

Krystyna DĄMBROWSKA
Poems

Absentminded

I missed you, days and weeks.
The street of yellow ash trees in October.
The play of grays so quiet in November
that one blood-red branch seemed like a shriek.
I overlooked you, end of December, season
of presents. What I gave and got I can't recall.
But I do remember the green-haired angels
a poet told me about, sculpted
by his colorblind father. Which no church
would accept. I overlooked
the night flinging sparks, as if someone
had noisily welded the old year with the new. Snow
I also missed, though it falls so seldom now.
My cat would prowl the swirling flakes.
And I don't know, cat, when you lost
your unruly brow, whose arch obscured your eye—
thanks to it, your world always was scratched.
Or when that same brow in the same place
began to sprout again.

I missed you, days, weeks, months.
I was a mirror shrouded in grief.

But all of us saw you.
And now we'll tell you about you.

KK

Travel Agency

I am a travel agency for the dead,
booking flights to the dreams of the living.
Famous celebrities, like Heraclitus, use me
to visit a writer who's in love with him,
but so do the lesser-known dead – like a farmer from Wasity village,
wishing to advise his wife on matters of rabbit breeding.
Sometimes several generations of a family charter an airplane
and land on the brow of their final descendant.
I also have dealings with the murdered,
who on regular trips to the dreams of the survivors,
collect frequent flyer miles.
I never deny my services to anyone.
I find them the very best connections
and reproach myself when a young lover,
entering his girlfriend's dream,
must transfer through a snoring crone.
Or when weather conditions force an emergency landing
and the dead man calls me: do something,
I'm stuck in the dream of a terrified child!
Incidents like these mean stress and a challenge
for me, a minor business with major ambitions –
for though I have no access to the dead men's world
or to other people's dreams,
thanks to me they are in touch.

ALJ

Contraband

Years ago, when Mrs. Kubicka saw a plane
in the sky, she'd throw down her scythe
and hide in the grain. Now she's flying
for the first time to see her daughter in America.
Who's getting married, Mrs. Kubicka says,
to some good-for-nothing guy.
Under her clothes, she's smuggling
her own wedding dress, dug out from storage.
She wound it in a belt like a bandage.
She knows: if they find it, they'll seize it—
her whole life they've taken everything.
Off she heads to security. They order
her to remove the top layers of clothing.
With trembling fingers, Mrs. Kubicka
unties her scarf, unbuttons her sweater.
She passes through the gate, hears drumming,
which might be her heart. Someone's hands
grab her and her temples pound. Someone
repeats something. That she is free. To go.
Only then does she feel how heavy
that dress is. How it prickles her skin.

Mrs. Kubicka, sitting in the plane,
watches the patchwork of fields grow small.

KK

Names

Summer, season of watermelons.
And your story about them:
childhood, a nursing home
for the incurably sick,
the white cornettes of the Sisters of Charity
sailing along in the garden.
Your grandpa, who ran the home,
grew watermelons in cold frames.
The sisters would come there
to lay claim to the fruits
– as yet under-ripe
on their umbilical stems –
and in careful even letters,
on the melon of her choice,
each would write her name.
Here they had something of their own,
which they jealously guarded.
The watermelons grew, and with them
on the green stripy skins
so did the names, ever bigger.
As if they had broken free
of the nursing nuns,
who wore them modestly like their habits,
and were living a second life
as succulent fruits,
jostling for space among the leaves.
Sometimes the watermelons burst.
A crack ran through the name.
And there inside appeared
the ruby-colored flesh.

ALJ

Our Language

*When you say can I sleep
a little longer since this chunk
of dream has to melt in me
like ice in spring,*

when I complain about a writing slump
and you counsel *Have patience, just like me!*
to which I say that's like learning
vegetarianism from a cat,

when we recall our all-night trip
in a shaker of memories to the Vietnamese mountains,

or how in a certain European capital,
we found ourselves looking urgently
for a pee-friendly courtyard,

when we meet halfway
between your solitude and mine
and make the rounds of the neighborhood
where old women prop elbows
on sentinel pillows,

I want to place what we speak on a list
of endangered minority languages
because only two people know it
and it's hard to preserve,
but also on a list of the strongest
because for now it shelters us.

KK

Sculptures for the Blind

In the museum where vision rules,
are sculptures for the blind—
the same ones the sighted
can't get close to:
let a foot creep past the red line,
or poke your nose in the hollow
of some ancient nose—alarms wail.
Only looking is allowed till you feel yourself turn
into those stone eyeballs on long stems
dug out of a Grecian marble head.
The blind view sculptures with their fingers—
trace a scar on the belly
of a Cycladic girl, the battle
of dragons on the backside
of a Korean mirror.
What arose thousands of years ago
they fashion anew, saying: pitcher, cup,
which they fill again with wine.
In their hands, strings of money-beads,
freed from the display, rattle gains and losses,
shady deals gone down.
A bronze knocker lends them its weight,
conjures a door.

Try to open it in the dark —

KK

Grey and Red

Right in the city, on the edge of public housing.
Where a boy and his dog come down the asphalt path,
and on a bench an old lady takes some kefir from her bag.
They perch above them. They live side by side,
but in separate hollows. They don't even blink
at the jackdaws and crows teeming around.

It takes me time to spy one out.
Speckled, the color of oak tree bark, oh, there he is –
snugly filling an oval cavity,
hidden and visible all at once.
The street noise, the roar of trams doesn't bother him,
nor having his nest so close to buildings.
Statuesque as an idol in an altar niche
or an ancestor's portrait in a locket.
And on the oak next door, look, another one: a tawny flame
has perched on the stump of a sawn-off bough.

They're a he and a she. They couldn't bear to be neighbors
if they weren't a couple. We circle the trees:
the fluffy heads, motionless till now,
are gently revolving; from under feathery brows
and dark, squinting eyes are watching us.
Grey and red, silence and sound, fire and ashes.
By day they sleepily keep watch, watchfully sleep,
their beak blades tucked into soft-downy armor.
Only by night do they take off and fly in our dreams.

ALJ

Genizah

Just like a not quite expert scribe, who makes a mistake
while copying the sacred letters onto parchment,
I failed, willfully writing
my first song of songs.
I worried it was dedicated
to someone who would not accept it.

When the scribe makes an error,
he's not allowed to throw away the parchment.
It ends up in the genizah—storeroom of writings
too flawed to be used,
but containing the name of God.

A genizah in a synagogue can be an inconspicuous crate
or a spacious room.
The one in me is sometimes small,
and sometimes huge,
with all the unaccomplished songs locked inside.

How can they be reached? How parted with?
And when the storage space fills up, a ritual funeral is held
for the spoiled parchments.
Or they accumulate and lie forgotten
until a scholar—a traveler
uncovers the genizah centuries later.

If only it were possible to open up your own—
like a stranger who comes from afar.

MR

I cannot say *we*, not unless *we*
is a hyphen between me and you,
that carries across a spark, though sometimes
it's like a tug of war.
I cannot write *we*, not unless *we*
is a bracket for the two of us, the room in which we sleep,
from which we are trying to drive out a hornet.
Not unless *we* is all four of our eyes:
they watch as the hornet scratches in the lampshade,
it's brown with stripes of gold, see that – what a beauty.
I cannot write myself into a *we* greater
than buzzing, wing-inscribed circles
orbiting you and me, that intersect each other
and grow away from us, moving ever further.

ALJ

Hebrew

Language, in which the question
where are you from sounds like
are you
from nothingness.

In which noun is *shem etzem*,
or *name of bone*.

Its curses derive from the Bible,
and if those don't suffice, it borrows from Arabic
as one asks for salt from a neighbor,
and if those too are wanting, it pilfers
from German, Polish, and Russian immigrants.

Language bound up in its country
through mandatory army service:
Elijah's chariot of fire, *merkava*,
became a tank and moved against that salt-lending neighbor
instead of ascending to heaven.

Language of the poet who wrote about rain
on the battlefield, falling on the faces
of friends, living and dead.

Language that embraces what we try for
in translation: God created the heavens and the earth.
That invents apt names for bewilderment and chaos: *tohu va-vohu*.
Language whose writing swims against the current
of my own, who teaches my hand
new beginnings and endings.

In class, a collective "coming out":
why are we learning Hebrew?
Hania has an Israeli husband.
I, thanks to Yehuda Amichai's poems.
Zosia—from a family half Christian, half Jewish.
Robert who lived four years in Tel Aviv,
sold halvah and Hassidic hats, converted old boats
into fishing trawlers for kibbutzes.

Tongue so warm and rough,
it licked us like blind kittens
before we could understand it.

KK

Two Sculptures

I used to be like that slender woman in a chariot.
Harnessed to nearly nothing—to a swallow's wing.
I kept hold of the reins, visible only to me.

Then suddenly I let go. Like those other figures
sculpted in a kiss, we became one:
joined leaves of a door in a house without walls.

But the slender woman returned and drives again
inside me. Her sharp shadow comes between us,
bringing sand, a draft and stormy weather.

I fear that I'll lose you because of her. She keeps
telling me that, without her, I can't have you.
And she points to the wings that are cutting the air.

MR

Wooden Figure of a Hunchbacked Dignitary

All his life he tried to hide the dromedary
ridge within the splendor of distinctions and accolades.

He obtained all possible honors,
among them the love of a beautiful woman.

At last he climbed so high
he had the right, like a king,
to disguise himself after death in a perfect body
chiseled by a famous hand.

He could have gone on for ages,
straight pillar of strength.

But he asked to be carved this way.

MR

Siblings

An aged woman dances flamenco.
In her effort a former lightness smolders.
She is tall and slender like a humpbacked heron,
her skirt has frills and ruffles, her cheeks are sunken in.
This aged woman dances like a young one,
a girl who perished during wartime.
After the show she wipes off the make-up, takes off the wig
and dress, then puts on pants and a jacket
and becomes the person she is off stage:
a male – the dead girl's brother.
The aged man goes back to his home.
He's woven it himself from scraps of the past,
photographs, posters and news clippings.
In between hang the dresses, which he sews by hand:
multicolored birds of paradise.
And his sister's portrait, fresh flowers beside it.
Before the war, they travelled through Europe,
a celebrated teenage dancing couple.
Then came the ghetto, escape, separation.
He told himself that if he had survived
it was only to become her embodiment in dance.
The aged dancer brews a pot of tea.
Silence. It's time the lights went out.
He'll go to bed quite soon, but first, just as he is,
with no costume or powder, he tap dances in the kitchen doorway
to the beat of the bone-hard rattle of castanets.

ALJ

Soundtracks

1.

In countries where they dub foreign films,
an international star and her local voice
form a relationship that never changes
as long as the star and her voice are alive.
So what happens when the star dies?
When her voice loses its face and slinks from the screen
back to earth. Where it's unemployed, awkward
in its original body, speaking in synch with its lips.
And when the voice dies? They find a new one,
so similar you hardly hear the difference.
But beyond the soundtrack you detect the thrum
of the foreign language, which can't be turned down.

2.

The recorded *hoo uh-hoo hoo* of the tawny owl
fools the owl of flesh and feather.
Lures him from the woods, trailing the winged stain
of shadow, soundless in the still light sky,
gliding fitfully to and fro.
Deceived, he seeks something not there
so just for a moment we could have
his birdy self before us.

3.

The soundless
gets translated into sound.
Radio detectors picked up the pulse
of gravitational waves as a series of *chirps*.
Black holes collapsing into each other
chirped so much, so shrilly,
they sounded like birds. No, not at that time
when they were no birds or ears or *when*,
but eons later, hundreds of megaparsecs
hence from that collision, explosion without witnesses.
New horizon unfurling with no one to see.
Peg pounded into a billion light years
without a sound. Translated into a chirp,
the signal of that Ur-occurrence arrived only now
to arms newly open to it.
Which will open wider still. For whom?

KK

When It's Over

I'll visit the Materials Library
at the London Institute of Making.
When it's again allowed, I'll touch
all the things assembled there:
the petrified turd of a tortoise, impossibly light
nuggets of aerogel, which in space
caught dust from a comet's tail—
though I too have such
a library inside me.
It includes a leather flag,
which in art school we'd wave over
lithographic stones to dry them;
the grooming comb for a cat
who purrs up a storm when I brush
the tangles from his undercoat; warm
puff from the nostrils of a sheep nibbling grass
from my hand with her ticklish lips;
and frigid burn of the Baltic
when it reaches my belly, summers in Sweden.
From the time our bodies became
like push buttons at crosswalks,
marked with X's of black tape,
from the time it grew dangerous to flick
a bit of dust from our eyes,
I sense as I shrink imperceptibly
how the library in me grows.
By the time it's over, maybe I'll get
sucked in entirely, and I'll become
a tortoise, a comet,
the fur of a cat.

KK

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