

Denisa COMANESCU

– *Poems*

RETURN FROM EXILE

Eleven years, four months and seventeen days.
Was it a short exile?
This is not the same notebook as then.
I've had lots of them.
Some were large, bound in leather, with golden covers,
others small, light, with Bible paper.
I would stealthily touch them at night
stroking their pages like membranes
faster and faster, more and more intense
with insatiable desire.
At day, I would not dare get near them,
as if they were someone else's private property.
I gave them away to friends, after a while –
it's for your new poetry book, I'd tell them.
To some it brought luck, or so they say.
And then you came,
after eleven years, four months and seventeen days.
Mornings, in the light that seems to elude death,
we fearlessly keep filling in, simple and natural, membrane after membrane.
Each time I turn a full page,
Orpheus turns his eyes away.

Translated from the Romanian by Adrian G. Sablean

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*TO A FRIEND WHO ASKED ME
TO DEDICATE POEM V TO HIM*

Adrian G. Sahlean's translation:

The seed of victory is not planted in me.
Some plants can grow roots
in water jars,
vigorous as Jesuits,
drilling rocks
beheading cities
reaching the sky, not the earth.
Oh, volcanic temperaments,
I have licked so much ash
that the sun rose inside my womb.
and since then, I've been shining,
shining.

Adam J. Sorkin's translation:

The seed of victory was never sown in me.
Some plants can sprout roots
in a glass of water.
Vigorous as Jesuits
drilling rocks,
decapitating cities,
they reach the sky yet not the earth.
Oh, volcanic temperaments,
I've licked up so much ash
the sun has risen in my womb.
Since then I've dazzled.
Dazzled.

*THE WORLD OF LANGUAGE*Adrian G. Sahlean's translation:

A being comes towards you
and you sketch it in words
but the obscure chamber of the brain
remains strange to you
like tiny demons in a hermit's life.
At times, a devastating creature
surges through the syllables,
like the moth that found shelter
in the soldier's purple wound.

War is real.
Quiet nights and the moon,
deceiving pauses
instigators to crimes.
Words get diminished.
The most fragile,
the loneliest in the world of language
I tried to save today.
Through the slashed vein of love
Morse signals
keep dripping slowly:
I will succeed. Later.

Adam J. Sorkin's translation:

A creature comes toward you,
you sketch it in words
but the camera obscura of your brain
remains a mystery,
like the petty demons of an anchorite's existence.
Sometimes a demoralizing apparition

rises up between syllables,
like a moth that craved safe haven
in a soldier's purple wound.

The war is real.
Peace at night, the moon—
deceitful pauses
triggering crimes.
Words shrink to nothing.
Today I tried to save
the most vulnerable,
the loneliest in the world of language.
Through love's slashed veins,
in Morse code,
slow drops:
I'll make do . . . later.

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THE CHALLENGE

Someone had it exactly right.
One morning, so real
and fresh
that the eye would have torn it apart
at a glance
if it could,
I met an armor.
People would go past without seeing it.
it appeared especially for my imagination.

Spider caught in another web
not his own
ship wrecked on a beacon's beam
in the middle of the ocean,
my soul did not want it

Come to me,
enfold me,
I'm the perfect manager,
from now on
you'll never be owned
by love, or hate,
I am the ethereality.

I wander through the city
as in a nightmare
my breath is caught
in magnetic handcuffs
nobody sees it
only I can feel the dark metal
sneaking into my blood
with every movement I make. Like thiiiis!
and I haven't the strength.

Translated from the Romanian by Adrian G. Sablean

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PESSOA

We would watch together the acacia tree across the street.
Each morning, this was our intimate moment.
I would leave you on the hallway table, your eyes
glued to the world outside.
In the evening, you'd wait for me by the door, performing
your voluptuous ritual, always the same,
soothing and taming me.
I named you Fernando Pessoa from the first day,
the day he brought you home, at the end of September,
eight years ago: a little black ball to feed with a pipette.
I didn't take you seriously for a long time –
you were filling the corridors inside a beleaguered couple.
In the spring, I wanted to let you walk on the fresh ground.
You clung to my sweater with such despair
that the fright in your eyes got to me too
as if that little patch of land confined by cement
was drawing both of us under.

During the first few years, I would leave you behind with little thought
until he brought me the news you had disappeared
For a full week you were stuck at the top of the acacia tree,
one could see the tree bark scraped by your embrace.
A kid climbed all the way up to you and pulled you by the leg,
breaking it. Anyhow, together we made it back home.
I would stroke you often, and you purred, pushing your head
against my palm
your eyes glued to my face
for minutes on end, full of light that seemed to come from another world
Your presence again became indispensable to us.
You drew us closer together, again, cleaning daily
the sticky mud from outside.
At Christmas, we did not buy a tree, just a few branches...
We decorated them with globes and put them up in the window.
When you ceased to follow their rainbows,
when you no longer came out from under

the pile of old papers and magazines, my anguish came back.
I took the vase full of shells we had brought from Rhodes
and spread them around you
I stood vigil by you until late that New Year's Eve...
The fireworks were drawing in the sky
the contour of the Hiroshima bomb.
The final spasm allowed your body a moment
of floating in the air, and your eyes the respite to plunge
into the dark.

Translated into English by Adrian G. Sablean

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FROM SIBIU

A dove and a pigeon
of metal
small invisible wheels
of pure intellect.
Love's secret of sand
won't destroy their life,
nor flight's sacred mystery
dissolve their wings.
To feed them
m(ircea) i(vanescu)
sends me daily
two plastic bagfuls
of poetry crumbs.

Translated into English by Adrian G. Sablean

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MY FATHER

The school in the rain like a boat on the waves.
Second graders write faster
this time they enjoy composition
during each break they will start to fight:
mine's bigger—no, mine.
A little girl watches the rain
the teacher tells her to write
she keeps watching the rain
the teacher gets annoyed, threatens her.
Is she going to punish the little girl?
Lightning slices across the children's heads
some shriek in fright.
At once the girl begins to write:
"My Grandmother taught me 'Our Father'
but only to use at home."

Connecticut Poetry Review
translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Irma Giannetti

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AUTUMN SCENE

Two-bit sadness is biting her tongue.
You pinch her cheek
like a girl's too young for her makeup.
On a bench the lonely lover
kept slapping the woman's face
just like a doctor trying
to bring back a suicide.
(All around leaves kept falling and falling,
leaves and newspapers.)

The man was beside himself
to get her to go away.
As if her soul had tangled
in his fingers
he continued to sit by her side
until both disappeared under a mound
of leaves and newspapers.

Exquisite Corpse
translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Angela Jianu

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IMPOVERISHED LAND

For ten pheasants bagged, one rabbit
like a manger the ashen plumage
with blood-red blade
we strip the fur from the warm body
an almandine statuette
fresh-fallen snowflakes alight on the staring eyes
like a halo.

Kalliope
translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Angela Jianu

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ATLAS

The wall of this poem
rests heavily
upon me.
Hey, there,
Sisyphus,
let's swap places
for just this one line.

Kalliope

translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Angela Jianu

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ANAMORPHOSIS

Fog lovers quickness
a cuckoo's nest spinning in rotation
"l'amante"—"lamentation"
can the Romanian "dor" mean "lovesick" in translation?

Curtain attention vixen
pie in the sky—like a big zero
"I like Ike"
a perfect mask for a kabuki show.

Surely *something* is struggling to arise
from fog quickness curtain
with vixen attention lovers
nouns buckle on their sandals

and give it a go
O the footbodywear!

Kalliope
translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Angela Jianu

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HIBERNATION

I need a line
you give me one.
The spark of fire in the alfalfa.
I'd invent a deity
but my mind is barren.
And the soul no longer holds back
devastated.
Doltish overseer! Who gave this life into your hands?
With stones and clods.
The earth devours trails of fire.
O give me a line.

Exquisite Corpse
translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Angela Jianu

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SPORTS POEM

The same night scene
through the curtainless window:
an old man sprawled on a vast bed.
Suddenly a woman slashes across the frame:
trumpets and blaring bugles crashing
into the white mountain of him.
I never see his face
I always fall asleep before he removes the newspaper
glued to his forehead. In the meantime
the woman has gone down on her knees.

Occasionally night overtakes me in strange hotels
heavy plush curtains close on a cenotaph
I'm gripped by a singular disquiet
as
from a balcony
I see
other curtains hiding life from view
like the unfurled wings
of a stuffed bat.

I flee back to the curtainless flat
the old man with the newspaper
the only animated thing
to give some warmth.
How much longer can this performance go on?

Visions International
translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Angela Jianu

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ARS AMANDI

I'm looking for Ovid's grave
it's always there
in Constanta
part nectar
part hemlock
an ancient Greek goblet
delivered over by the Romans
epistles to the emperor
love letters
in bottles
thrown into a dead sea.
Ovid
with his doctorate in despair
awarded by the Getae
and the Thracians
honores
honors
half a coin from a world away.
"Under this tombstone lies
the singer of the tenderest loves
by his own art undone.
Stop, traveler,
if thou didst ever love,
and for him pray
that he may sleep in peace."
With a freedom fighter's zeal
we each went near
and each of us prayed
but the emperor would not hear
yet mercy has a thousand hands
a ticket agent eyeing a deserted station
Ovid's grave is here to redeem
our hope once more
that prehistoric ghost
dreamed up somewhere
in this land.

Omnibus, Exquisite Corpse
translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Angela Jianu

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REMEMBER

When the mirthful monkey of chance
wakes up
and declares her wish to fill your life
with colored hours
quickly pull something over your face and start humming a lullaby

Translated into English by Heathrow O'Hare

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TO A POET

he has gotten 13 cats
but I won't tell you his name
we met while roaming about the castle by chance
once on the terrace even, on a Tuesday, as I remember,
when the storm had broken several windows
usually I would catch a glimpse of him at dusk as he was
slouching towards the railway station
his train was always leaving in the morning
but he used to walk those 5 miles
then he would huddle himself up in a passenger lounge
he had long made friends with the station
I still am unable to say if he has ever enjoyed the crowds
I think they have kept death away from his poems
just long enough to allow one of his
13 cats to give birth

Translated into English by Heathrow O'Hare

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LATE CALL

Full pages, a life in shreds.
At a sheepfold in Bucovina
a man with blue spectacles moving softly away,
huge dogs tethering their tongues to my hands,
the hillside like a sledge,
and a brook like tar calling me into the valley.
There in lukewarm water I shall go to sleep.
I have a cheque in my purse for the most exacting boatman.
What good mothers the black waves!

Translated into English by Fleur Adcock

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PERSEPHONE

"Here let thy clemency, Persephone..."
Ezra Pound

The light was streaming from her body
as from a flowering lime-tree.
On the frozen earth
she left a hopscotch grid
of strange vegetation.
A more powerful sun
held her,
a calm sun,
and I had entered
under her jurisdiction.

Like gray stones

which only the sea
still bothered with
seemed to me
suffering,
fear,
hatred.

I followed her without shyness,
I shared the light with her;
she was a temple
in which the desecrators
suddenly embraced
faith.

Once more the time draws near
for your coming,
tender doctor,
as if an old eyelid
had lifted from an eye
of clear memory.

Persephone,
my sister,
what is the nature of your clemency?

Translated into English by Fleur Adcock

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FAMILY WEDNESDAY

The three of us support a very thin cloud.
Mother is dyeing things black
(and counting the plots in the cemetery).
I creep into the house
at two in the morning.
Mother (who in her sleep can sense
even a twitch of the cat's tail)
sighs.

Every day we take turns
to keep vigil
by Grandmother's bed (in a hospital room
on the fourth floor)
and feel sick as we leave.
Sometimes I listen to classical music on the
record-player.
Puffy clouds migrate
through the family air.
My parents take refuge on the balcony,
but the telephone follows them, just as
a summer day is torture for the North.
As early as Sunday morning father announces
to Mother and me
in turn
(and from then on tells us every day)
in a broken, painful voice
matching the beating of his heart:
"On Wednesday the TV film is the Black Tulip.
On Wednesday the TV film is the Black Tulip."
We meet in the parlor
in front of the television
and touch each other's hands carefully
as if
the three of us supported
a very
very thin cloud.

Translated into English by Fleur Adcock

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BREATHING SPACE

my right hand is a tube,
and my right eye,
and my mouth, a rusty tube in the morning

when I try to clean it with two fingers
the poison-grass buds in it.
last summer in the sea your ankle was a hot pipe
with what desperation I caressed the smooth shinbone –
a navel cord connecting me to the world, your ankle,
a magnetic tube holding me still in life –
and even still I pass through deep places like a wave left behind
and even still it is only through this that I breathe.

Translated into English by Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin
In *When the Tunnels Meet. Contemporary Romanian Poetry.*
Edited by John Fairleigh. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1996.
