

from TOUCH TO AFFLICTION

by Nathalie Stephens

le poème affligé

Let me tell you some of what I have seen. Amid the languages I speak, and those I keep concealed. Things I have touched upon with my hands, and those that have eluded me.

Through a window in an old wooden door the sky breaks away at dusk. What remains is a dark stain where none was. And my inability to recall the shape of things before.

There is a telephone with a cut cord, and a dog lying heavily against the wall. It is or is not cold.

I walk from one end of a room to another.

I walk from one end of a garden to another.

What remains after seeing is a short burst of colour, gone.

After suggests something other. Other than what is before me.  
This letter, your name.

Language that is conciliatory rebukes the body. I am offended by  
the nature of words, and their ability to dissuade. Often I am most  
offended by the words of your language. The language in which I  
write. The language which sets my body against itself. And  
dismantles the present.

In your language, there is illusion, but there is no hope.

In hope, there is illusion.

And in illusion, there is the stuff of language.

I have acquired a viola that in time I will learn to play. Do you still listen to Górecki? I have also acquired the score to *Already It Is Dusk*. In it, Górecki notes: "The viola is always 'en dehors', but not too much." Do you know what this means? I believe it to mean that the viola for Górecki is much as some poets intend language to be. The viola is always underneath the music. Underneath is the suggestion of itself. It is outside. In another language I would say: *désincarné*. But I would not say: disembodied.

Affliction is a capital word. Affliction is the blood of poetry.

Don't misunderstand me. Through the window in the door, I see the afflicted sky. It is afflicted because it is out of reach. For a poet, this, too might be the nature of language. And it might also be the nature of the poet, in relation to other humans. For the poet must make language into two things simultaneously: sobriety and passion. Does not Buber do the same through the able pen of Walter Kaufmann?

"And to gain freedom from the belief in unfreedom is to gain freedom."

Where is the poet who will return language to the body?

Where is the body that is prepared to receive language?

I am sending you plays by Koltès. I think that you will know what I mean.

finitude lamentation

Who cries out anymore?

This arms askew dwindling and furore.

This inconsequential.

This river torn weary and walking behind.

This fantasy touching the curve of gentle.

This finitude lamentation.

This gridded this untraced stoppable.

You bent a body into language. It ran arrested ran.

---

In your language the present erases itself. You stand in a place and the present comes and you are not standing there anymore. The book in your hand is a grimace on the face of some reader. And your hand is a stone in water. These are pictures, maybe. Inaccuracies. What you remember is a small square of paper organized into pixels. Your language does not remember. And when you say "What was" you are already falling away.

L'oubli is the word you are searching for. The word outside of which you disappear. I am again with your language and le vide. Le vide is not nothing. Your language is not traceable. So what does your present hold?

Forget leaving. This is as I might speak. But want is otherwise  
configured. And there is the question of memory. The timing is all  
wrong.

Your language might be a stilled beat. An inopportune rhyme.  
Afflicting these bodies. I say these because we are several at  
least and we will populate our deaths as we populate our cities:  
Feverishly.

broyer as with centuries or meat

The thing came at me in this precise way: As the face. The face on a small body perhaps. As the small body falls from the arms. Face first into snow. Snow that is red. This is the face of Lévinas and as such your language without a philosophy of hunger is incomplete. Without a philosophy of touch. Without a philosophy of greed. And so on.

The face of Lévinas appears as two eyes commanding murder and fragility.

Touch what wants touching and you will break along side the thing you would hold if in your language there were moments for breath and the capacity to yearn.

Lévinas is not your language.

And you have yet to speak.

Leaving. Not so much as having.

You wish yourself out of arms' reach the way you wish yourself out of your city. There is logic in bereavement but decry worship. The way your city was thrust from your thigh and what was wine ran like night through bone that is implacable. The night sky is cock-hard moving over you. And water on your tongue is nothing like fire, but dirt.

This theology bears the weight of every untraceable sadness.

What your language touches moves. What moves beckons murder. And what is murdered scratches a worn whisper onto all of the faces.

Geography is conversion. A measure for what is lost.

We were looking up at ourselves.

With our texts full of faces and our hands like water getting into everything.

Do you know the word *broyer*?

As with stone or chicken gut.

In it is the turbine with its axle and teeth. Death count. Or le cri.

*Broyer* as with centuries or meat.

*Broyer* as with morality.

A garden beneath a darkening sky.

A dog heavily.

Lévinas cries out, why wouldn't he?

Geography is perversion.

Lyon, 1987: Klaus Barbie's name is on la place publique and in so many mouths. Like this against a French tonsil and chattering teeth. Summer is the dismantled scaffolding of the Palais de Justice. This is as time reconstitutes itself. For Klaus Barbie it is always summer. Even with the heat he does not weep. He smiles for the camera. And the little girl who is eighty-one.

All this time his hair grew and saliva wet his tongue.

What is relevant is not memory but its absence. Is not habit but its betrayal. Is not innovation but humility. Is not love but anguish. Is not literature but history. Is not language but sediment. Is not amnesty.

Is grievous.

Is grievous.

Is grievous.

---

“These bodies”.

Those were not your exact words. I took them into me.

The ocean is a measure for grief. What drowned letters and memory, relief.

Relief. How France became l'Algérie and the winter that brought snow carried the shame of leaving (being made to leave) and the detritus of speech. The remaining words stuck to the tongue. The thing burns in and outside of us. And our blooded knees are the only possible trajectory. This reaching along and touching through. As though our bodies were simpler even than desire or the ability to speak.

Speak. It begins in the throat of a boy and the refusal to ancestry.  
It begins in the names on the registry and the subsequent ratages.  
And these ashes on my desk and the voices that end. What has  
language to offer that the earth cannot hold?

These are simple diversions. Great claims of hope or no hope at  
all. And our mouths move around sounds shovelled into the  
ground below.

Our century (this one, and the one before) appeases itself with  
confession.

We are ungainly and stubborn.

We have read too many books.

We mistake ourselves for those we abandon.

We deign to fall.

What permissions have been granted?

What languages received?

Kristof and her truncated country on a mouth in short sentences.  
Dib and his displaced ancestry, the culled strangers on unnamed  
streets. (France, always France).

Am I that progeny?

What brings the body tremble or weep?

What language with its difficulties enables me to speak?

We are new to suffering. What we claim as home is fantasme. We  
are weak. We speak clumps of hair and loose teeth. We peer at  
things from below with our arms to steady our fall. Our  
superstitions are motivated by greed. And our desires by rote.

Our passions capsize on fallow ground.

Is this what we call English? The permission to retreat?

Your language deliberately.

August 1988 : The Golfe de Gascogne collapses red tile two hands and a small room atop a flight of stairs. The mountains : proximity. The beach : sleet. Un baiser : reproachful. What dreamt what meant keep. A measure too full of landscape. Fistfully. You imagine sunswept fellatio feux d'artifice. Il n'en est rien.

Rien. What drowns in winter survives sleep. What wrists on a quai de gare bleed. What holds sound in a small tile again and over. Fisted. A city. Impossible to keep. J'ai. Je n'ai.

This is as I dreamt language. This is dream is séquelles is fine is fine is ask me anything from now on. Not chronology.

And what you will believe.

Simply : The city turns grey and disappears. The body wants récompense for the things it sees. It goes on seeing. Your language accounts for none of it. We are young. We are only witnesses if we are willing to speak. But what language will hold us? What temperament for fugitif?

L'abattoir or la place publique. Slaughter is someone's reverie.  
And we are wallowing in meat.

Place is manquement is not missing.

What we touch is aberration but we go on touching and what we  
turn over reddens in the sun and weakens in the rain and  
everything is bone and everything is dust and brick is water that is  
weatherworn so that we drown in masonry and trowel is layering  
and we bury ourselves willingly and we touch the façades of so  
many buildings with our fingers catching nails and our skin  
unbleedingly the door posts the iron scaffoldings the misery and  
what trembles (ce qui tremble) is not pretty and nostalgia is idiocy  
is yearning is mediocrity is not pathos or figurative is this wall is  
how many missing and what have we done?

Plainly: I have counted my dead and they far outnumber me.

we are accountable for what we aren't told

Your language like your country. I speak poorly.

I haven't deference for the past. Nor its beginnings. Our languages behave as poorly as do we. This talk of peace. The mouth's ecology. Devastation.

And I want to know : Who are we defending?

What do we learn?

Of futility. Of machines. Of discouragement. Of condemnation.

A country is four corners of earth draped over bone and as much  
silence as water can hold. Initiations to war.

Homeland is patrie and the sands are incensed by the crush of  
feet and the city groans from centuries of stone and our voices  
erode what sense to l'oubli. Forget it I say. Oublie. What  
everything we know. I am reading Saïd and the bones break in my  
feet. Like this walking into the century and dry earth underneath.

Let me explain.

I am ignorant of my enemies and my face has many origins.

NOS LANGUES SONT INCOMMEN  
SURABLES ET MEURTRIÈRES

(OUR LANGUAGES ARE INFINITE  
AND MURDEROUS)

held (abrégé)

Ne demandez pas après moi. Cette faim. Une infâme solitude. L'arrimage de l'être au passage des êtres enclins à la disparition. À l'horreur que nous sommes vous et moi. Un corps géographiquement situé au bord de sa peau aux bords rabattus d'un hameau, à la torpeur d'une baise insignifiante, ces boutures de désir colmatées en une peau barbare. On a deux mains pour ramasser ce qu'on laisse tomber, pour tout jeter à l'eau. Figure-toi que j'ai honte pour nous et je touche à ce qui ne bouge. Comme c'est crasseux le lieux où tu vas. | Fistfully. Mouthfully. The place you take into you is an injury and my prints are all over you. This is your city. Your tawdry. As though speaking of seeing could correct calamity. Our limbs are not limber. And geography cringes at the encroachment of further geography. Find the text that granted permission, the book that wanted burning, the mouth that needed closing, the hand held before an expressionless face. Brazen and stumbling.