

Bargaining

Years squandered mastering cosines and conjugations,
species of sonnets, stanzas of mating birds,
fruitless months on the counterpoint for Mahler's Fifth
yet not one hour toward learning the dark arts of bargaining.

How each of those hours matters now.

My grandmother, her sacred memory be blessed,
with fifty words of English and a third grade education
could scalp two dollars off the head of a live chicken
(and leave the poulturer smarting the loss) with the scorn
of a fierce squint.

Her anguished voice comes to me in fever dreams.

I showed you how. Every Friday at the market.
You think I dragged you out for my own health?
All you have to do is speak the same language:
Let the poulturer know you'd sooner go hungry
than yield another nickel. How will you cheat
Death if you can't even stare down the poulturer?
Not once does she mention the fate of the chicken.

—Jacob M. Appel, MD

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