows the private lives of townspeople encircled by public violence: a newly married couple, Alfonso and Sonya, expecting their child; the daring Momma Galya, instigating the insurgency from her puppet theatre; and Galya's puppeteers, covertly teaching signs by day and by night heroically luring soldiers one by one to their deaths behind the curtain.' 'The Townspeople Circle the Boy's Body' is a central episode in that story. If you were making *Deaf Republic*, the feature film, how would you want this scene to appear? How would you incorporate the sign at the end of the poem?
- What is the key ingredient in the tomato salad in 'In a Time of Peace'? How would the salad be without 'joy'? How would the poem be without the salad?
- 'How bright is the sky (forgive me) how bright' – this is the last line of the poem and the last line of the book. How does this line compare with the last line of Fiona Benson's book? Which line stays with you the longest?

Other books by Ilya Kaminsky

Musica Humana (Chapiteau Press, 2002)

Dancing in Odessa (Tupelo Press, 2004)

If you liked Ilya Kaminsky, try ...

- Alice Oswald
- Christopher Logue
- Ocean Vuong

Ilya Kaminsky online

www.ilyakaminsky.com