

King Priam of Kharkiv

An old man, frail, deaf and nearly sightless,
a long way past his prime though ignorant
of war till now, gets quietly out of bed.
He hasn't slept all night, like all the other nights
since it happened. His wife lies exhausted,
dozing between the nightmare they now share.
He goes slowly to the window, stares out
through the smoky darkness, nothing left
to think about, the sky already turning to fire.
Coat, outdoor shoes, walking stick; open, close
the door without a sound; involuntary shiver
in the dawn chill; crouch across the short stretch
of no-man's land, past the wire, over the ditch –
and there it is, the camp, the man he must find
the words to talk to, ask the impossible, beg
for his son's desecrated corpse to be returned.
Tears crawl down his cheek for the shame of it.
He'll stop here, lean against the wire fence
while he retches. He'll think, only a father
can do this. This is the only thing a father can do.