

Bitter Herbs

Steven Tarlow

All freedom is bitter for me now,
bitter as the twin blades
of this horseradish rising
from a red pot, thrusting
at the sun. At night
the underground cobs grow long
and thick, their bitterness coalescing.
I think of them feeling for the rim
of the pot and bending back,
turning anger into bone.
I think of the hard skin ulcer, eating
and eating, growing strong.
Soon I will dig up the roots
and let out all that bitterness.
The bony smell will permeate
my backyard. I will savor
the difficult taste all year round,
as I used to on Passover,
when I wedged cold wafers
of horseradish between matzoh
and forced down more than I could stand.
Now each day will bring
its own wafer, a chunk of herb
dipped in salt water
then folded in lettuce,
a bitter herb in a stiff green bed.

Each day I will sing my freedom song
with true rancor, as if I'd earned
the right, as if I too had sojourned
and bit off my share of charred flesh.
Freedom makes the eyes water and clears
the nostrils. It makes the tongue recoil.
My eyes will water as I sing.

STEVEN TARLOW *has published poetry (original and translated) in many journals, including The Cortland Review, Northwest Review, Tikkun and Zeek. His work has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.*