

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*

*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.

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