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Springtime

In the Art Institute of Chicago
a Claude Monet hangs,
Torrent, Creuse,
a winter landscape with an oak tree.
To capture the frozen trembling
of the oaken forms
the painter hung so long on the canvas
that the oak tree began to turn green,
for spring had come in the land.
Desperate at the thought of losing the image
of an oak tree in winter,
Monet hired workers
to peel the young green foliage off
the oak day after day,
so as to keep it winterly at any cost,
naked, dead,
painterly alive.

Poetry is different.
For a long time I felt winter
inside and around me,
now that I want to write a winter poem
the poem is turning green,
for spring has come in the land,
and I don't have workers
to peel the greening
words off the reborn tree of a poem.
And even if I had an army of good, skillful elves,
the poem would not yield,

for words sprout up
whenever they do and however they do,
and there is nothing anyone can do about it.

That's why I eagerly, vernaly, hasten my step
for I well know:
when summer comes in the land,
and autumn, and the next winter,
nothing will ever bring back
this painfully luxuriant
awakening in spring.
Nothing can ever bring anything back again.
O, the unwritten poems!
O, things forever lost!

I hasten, hasten my step
and with every word,
with every leaf
winter is getting nearer.

TRANSLATED BY MIA DINTINJANA

Father

As long as they live, parents stand
with their own bodies between death and us,
their children: destiny appears as if through a curtain.

I was hurt by your thin arms
when you died, o my only father:
still yours, but already foreign, too deep

they fell where I could not reach them,
into the air, yet quite near, here, to the spring
of tears, where I fall upon my face and weep.

In that terrible evening
when we washed the withered body
to return sweet unrest to the all-embracing peace,

I took upon myself, crystal-clear and amazed,
my own human death: since then I
am the father, I am the naked wound desperately

protecting the child against the hailstones
with the death of my own body
that grows from memory into the future

and sings, the rhythm of dance, the snow of farewell.
I fly across to the other side, bound by the law of the flock
of migratory birds, and I cry when I return to you,

my father.

*(on the third anniversary of his death,
December 30th, 1994)*

TRANSLATED BY MIA DINTINJANA

Borders

We gaze at the same full moon . . . horizons
far away, too far from each other. Mountains
rise between us. A soft, mossy crust
grows over our footsteps. All alone

you crossed all borders and came to a foreign country,
to the homeland of my arms. Dangerously alone
I crawl past the keepers of borders: I travel to the
northwest, where I am bitterly ashamed

of the screeching of the soul among smooth, horrible walls.
I stand before them, a dark man from the southeast,
with a conspicuous name, shuddering, as naked as prey.
I cannot escape. Border is destiny.

Now you know: although you cross the border, you don't erase it.
Rising even higher it will measure your steps, like doubt.
A map is not an illusion. So speak more softly.
Beyond all borders your lips are my home.

TRANSLATED BY LILI POTPARA

Your Scent

Your scent wells up from the opulence of milk.
Your scent is milky mild and fresh and thick.
It washes over me like waves from distant rivers,
unseen air, the secrets of soothsayers.

You are dressed in it. Your scent is a robe
that never falls from you. A forest so thick
that even time cannot cut through it. Your scent
connects me to you: it is a delicate bridge.

When your own scent is concealed by the smell of flowers,
fragile and rich, I strip them away from you with tender
embraces. I lie inside of you: final and eternal.

The aroma of two bodies is a measure of happiness . . .
That is why I don't wash myself and your scent
steals furtively inside of me, mysterious and enduring,

timeless and placeless, stinging me.
I recognize your beauty and your unseen
trace as the most fatal of all words.
How far away you are. It is all in vain.

TRANSLATED BY ERICA JOHNSON DEBELJAK

Our One House

We lie, after love, on a wrinkled
bed, intoxicated with the smell
of nearness yet already breathing
distance, and we sketch on the last page

of a scribbled notebook: a wide garden,
a big kitchen, dining alcove, and a room
flooded from a high window with the light
needed to write. Walls rise up from the

awkward letters, the colors will be bright,
in the bedroom a magnificent double bed,
the same one where we lie now

awake and dreaming and knowing—each
of us knowing but neither of us saying it aloud—
that this will be our one and only home,

our one safe and warm hiding place
in a jealous and lethal world,

this bed, this raft floating through time,
through the unfulfilled light of days . . .

Enough for love. Enough for death.

Too little for life . . .

TRANSLATED BY ERICA JOHNSON DEBELJAK

Decisions: 11

Between two words
choose the quieter one.

Between word and silence
choose listening.

Between two books
choose the dustier one.

Between the earth and the sky
choose a bird.

Between two animals
choose the one who needs you more.

Between two children
choose both.

Between the lesser and the bigger evil
choose neither.

Between hope and despair
choose hope:
it will be harder to bear.

TRANSLATED BY MIA DINTINJANA

My Doppelganger

I have a doppelganger. While I,
vain as I am, show myself to the world,
he sits at home and works, works, works . . .
My faithful slave, my face known to no one.

I chain him to a cold radiator
and pour him a glass of water
(so he won't die of thirst). I owe him
the light of my freedom, he, my gladiator.

He eats little, is grateful for a bit of dry bread and a dark hello.
He sleeps little, only a few hours each night.
When I stagger in exhaustion, he rushes to my aid.

He is the one who writes; I only put my signature there.
Now he's blushing in embarrassment. My intimate stranger,
my doppelganger. I wish I knew him a little better.

TRANSLATED BY ERICA JOHNSON DEBELJAK

Ragology (The Study of Rags)

All her life, our *nona* waged
a systematic battle against dust,
mud, and all manner of filth and muss.
To this end, she developed a precise strategy,
the study of rags, known to her family as *ragology*
At any moment, she would have arrayed
before her some seventeen different rags
that she would send into combat
as division generals in the battle field.
God forbid any unauthorized use
of one or the other for the wrong purpose!
Whoever did so received
the strictest of punishments.
In this regard, our *nona* did not trust even her maid,
and followed her movements with the sharpest gaze.
In the end, she preferred to dispatch her army of rags herself
with her own feet and hands.
I shall enumerate the various types of rags and cloths
using the scientific terminology of *nona's* ragology:

- 1) the “rough” one for the stairs to the front door;
- 2) the “fine” one for the marble in the *entrée*;
- 3) the “soft” one for waxing the old parquet;
- 4) the “plush” one made from pieces of old clothing
for the copper tiles under the hearth;
- 5) the “big” absorbent one for the stone floor on the terrace;
- 6) the “little” absorbent one for the stone floor in the kitchen
and the bathroom;

- 7) the “old” clean one for the pots and other metal pans;
- 8) the “new” clean one for the porcelain service;
- 9) the “sensitive” one for the wine glasses;
- 10) the “fast” one for the knives;
- 11) the “clever” one for the forks;
- 12) the “pedantic” one for the spoons;
- 13) the “shiny” one for the silver;
- 14) the “splendid” one for the mirror;
- 15) the “see-through” rag for the ironing;
- 16) the “male” rag for the military boots;
- 17) the “chic” rag for her own high-heeled shoes.

Nona's explanation for these all-important ragological distinctions was passionately detailed and deeply considered —knives were smooth and generally not put in the mouth hence a simple treatment with the “quick” rag would suffice; —little scraps of food tended to get lodged between the tines of the fork, hence the need for careful treatment with the “clever” rag;

spoons that we like to lick so much and which relentlessly attract a great number of bacteria, require serious and radical hygienic measures that can only be assured by the “pedantic” rag.

But all this advanced and specialized study of rags, all of these seventeen fanatical divisions of the anti-dust armada, sent day and night into pitched battle against the great filth of the world, regularly deployed and redeployed, all this bourgeois order,

that represented meaning and purpose in her life,
could not help,
could not prevent,
our *nona*,
our own dear *nona*,
our own dear *nona*'s life from falling apart,
 from being scattered about,
 irretrievably dispersed
like so much ash and dust.

TRANSLATED BY ERICA JOHNSON DEBELJAK

Butterflies

Just one week before his death, Mr. Novak took his net and—like the morning before—went out to catch butterflies. He was accompanied by the neighbor boy, small, lively, and gentle.

The old man taught him how to place the fragile things

into a special case and how to hold their wings so the fingers wouldn't damage that trace of dust, without which they couldn't fly, these tender, fluttering, colorful hearts at the bottom

of the sky . . . At the tragicomic funeral of this incurable atheist, the cross removed from his coffin, all the mourners wearing

their coats inside out, seams exposed, the boy opened a box full of butterflies and they took sudden flight to the sky,

so fluttering, tender, and mild, so wonderfully alive! Oh, the ascension of colors! A swarm of flying hearts!

A butterfly flew into the eulogizer's throat. He stood by the open grave. The whole world stood.

The sky opened.

And God smiled.

TRANSLATED BY ERICA JOHNSON DEBELJAK

FRAGMENTS FROM THE EPOS (2009–12)

Tidying up after the Dead

Even now, as I write this, the taste of ash
fills my mouth and it is hard to breathe. Because
tidying up after the dead is a horror. To pass

a whole life through a sieve, to choose among
the unfortunate things destined for the hell of oblivion,
and the more happy ones, for the paradise of memory.

To find in this legacy gold used for fillings
and for wedding rings, bracelets, and pocket
watches with broken hands, the old detritus

of souvenirs and letters, visiting cards and
postcards, important documents and photographs,
a sewing kit, a box of buttons, a broken necklace

and rusted keys, fruit rotting in the refrigerator,
someone's first tooth, primary-school textbooks,
a dozen glasses with different lenses and frames,

two dozen identification cards and passports,
paintings and prints, and shelves filled to overflowing
with dusty books, books, books, books . . .

A last glance at a life, amazement, what a beauty
my mother was when she was young, the scent
in her skirts, her rounded soul hovering in the pleats,

so lovely. —My memory of her will live until her scent
abandons the empty clothes. —Tidying up after the dead
is a bittersweet ritual that revives for the last time

everything that she once was and had, before the death
shroud erased all traces. It's a terrible dilemma,
what to keep and what to throw away. Discarded

memories roam in boxes closed forever.
Two evening dresses with matching silk scarves,
which pair should I save from oblivion? . . .

The zeal of the living continues relentlessly, the force
of the present pushing aside the weight of the past.
All those closets filled with junk would suffocate us,

we must make room, cleanse our memory,
lest it collapse under the weight of the burning
cargo it carries . . .

It burns for so long,

that statuette from the Horn of Africa—
who brought it so far, to this Alpine land—
and a faded letter, a passionate appeal,

from my father to my mother, just before they

became father and mother, dated 1953, *April 9*,
that father wanted to destroy but mother saved

after his death for future eyes, and now
I also save because I, who my mother—so feminine,
so mild—carried then, am mentioned in it.

I am tormented by the question: what will be the fate
of this letter when my time comes—the next tidying-up
by the living of the traces left behind by the dead?

Will another face

lean over this letter and dream of lives lived
and lives ended? Will my parents' love be tossed
in the garbage bin
or in the box of memory?

Silence descends . . .

TRANSLATED BY ERICA JOHNSON DEBELJAK