Spoils of War
Joseph Brodsky

“In the beginning, there was canned corned beef. More accurately, in the beginning, there was a war. World War II; the siege of my hometown, Leningrad; the great hunger, which claimed more lives than all the bombs, shells, and bullets together. And toward the end of the siege, there was canned corned beef from America. Swift, I think, was brand name, although I may be wrong; I was only four when I tasted it for the first time.”

“It was perhaps the first meat we had in a while. Still, its flavor was less memorable than the cans themselves. Tall, square-shaped, with an opening key attached to the side, they heralded different mechanical principles, a different sensibility altogether. That key skeining a tiny strip of metal to get the can open was a revelation to a Russian child: we knew only knives. The country was still nails, hammers, nuts, and bolts: that’s what held it together, and it was to stay that way for most of our lives. That’s why, there and then, nobody could explain to me the sealing method used by these cans’ makers. Even today, I don’t grasp it fully. Then and there, I’d stare at my mother detaching the key, unbending the little tab and sticking it into the key’s eye, and then turning the key time and again around its axis, in sheer bewilderment.”