1.4. "Babi Yar" by Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Yevgeny Yevtushenko, a Russian poet born in 1933, wrote this poem in 1961 in part to protest the Soviet Union's refusal to identify Babi Yar, a ravine in the suburbs of Kiev, as a site of the mass murder of 33,000 Jews on September 29–30, 1941. Dmitri Shostakovich's “Thirteenth Symphony” is based, in part, on this poem.


No monument stands over Babi Yar.  
A drop sheer as a crude gravestone.  
I am afraid.  
   Today I am as old in years  
as all the Jewish people.  
Now I seem to be  
   a Jew.  
Here I plod through ancient Egypt.  
Here I perish crucified on the cross,  
and to this day I bear the scars of nails.  
I seem to be  
   Dreyfus.  
The Philistine  
   is both informer and judge.  
I am behind bars.  
   Beset on every side.  
Hounded,  
   spat on,  
slandered.

Squealing, dainty ladies in flounced Brussels lace  
stick their parasols into my face.  
I seem to be then  
   a young boy in Byelostok.  
Blood runs, spilling over the floors.  
The barroom rabble-rousers  
give off a stench of vodka and onion.  
A boot kicks me aside, helpless.  
In vain I plead with these pogrom bullies.  
While they jeer and shout,  
 'Beat the Yids. Save Russia!'  
Some grain-marketer beats up my mother.
O my Russian people!
I know you are international to the core.
But those with unclean hands have often made a jingle of your purest name.
I know the goodness of my land.
How vile these antisemites—
without a qualm they pompously called themselves the Union of the Russian People!

I seem to be Anne Frank transparent as a branch in April.
And I love. And have no need of phrases.
My need is that we gaze into each other.
How little we can see or smell!
We are denied the leaves, we are denied the sky.
Yet we can do so much—tenderly embrace each other in a darkened room.
They're coming here? Be not afraid. Those are the booming sounds of spring: spring is coming here.
Come then to me. Quick, give me your lips.
Are they smashing down the door? No, it's the ice breaking . . .
The wild grasses rustle over Babi Yar.
The trees look ominous, like judges.
Here all things scream silently, and, baring my head,
slowly I feel myself turning grey.
And I myself am one massive, soundless scream above the thousand thousand buried here.
I am
each old man
here shot dead.
I am
every child
here shot dead.
Nothing in me
shall ever forget!
The 'Internationale,' let it
thunder
when the last antisemite on earth
is buried for ever.
In my blood there is no Jewish blood.
In their callous rage, all antisemites
must hate me now as a Jew.
For that reason
I am a true Russian!