

## Nunc Dimittis (by Joseph Brodsky) from Joseph Brodsky, *A Part of Speech* by George L. Kline (NY: Noonday, 1996

When Mary first came to present the Christ Child  
to God in His temple, she found — of those few  
who fasted and prayed there, departing not from it —  
devout Simeon and the prophetess Anna.

The holy man took the Babe up in his arms.  
The three of them, lost in the grayness of dawn,  
now stood like a small shifting frame that surrounded  
and guarded the Child in the dark of the temple.

The temple enclosed them in forests of stone.  
Its lofty vaults stooped as though trying to cloak  
the prophetess Anna, and Simeon, and Mary —  
to hide them from men and to hide them from Heaven.

A chance ray of light struck the crown of the head  
of that sleeping Infant, who stirred but as yet  
was conscious of nothing. He blew drowsy bubbles;  
old Simeon's arms held him like a stout cradle.

It had been revealed to this upright old man  
that he would not die until his eyes had seen  
the Son of the Lord. And it thus came to pass. And  
he said : ' Now, O Lord, lettest thou thy poor servant,

according to thy holy word, leave in peace,  
for mine eyes have witnessed thine offspring, this Child —  
in him thy salvation, which thou hast made ready,  
a light to enlighten the face of all peoples

and carry thy truth to idolatrous tribes;  
bring Israel, thy people, its Glory in time.'  
Then Simeon paused. A thick silence engulfed them,  
and only his echoing words grazed the rafters,

to spin for a moment, with faint rustling sounds,  
high over their heads in the tall temple's vaults,  
Like some soaring bird that flies constantly upward  
and somehow is caught and cannot return earthward.

A strangeness engulfed them. The silence now seemed  
as strange and uncanny as Simeon's speech.  
And Mary, confused and bewildered, said nothing —  
so strange had his words been. The holy man, turning

to Mary, continued: 'Behold, in this Child,  
now close to thy breast, is concealed the great fall  
and rising again of the many in Israel;  
a source of dissension, a sign to be spoken

against. The same weapon which tears at his flesh  
shall pierce through thine own soul as well.  
Thy wound, Mary, like a new eye, will reveal to  
thy sight what in men's deepest hearts now lies hidden.'

He ended and moved toward the temple's great door.  
Old Anna, bent down with the weight of her years,

and Mary, gazed after him, perfect in silence.  
He moved and grew smaller, in size and in meaning,

to these two frail women who stood in the gloom.  
As though driven on by the force of their looks,  
he strode through the cold empty space of the temple  
and moved toward the whitening blur of the doorway.

The stride of his old legs was audibly firm.  
He slowed his step slightly when Anna began  
to speak, far behind him. But she was not calling  
to him; she had started to bless God and praise Him.

The door came still closer. The wind stirred his robe  
and touched his cool brow, while the roar of the street,  
exploding in life by the door of the temple,  
beat stubbornly into old Simeon's hearing.

He went forth to die. It was not the loud din  
of streets that he faced when he flung the door wide,  
but rather the deaf-and-dumb fields of death's kingdom.  
He strode through a space that was no longer solid.

The roaring of time ebbed away in his ears.  
And Simeon's soul held the form of the Child —  
its feathery crown now enveloped in glory —  
aloft, like a torch, pressing back the black shadows,

to light up the path that leads into death's realm,  
where never before until this point in time  
had any man managed to lighten his pathway.  
The old man's torch glowed and the pathway grew wider.

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Joseph Brodsky was a Russian poet who later learned, and wrote in, Polish and English. He was famously arrested in 1963 for being a menace to society and was exiled internally to a remote region of Russia for five years. He was later expelled from Russia, came to the U.S., and eventually won a Nobel Prize for literature. Brodsky's famous liturgical poem *Nunc Dimittis* describes Simeon's movement (found in Luke chapter two) from the physical to the metaphysical realm. The poem tells us that Simeon was the first human to bear Christ's image—his light—into that *other* world.