MUNDUS ARTIUM

A Journal of International Literature and the Arts
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The Editors
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Eva Gerlach, Dochter

De doden zijn in mijn kind opgestaan.
Hun hoofden hangen nog slap, op de tast
zoeken zij in mijn armen een houvast,
zij worden luid terwijl ik voor hen zing;
honger beweegt hen naar mijn borst, zij vinden
steunpunten voor hun handen, herkenning
maakt hun pupillen klein nu zij de blinde
ogen van de foto's naar mij opslaan.

Eva Gerlach, Dochter

Wereld die ik haar aanpraat, zekerheden
vaster en talrijker dan ik bezit.
Zij wijst en mijn tong, kwispelend, rent van dit
naar dat, heen, terug: niets alles wat ik weet,
leg ik bij haar neer zonder aarzeling.

Kleurloos aanspoelsel, bloot gedachtending,
onmogelijk staketsel, dat ik bekleed
om haar te dienen, met een schijn van rede.
Eva Gerlach, *Dochter*

The dead are resurrected in my child.  
Their heads hang limp still, groping fingers ask  
for something in my arms that they can grasp.  
They try their voices while I sing to them.  
As hunger moves them to my breast their hands  
find their support; now recognition trims  
their pupils small, as eyes from photographs,  
all wide and blind, look up and into mine.

Eva Gerlach, *Dochter*

World I talk her into, certainties  
more firm and numerous than I possess.  
She points and my tongue moves, hurries from this  
to that, there and back: nothing, all  
I know I bring her as my offering.

Bleached-out shore debris, bare thought-thing,  
unlikely trelliswork; to serve her well  
I cover it with semblances of sense.
En el sótano
los inservibles muebles
los libros ilustrados por la fatua humedad
los retratos heridos que esperan
el abrazo de polen de la resurrección
las alas ebrias
los espejos sin cara
una mano
pudriéndose
Y esa pequeña puerta
cerrada por la nieve
(que no cayó
jamás)
David Escobar Galindo

NOCTURNES OF TRAFALGAR PLACE

III

In the storeroom
useless furniture
books with designs by the fatuous dampness
pictures distressed expecting
an embrace of resurrecting pollen
the tipsy wings
the faceless mirrors
a hand
rotting

And that small door
closed by the snow
(that never
did fall)
David Escobar Galindo

NOCTURNOS DE TRAFALGAR PLACE

Una ciudad no es sólo un río
de visceras ardiendo:
de súbito solloza
dentro de mí
como misterio de carnicería:
higados y riñones
y sesos y membranas
goteando por mi aliento
de catador de aires felices, irredentos.
Y en el río quemado por la estación irreal
caminan otros días, abandonados al verdor del fuego,
como si regresaran a las imágenes de la tortura
a través de una calle de manos aleteantes.

David Escobar Galindo

ESTAMPILLA POSTAL

La ciudad encendida
millares de ojos fijos
abiertos en lo oscuro
mientras el sol rey de oros
se solaza en vajillas y vitrales
Una ciudad donde los niños llueven
como si Dios soltara las compuertas
y empezara el diluvio
cuarenta días y cuarenta noches
en la celebración del reinado del hambre.

San Salvador, 1974
David Escobar Galindo

NOCTURNES OF TRAFALGAR PLACE

A city isn’t just a stream
of burning viscera:
           it is a sudden throb
inside me
as in a butcher shop mystery:
kidneys, livers,
brains and membranes
dripping from my breath
so aware of joyous, unredeemed air.
And upon the burnt river of the unreal season
travel other days, forsaken to the fire’s vigor,
as if they returned to the images of torture
across a street of quivering hands.

David Escobar Galindo

PICTURE POSTCARD

The city aglow
thousands of eyes opened
staring in the darkness
while the sun king of diamonds
lounges with stained glass and serving dishes
A city where children rain
as if God opened the gates
and the flood began
forty days and forty nights
in celebration of the reign of hunger.
              San Salvador, 1974
Reiner Kunze

KLEINE RECHENSCHAFT NACH MAHREN
(für Jan Skácel)

Was bleibt übrig, als sein heil zu suchen
in der demut der kleinen wortanfange

Das ende schreibt sich immer klein

Das ende, wenn mit kлярrendem gestange
der sarg hinausgeschoben wird

Gott wohnt nicht bei den glocken,
und hoher reichen wir nicht
Reiner Kunze

A SMALL ACCOUNT OF MORAVIA
(for Jan Skacel)

What's left but to seek well-being
in the humility of the small beginnings of words

The ending is always written lowercase

The ending, when with clattering rods
the casket is pushed out

God doesn’t live near the bells,
and we don’t reach any higher
A DAY TO DISPOSE OF

It was still light for quite a while after he got home in the late afternoon; about one hour. In the pale sky a few swallows would dash here and there over the rooftops.

One day towards the end of winter Tu returned from work feeling quite tired. He lay down and watched the swallows fly up and down the alley. The birds flew vigorously. They were not flying from a need for displacement. They approached suddenly; then, just as abruptly they would dart away. Their movements seemed pointless, merely to demonstrate their skills, to show off unexpected twists and turns. How many were there? Three or four or more? It was difficult to say. They were everywhere, a joyous sight above the alley inhabited mostly by poor people. In the afternoon when everyone was feeling tired and let down at the end of a day, Tu lay there on his back, watching the swallows until the street lights went on.

It began to rain lightly as the shadows grew darker. When Tu finally got up to make his way to the back yard where the water jar was, the rain wet his hair and the handle of the water scoop was soaking wet when he grasped it.

It continued to rain lightly and silently while Tu ate his supper and even after, when he had finished eating and had lain down to read his papers. He had no idea when the rain stopped.

It was late evening; the moon was bright and cool. In the moonlight the lime-covered burial mound was a startling presence in the front of the house, to the left of the entrance. The old tombstone was covered unevenly with moss. In the moonlight the walk looked even more rough and uneven; the walls of the houses were irregular patches of light and dark; a few pieces of clothing still hung on the lines in the backyards; there was a child's tricycle. Not much of a setting in which to contemplate the moon. But all the same, a moonlit night stirred within Tu an expectation, an excitement, an impatience, even, which he could not explain.

He recalled an old poem, an old verse lurking somewhere, long lost in his memory:

"Twenty-four bridges, one moonlit night"...

Twenty-four bridges? What could be more seductive than those dark and light areas of the walls in that small alley, than those discarded old tires
lying at the end of the walk, those pieces of clothing on the line? Nothing much, but then?

Tu wanted to stay awake but it was very late. Some time later he woke up. Somewhere a car was snarling like a wild beast. It was trying to move forwards, then backwards, probably having difficulty turning around. Often at night, people would come to the house next door to gamble and now they were leaving. Headlights reached into Tu’s room. In the beams he saw that it had begun to rain again, half-heartedly. It was probably a little past curfew time. After the car was gone, the entire alley was quiet again. Not much of the night was left and Tu went back to sleep.

He awoke again. This time four flarebombs shot up at the same time and hung motionless in mid-air somewhere over Tan Cang, the new harbor. Their light even invaded his mosquito net. He noticed with surprise the seams of his net; he even saw the sheet of newspaper he had put on top of it. The four flarebombs burned brightly and vigorously for a moment and then went out. There remained the cool, blue light of the moon. The rain had stopped. There was not much time left.

Later he woke again and heard, far away, the lonely popping of a pedicab someone had just gotten started. The curfew was over. There was not much more time now but he needed some more sleep.

Just as he feared, as soon as he had dozed off, he heard the street vendor crying, “HHHOOOTTT BBRREAD!” That was the end; from now on, time no longer belonged to him.

* * *

Dawn broke like an arm raised high, its fist ready to fall. Tu was afraid of dawn. Each morning was a menace. Every morning was the beginning of a hard day. Every day was a day of work. One thing followed another, one minute, one hour followed others, continuously until evening.

“HHHOOOTTT BBRREAD!”

He opened his eyes. Mist was a vague white outside. He heard the heavy low voice of a pigeon. The heavy, low cooing brought the dawn into deeper silence. Tu wanted to stay in bed longer, to listen to the pigeon but it was already six-thirty, already late. There was no more time for him. There was one hour to go through a few morning exercises, wash his face, shave, go to the toilet, eat breakfast, get dressed and then, after a cursory examination of his bicycle, to jump on it and head for the office.

Tu couldn’t afford to get up ten minutes too late. The low cooing of the pigeon, reflections on a quiet, grave morning didn’t belong to him. The “moonlit night” of the half-remembered poem didn’t belong to him.

“Twenty-four bridges”? Where were they? What were they like? The
nights of moonlight—he thought of them and it made him yearn for something distant, unreachable. Tu imagined himself alone, wandering, drifting about in that far away, unreal place. But the “twenty-four bridges” didn’t belong to him either. He imagined those narrow canals where water ran between rows of trees in the gardens of Lai-Thieu and Cho-Giua, and those forests of thorny bamboo in the highlands of central Viet-Nam, and long, moisture-laden clouds carrying innumerable droplets of water, heavy lazy clouds dragging themselves over the mountain pass of Hai-Van. Tu imagined the countless little crooks and crannies of the city crawling with life, a busy life full of the unexpected, the life of a hard-pressed people. He imagined the small Chinese coffee shops, the public squares and gardens of Saigon and Cholon, those places where he could sit around and kill time. But those places didn’t belong to him. Tu couldn’t choose to be there or anywhere else. There was only one place for him to be and that was at the office.

Dawn had arrived like an arm raised high, about to strike and he bent his head, ready to receive its blow.

Tu bent his head that morning as he had bent his head the morning before. He had been doing that day after day, year after year. Not one day belonged to him, just for him to dispose of. Making a living was robbing him of his life.

If he decided to go ahead and interrupt the chain of days, to free himself so that he would have the time to do what he enjoyed doing most, to live according to a schedule he arranged himself, then he would be out of work in a few days and in trouble. He did not have the power to stop the flow of things. Looking ahead, far into the future, he could not see the time when a day would come that was his to use and to spend, that belonged to him. On the letters and papers which passed between offices and agencies there was often the phrase, “for your office to take appropriate action.” But for him, in the days past and in the days ahead, there never had been and never would be a time to “take appropriate action.” A life did not exist in which he could “take appropriate action.”

Tu imagined what it would be like. He would stay and watch the renovated folk theater until he was satiated around midnight; then he would walk over to Cho Cu, the old market, to down a bowl of fish soup at one in the morning; then he’d go home to read a couple of chapters of an old Chinese novel. After that he would bring out his stringed instrument and play away, his favorite pieces, over and over, until two or three. Only after that would he go to bed. It would be hardly dawn yet when the Cu bird would utter its low, sad cries in the dew-filled garden and he would listen to those sounds, following each one for a long time, thinking of the damp and chilly dew. He would curl up more tightly in the warm shelter of his blanket and if his wife was in the mood, they’d make love slowly, leisurely. Then he would roll over
and sleep again. Outside the gentle, early morning sun would dissipate all
the dew and warm up the air. It would be past nine when Tu got out of bed.
He would check out all those ambulatory sellers of breakfast who filed past
his front door but none would have any food left: hot noodles gone! crab and
vermicelli gone! rice and pork gone! He would burst out laughing, contented,
and rush outside to buy a piece of French bread and an egg. Then he would
make himself a cup of coffee. . . . Breakfast over at ten-thirty, lunch at
three p.m. That would be a day of “taking appropriate action.” A hypothetical
day. A magnificent day. A magnificent session of lovemaking at dawn, a
magnificent breakfast at nine in the morning.

Tu continued to imagine his extraordinary day and his movements in
that day to his heart’s content; like a fish in the water or a bird in the sky he
would dart here and there, making rounds and twists; he would turn the
usual order upside down; he would destroy the usual rhythm of life. He
surrendered to his imagination with passionate abandon. But where was
that day? As far as he could see ahead, it was nowhere.

Nowhere in the future could he see that day, but sifting through the
past, he knew that probably he had had one, certainly when he was a child
and his father was working to support everyone. He had had those days
when he could do whatever he wanted to. In those days his father had been
much like he was now, trying to take each day as it came. His father had
struggled until the last day when he no longer had enough strength left;
he had staggered, shuddered like a boat about to sink; he became still at
exactly four one afternoon. What a pity! The sun was already tilting in the
sky. If only he had lasted two more hours he would have seen the evening
swallows flying all over the neighborhood and he would have felt contented
and at peace, like a horse that has reached its stall.

Then Tu had begun working. No, it wasn’t then that he no longer had
free days. He remembered those nights drinking with friends until two in
the morning. Then there was that day his colleague, Hung, got married and
he was, for some reason, so despondent he walked the streets all night. And
that time he was learning to play the flute! He would wait every night until
after eleven to climb up to the upstairs porch and blow into his bamboo flute
until one or two. There were weekends when he brought his girlfriend to the
Cape and returned directly to his office at eight the Monday afterwards. And
then there were days when he seemed to be permanently fixed in dark movie
theaters with one or another of his girlfriends.

Looking back, Tu was bewildered. One day had followed another. Every
day was a day of work—during that entire time he had worked for a living:
yet, when he was younger, he had been able to discover a gap in that continual
flow of work, a small gap here or there where he could play the flute and
court his girl. It was remarkable.
But then, those gaps became rarer and rarer, harder and harder to find.

One day, during one of those gaps, Tu had met a nice girl. She gave him her address, one of those alleys in Khanh-Hōi. He noted it carefully. When they met again she borrowed a book from him. He was all set later, under the pretext of getting his book back, to come to her house. He had never gotten around with it. Then someone told him she was in love with a young sergeant. How much in love he didn't know and couldn't imagine. But since she was seeing someone else, he left her alone. Some time later he met her again and found she had changed. There was a sadness, a far-away look about her. Yet she was as friendly towards him as before. They became closer and began to meet daily. He learned then that the young sergeant had lost his leg during a military operation. Naturally he wanted to know what was going on between them, if they had any plans. But he couldn't very well ask her, and any comments she made were vague, enigmatic, “It's rough you know.” He thought she meant that she didn't have the heart to leave him, yet she was no longer in love. It seemed to him she felt sluggish about the whole thing, or even nonchalant, almost indifferent. He thought that was another aspect of pain and his heart went out to her.

One rather chilly day they lay under a sheet together. She had her arms wrapped around her head, over the pillow. When he looked at her she made a motion as if to unclasp her arms and bring them down. He gently pressed down her arms, keeping them around her head. She resisted weakly, then smiled and gave in. She closed her eyes. While he moved she kept them closed, her face calm. Then she took his lower lip into hers and sucked on it, softly, with concentration, like a child. Tu felt at peace. He didn't rush, didn't wolf it down. He was gentle and slow and deliberate. She went on sucking his lip, the same soft and slow way. After awhile he stopped moving and looked down and saw that her eyes had opened just a tiny crack. Within that tiny opening her irises shifted back and forth, gleaming. He felt she was insecure and suspicious, prey to some dark disarray. But he went on and she shut her eyes tightly, yielding completely. They were silent all the time. Once in a while he paused, catching again that glimmer of insecurity, of something near panic in that barely perceptible opening between her lids, but he went on again with his lovemaking.

When it was over, they lay quietly next to one another. The room was in semi-darkness. The air was chilly and time seemed to stretch infinitely. Once in a while Tu was aware of some thought, lonely and listless, like a fly weakly tracing a curve through the space of a quiet afternoon. He remembered that he had come on his friend's body and that thought filled him suddenly with an immense tenderness, a deep and infinite love for her. Her nonchalance, her indifference, summoned their counterparts hiding within him. Unexpectedly then, Tu had come face to face with his growing weariness.
days ahead of him were threatening. He feared them. He felt that from now
on he was going to have trouble finding those cracks, those gaps in time when
he could enjoy a moment of pleasure, of quiet next to his friend. He did not
want to ever part from her.

Not long afterwards, Tu asked the girl and they were married.

Then, as he had expected, the days came and went and he could no longer
find one of those moments of leisure. The time came when he could not even
imagine or conceive of finding such a moment. Just fending off the rush of one
single morning was enough to leave him exhausted. One day would pass, and
as Tu caught his breath, another day was there again.

Now, from its hiding place somewhere on the horizon, the morning sun
sprang out and flared against his door, shouting: “Here, another day!” And
Tu acquiesced: “Yes.” He was unhappy, he complained, but he could do
nothing except follow and obey and answer, “Yes.”

From now on, until the end of his life, until the last moment of the human
race, throughout that long, long stretch of time, the shouts would go on one
after another: Another day here! Another day! Another here! Another!
Again! Again! The screams and their devilish echoes reverberated, bursting
eardrums, hammering into brains, the sounds of fright and hopelessness.

At a certain age, one could still drag one’s feet and stop here or there just
for a fleeting moment of rest and joy. But one could not rest for long and in the
end one capitulated.

In the late afternoon, at the end of winter, Tu came home from work, lay
down and watched the swallows darting here and there in the sky above
his neighborhood; he worried that night would come too soon, and soon
disappear again.

He watched until the swallows had flown away, unaware that rain had
begun to fall lightly in the darkness. The rain was falling soundlessly, but
after awhile enough water had collected to pour down his roof in thin strands.

Across the alley, over on the porch of Mr. Hai’s house, a girl in a white
dress was playing with the rain which dripped down from the thatched roof.
She probably thought that in the deepening twilight no one saw her or would
pay attention to her. She stretched her hand out under the thin strand of
water; she teased each drop as it hung at the end of a piece of thatch. She
was smiling to herself. Tu understood. A girl of that age was not really playing
with the rain dripping from the roof. In reality she was smiling at some joy
bursting inside her. She had come out where she thought no one could see
her so that, all alone, she could contemplate this delicious turmoil. She teased
the drops of water as if she was playing with a puppy or a kitten, while her
mind was elsewhere, absorbed with some distant image, some secret
yearning.

Tu thought of when he had been going with his wife. How much in love
had she been with that young sergeant? Had she ever been like the girl across
the alley? He was still bothered by what he did not know. How had she loved
the sergeant? All he knew about her was her attitude towards him. He
remembered how she had closed her eyes so that he could not see her. Each
had his own torment, his own world and there was no trespassing. There
was acceptance but it was of a passive kind, made of pain and sadness.

But even all that was far away now. He would never again find those
gaps in time when he could watch a woman close her eyes, or when he could
play his flute in the middle of the night, or listen to the Cu bird at dawn, or
breakfast in mid-morning.

The girl over at the thatched house could still get away with that. “Keep
at it,” he thought. “Go on, play with the rain drops, yes, go on, and tomorrow,
before or after your eight hours of work, try to save a few hours so that...yes,
keep at it.”

The rain had stopped. The moon shone over the burial mound, hiding
half of the girl's legs. Tu had to think about getting a night's sleep now so
he would be prepared and ready for the arrival of the dawn. If not, he would
not have enough energy left in his body, and he would not be able to make
it through another day, just as, finally, his father hadn't made it.

The young girl could stay up. He wished her all the world.
Rodica S. Jackson

POST-CARD

To write a poem twisted
like the bull

in Eurydice's heart,
enduring

like Antigone's hatred,
criminal

like the red sky
and its big nothingness
Veronica Volkow

EL TEDIO DE EURILOCO

“Más allá de la gruta de Caribdis,
mas allá de los aullidos de Escila,
hay un punto en que el barco se desploma del océano
y de los que han caído ya ninguno regresa.”
Euriloco pensaba sentado en la cubierta
mientras sentía la brisa que hacía ondear las cuerdas
y palpitar las velas como ijares;
miraba aquí y allí, distraído y cansado,
los cabellos de Ulises, las manos de un esclavo
y oía desatento el rechinar de la madera
y el rumor de las voces en esa lengua antigua,
que es hoy una música perdida.
Allí estuvo el mar entre los remos,
transparente y elástico,
pero a los ojos de Euriloco sería
casi invisible de monótono
y la jornada larga, muy tediosa,
y nunca pensó que a cada instante
eso mar evanescente y poderoso
se le alejaba inalcanzable
y era imposible ya el regreso.
THE WEARINESS OF EURYLOCHUS

"Beyond the cavern of Charybdis, beyond the howls of Scylla, there is a point where the boat leans from the ocean and of those who have fallen, none now return."

Eurylochus was thinking, seated on the deck while he felt the breeze that had been strumming ropes and urging the sails to quiver like a horse's flanks; he was watching here and there, absent-minded and tired, Ulysses' hair, the hands of a slave and he carelessly heard the creaking wood and the murmur of voices in that ancient tongue which now is a lost music.

There was the sea between the oars, transparent and elastic, but to the eyes of Eurylochus it would be nearly invisible from monotony and the long voyage, so tedious, and he never thought that at each instant the evanescent and powerful sea was sliding away, past his reach, and the return was already impossible.
Veronica Volkow

LA LAVANDERA

Siente ásperas las manos como peces,
ciegos peces que golpean contra la piedra,
incesantes contra la piedra durante años y años;
mira la noche atravesada de ojos,
húmedas miradas deslizantes,
rostros escurridizos, mudos, que se pierden,
miras de muchachas de piel tersa,
miras marchitas de las madres cansadas.
El día termia y las gentes regresan a sus casas
y el agua cae del grifo monótona como una canción,
el agua ha perdido la forma de los tubos,
ha perdido la memoria de su cauce en la montaña
y ha construido su camino a golpes,
cercada en sus obstáculos,
como los pies, como los ojos, como las manos.
Mira las sombras que le gente arrastra,
sombras en los muros, las esquinas, las calles,
tintas fugaces que marcan los caminos,
caminos desesperados, afanosos,
que buscan sólo quizá una permanencia.
Veronica Volkow

THE WASHERWOMAN

She feels her hands, scabrous as fish
blind fish striking against the rock,
incessantly against the rock for years and years;
she watches the night pierced with eyes,
humid, slippery glances,
mute faces shifting, losing themselves,
the brilliant glances of girls,
languish of exhausted mothers.
The day ends and people return to their houses
and water runs from the faucet monotonously as a song,
the water has lost the shape of tubes,
lost the memory of its ditch in the mountain
and has pounded out its road,
besieged by obstacles
like the feet, like the eyes, like the hands.
She looks at shadows people drag along,
shadows on the walls, corners, the streets,
fugitive ink that marks the beaten roads,
desperate roads, laborious,
looking for only perhaps a constancy.
Veronica Volkow

EL INICIO

X

Entre tu cuerpo mi cuerpo
es la huella de tu cuerpo
es el ojo de tu cuerpo
escucho tus brazos
tus dientes
tu lengua
tus piernas
con todo mi piel escucho la forma de tu cuerpo

entre mi cuerpo tu cuerpo
es otra forma de tu cuerpo
como el agua que es hielo incandescente
o el grifo de la llama en las cosas
tu cuerpo
grita en mi cuerpo
y eres un grito grieta
un grito astro
un grito mudo de carne en mi cuerpo

dime ¿no es el fuego
la semilla de los mundos distantes
la extraña y súbita forma de su cercanía?

I

El hambre es el primer ojo del cuerpo
el primer ojo en la noche del cuerpo
el ojo con que la carne mira por primera vez la carne

y una sangrienta oscuridad nos enreda hacia dentro
Veronica Volkow

EL INICIO

X

Your body enters mine
which is the print of your body
it is the eye
the sound of your body
I hear your forearms
your teeth
your tongue
your thighs
I hear the shape of your body with all my skin

my body enters yours
it is another form of your body
like water is incandescent ice
like intoxication breaking out of flames
your body
cries out in my body
and you are a loosed scream
a shouted star
a mute cry of flesh in my body

tell me isn't the flame
the seed of distant worlds
the peculiar and sudden form of your nearness

I

Hunger is the first eye of the body
the first eye in the night of the body
the eye with which flesh initially recognizes flesh

and a blood red darkness spreads out its nets
el ojo
con que te miran mis pies mis dientes
mis dedos

con que te miro como hace siglos
en la noche del tacto

esa noche
tan parecida a la noche del pez
del tigre
de la serpiente
tan parecida a la primera noche de la vida

somos la bestia otra vez al cerrar los ojos
y nuestros cuerpos se abrazan como fauces
aferrados al sabor de las formas
the eye
with which my feet stare at you
my teeth
my fingers

with which I watch you
eye
in the night of touch
while centuries have passed

that night
so much like the night of fish
tiger
snake
so much like the first night of living

we are the beast again about to close its eyes
and our bodies grip each other like gullets
seizing the flavor of shapes
Veronica Volkow

AUTORRETRATO MUERTA

Los ojos ya no miran
están como ríos muertos,
marchitas las raíces
y yemas de los dedos
donde crecía la tierra
follaje piel adentro.
Desalojaron las sombras
los laberintos del sueño
y enmudeció la oreja
como un pájaro muerto.
El bosque de las venas
fue secando su incendio
y el ovillado viento en los alvéolos
quedóse quieto.
Ya no siente siquiera
el mar que se vacía,
la oscuridad que encierra,
mientras que en otro orbe inconcebible
bajo el agobio inmenso de la noche
se concentra el carbón de las estrellas.
Veronica Volkow

DEATH'S SELF PORTRAIT

Already the eyes aren't watching,
they are gone like rivers,
like those withered roots
the fingertips
foliating beneath the skin.
Shadows broke out
from labyrinths of dream
and the ear fell mute
as a dead bird.
The forest of veins
went parching its fire
and the tangled wind in the alveoli
remained quietly.
Already the ocean scarcely feels
it is emptying;
the darkness, that it is locked away,
meanwhile on another inconceivable sphere
under the immense crouch of the night
the coals of stars concentrate.
Veronica Volkow

LA MEMORIA

Mientras yo avance,
hay otra que sigue mi pie
y copia mis movimientos como una sombra,
una que abre la puerta
por la que va he salido,
otra que amanece ayer,
otra que nace
y otra que llora.
Hay un momento en que me estoy enamorando
siempre
y en que pierdo el amor,
momento sucesivo:
circulación de una película invariable,
agua cincelada que ya no se derrama.
Otra siempre
calza la huella de mi pie
y otra a su vez hay que calza su huella.
Cientoés que simultáneo avanza
en todos los instantes
irrigando ruinas y despojos:
viejo ferrocarril de la memoria
que cruzas por un túnel de excavadas madrugadas,
conoces sólo un cielo diluido
Veronica Volkow

MEMORY

While I step forward
there is someone else who mimics my stride
and copies my movements like a shadow,
another woman who opens the door
I have just left by,
another who arrives at daybreak yesterday,
another that is born
and another who weeps.
There is a moment I am falling in love
constantly
and in which I lose love,
successive moments:
recycling of the same film,
engraved water that no longer spills.
Always another
puts on the track of my foot
and another, at her turn, sticks her toes into the footprint.
Millipedes that simultaneously advance
in every instant
irrigating ruins and slough:
old railroad of memory
cutting through a tunnel of excavated dawns,
you know only a diluted sky
and the gesture; I act in another time,
repeating kisses, steps and muttering.
Life already wasted in living it.
So they sought for a beautiful maiden throughout all the territory of Israel, and found Abishag the Shunammite, and brought her to the King. The maiden was very beautiful; and she became the King's nurse and ministered to him; but the King knew her not.

Kings I, 3-4

It was a searing summer. The last one of my youth.

Tense, concentrated in the challenge preceding combustion, the city burned in a solitary, dry and dazzling flame. I was in the center of the flame, dressed in black, proud, feeding the fire with my blonde hair, alone. The men's gazes slid over my body without staining it, but my haughty reserve imposed respectful greetings. I was sure of my power to subdue passions, to purify everything in the inflamed air that surrounded but didn't consume me.

Nothing changed when I received the telegram; the sadness it brought me didn't affect at all my sense of being in the world—my uncle Apolonia was dying at the age of seventy some years; he wanted to see me for the last time, since I had lived in his house like a daughter for a long time, and his inevitable death caused me sincere sorrow. All of this was perfectly natural, and no shudder, no augury made me suspect anything. I made quick preparations for the trip in that same untouchable center in which the static summer enclosed me.

I got into town during the siesta.

Walking through the empty streets, my small suitcase in hand, I started falling into the private daydream of reality and time that excessive heat produces. No, I didn't remember, I was only partially alive, like back then. 'Look, Licha, the amapas are blooming.' Her voice, clear, almost childish. 'I want you to have a dress made for the sixteenth, like Margarita Ibarra's.' I could hear her, feel her walking next to me, a little stooped over, agile in
spite of her corpulence, happy and old; I kept walking straight ahead, eyes half closed, storing my vague, tender anguish, sweetly subdued by the company of my aunt Panchita, my mother’s sister. —“That’s all right, child, if you don’t like Pepe . . . but he’s not a bad young man.”—Yes, she said it right here, in front of Tichi Valenzuela’s window, with that joy of hers, innocent and evil. I walked a little further, the bricks of the sidewalk having clouded over, and when the peal of the bells resonated, heavy and real, ending the siesta and announcing the rosary, I opened my eyes and took a real look at the town: it wasn’t the same one, the amapas hadn’t bloomed and I was crying, in my mourning dress, in front of my uncle’s house.

The portico was open, as always, and at the rear of the patio, bougainvillea. As always. But not the same. I dried my tears and didn’t feel I was arriving, but, rather, saying good-bye. Things seemed immovable, like in a memory, and the heat and the silence wilted everything. My steps resounded, unfamiliar, and Maria came out to meet me.

“Why didn’t you say you were coming? We would’ve sent . . . ”

We went directly to the sick man’s room. When I entered I almost felt cold. The silence and shadows preceded death.

“Luisa, is it you?”

That affectionate voice was becoming quiet and would soon turn completely mute.

“Here I am, uncle.”

“Blessed be God, now I won’t die alone.”

“Don’t say that, you’re going to get well soon.”

He smiled sadly; he knew I was lying, but he didn’t want to make me cry.

“Yes, child, yes. Rest now, make yourself at home and then come keep me company. I’m going to try to get some sleep.”

Smaller than before, thin, toothless, lost in the huge bed, floating unconsciously in what little was left of his life, he tormented one like something superfluous, out of place, like so many dying people. It became obvious upon stepping out into the hot corridor, and instinctively taking a deep breath from the light and air.

I started taking care of him and felt happy doing it. The house was my house and many mornings, while cleaning, I hummed forgotten songs. The calm surrounding me came perhaps from the fact that my uncle no longer awaited death as an imminent and terrible thing, but abandoned himself to the days, to a future more or less short or long, with the unconscious sweetness of a child. He recounted his life with joy and took pleasure in the hope of leaving his images in me, as grandparents do with their grandchildren.

“Bring me the small box that’s in the big dresser. Yes, that one. The key
is under the table cover, next to San Antonio, bring it also."

And his sunken eyes revived with the sight of his treasures.

"Look, I gave your aunt this necklace on our tenth wedding anniversary; I brought it in Mazatlán from a Polish jeweler who told me, I don't know how many stories about Austrian princesses and sold it to me at a high price. I brought it hidden inside my gun holster and didn't sleep for a moment in the stage coach, afraid that someone might steal it . . ."

The afternoon sun made the stones sparkle, young and alive in his arthritic hands.

"... this ring, with such an old setting, belonged to my mother; look carefully at the miniature in the living room and you'll see she's wearing it. Cousin Begoña was whispering behind her that a boyfriend . . ."

Those women in the pictures, whom he had seen and touched, once again talked, breathed. I imagined them, and I thought I understood the meaning of the family jewels.

"Have I told you that we went to Europe in 1908, before the Revolution? You had to go by boat to Colima . . . and in Venice your aunt Panchita wouldn't let go of these earrings. They were too expensive and I told her: 'They were made for a queen' . . . The following day I bought them for her. You can't imagine it because it happened long before you were born, but back then, in 1908, when we were in Venice, your aunt was so young, so . . ."

"Uncle, you're wearing yourself out, rest."

"You're right, I'm tired. Leave me alone for awhile and take the box to your room, it's yours."

"But uncle . . ."

"Everything's yours and that's the end of it! . . . I can give away whatever I want."

His voice broke in a terrible cry: the illusion vanished, and he suddenly found himself again at the brink of death, at the moment he was saying goodbye to the things he most loved. He turned in bed, leaving me with the box in my hands and not knowing what to do.

Other times he would talk to me about the 'year of hunger,' the 'year of the yellow corn,' about the plague, and he would tell me very old stories of murderers and ghosts. Once he even sang a song from his youth which shattered into pieces in his decrepit voice. But he was making me the heir of his life; he was happy.

The doctor said yes, he did notice an improvement, but that we shouldn't get our hopes up, he was incurable, it was a matter of days more or less.

One afternoon, darkened by threatening storm clouds, when I was taking
the wash off the clothesline in the patio, I heard María scream. I didn’t move, listening to that scream as if it were a thunderclap, the first of the storm. Then silence, and I, alone in the patio, motionless. A bee buzzed by and the rain didn’t break out. No one knows as well as I how terrible the omens are that hang over a head looking skyward.

“Lichita, he’s dying! he’s gasping!”

“Go get the doctor ... No! I’ll go ... call doña Clara to come over and stay with you while I’m gone.”

“And the priest ... Bring the priest.”

I ran out, fleeing from that unbearable moment, from that deaf and asphyxiating imminence. I went, came, returned home, served coffee, greeted the relatives who started arriving already partially dressed for a funeral, ordered candles and relics, continued insanely running away so I wouldn’t have to perform the only duty I had at that moment—be at my uncle’s side. I questioned the doctor—he had given him a shot just for the sake of it, but everything was useless. I saw the priest arrive with the Eucharist, but not even then did I have the strength to go in. I knew I would feel remorse later—Blessed be God, now I won’t die alone—but I couldn’t. I covered my face with my hands and started praying.

The priest came and touched my shoulder. I thought everything had ended and a chill ran up my back.

“He’s calling you. Go in.”

I don’t know how I reached the threshold. It was already night and the room, lit by a visit light, seemed enormous. The furniture, blown out of proportion, somber, and a strange stagnant air around the bed. My skin turned to gooseflesh; through my pores I breathed the horror of it all, of death.

“Go to him,” the priest said.

I obeyed, going up to the foot of the bed, without daring to look at even the sheets.

“It’s your uncle’s wish, if you don’t have any objections, to marry you in articulo mortis, with the intention that you inherit his wealth. Do you accept?”

I stifled a scream of terror. I opened my eyes as if to take in all the horror that room enclosed. ‘Why does he want to drag me to the grave?’ ... I felt death brushing my very flesh.

“Luisa ...”

It was don Apolonio. I had to look at him—he could barely articulate the syllables, his jaw sagged and to talk he moved it like a ventriloquist’s dummy.”

“. . . please.”

And he fell quiet, exhausted.

I couldn’t stand it any longer. I left the room. That wasn’t my uncle, it
didn't look like him . . . Inherit, yes, but not only his wealth, the stories, life . . . I didn't want anything, his life, his death. I just didn't. When I opened my eyes I was in the patio and the sky was still cloudy. I breathed deeply, painfully.

"Are you ready . . . " The relatives came up to ask me when they saw me so upset.

I shook my head. Behind me the priest talked.

"Don Apolonio wants to marry her at the last moment to name her his heir."

"And you don't want to?" the old servant asked anxiously. "Don't be a fool, you're the only who deserves it. You were a daughter to them and you've killed yourself taking care of him. If you don't marry him, his nephews in Mexico City won't give you a thing. Don't be a fool!"

"It's a fine gesture on his part . . . 

"And then you'll be a rich widow and as virgin as now," a young and clever cousin laughed nervously.

"His wealth is considerable, and I, as your distant uncle, would advise you to . . . "

"Thinking about it carefully, not to accept is a lack of charity and humility."

"That's true, that is really true." I didn't want to give the old man a last pleasure, a pleasure that after all he should be thankful for, because my young body—of which deep down I was so satisfied—didn't have any kind of link with death. I became nauseous and it was the last clear thought I had that night. I awoke as if from a hypnotic stupor when they forced me to take the hand covered by cold sweat. My stomach wrenched again, but I said, 'Yes.'

I vaguely remembered that they had surrounded me the whole time, that they all talked at once, that they took me, brought me, made me sign and answer. The impression that night left on me forever was of a malefic crowd spinning rapidly around me and laughing, grotesque, singing.

I'm the little widow who must obey

and I, in the center, was a slave. I suffered and couldn't raise my face to the sky.

When I realized it, everything was over, and on my hand shined the braided ring I so often saw on my aunt Panchita's ring finger—there hadn't been time to get another.

Everyone started leaving.

"If you need me, call. In the meantime give him the drops every six hours."

"May God bless you and give you strength."
“Happy wedding night,” my young cousin whispered in my ear with a wretched giggle.

I returned to the sick man. ‘Nothing has changed, nothing has changed.’ At least my fear hadn’t changed. I convinced María to stay with me to watch don Apolonio, and only when I saw dawn breaking was I able to control my nerves again. It had started raining, but without lightning, without thunder, quietly.

It continued drizzling all day, and the next, and even the day after that. Four days of agony. We hardly had any visits besides the doctor’s and the priest’s; on such days no one leaves their house, everyone withdraws and waits for life to start again. They are spiritual days, almost sacred.

If at least the sick man had required lots of attention my hours wouldn’t have seemed so long, but what could be done for that sluggish body was very little.

The fourth night María slept in the next room and I had to stay alone with the dying man. I heard the monotonous rain and prayed unaware of what I was saying, drowsy and fearless, waiting. My fingers grew calm, lingering over the rosary’s beads; and as I caressed them, through my finger tips entered that alien yet personal warmth which we leave behind in things and is returned to us transformed—companion, brother in whom we anticipate the other’s sweet warmth, unfamiliar and known, never felt and which inhabits our bone marrow. Softly, delicately, my nerves relaxed, flesh light, I gradually fell asleep.

I must have slept many hours: it was almost dawn when I woke up; I could tell because the lights were off and the electric power plant stops working at two in the morning. The room, barely lit by the oil lamp burning on the bureau at the foot of the Virgin, reminded me of the wedding night, my wedding……. It had been a long time since then, an empty eternity.

From the depths of the shadows came don Apolonio’s fatiguing and broken breathing. Something was still there, but not he; the persistent and incomprehensible mortal remains stubbornly insisted on staying here without purpose, with no apparent reason. Death causes fear, but life mixed, permeated with death, produces horror which has very little to do with death or life. Silence, corruption, the stench, the hideous deforming, the final disappearing, that’s painful, but it reaches a climax and then starts giving way, gradually diluting in the earth, in memory, in history. And this couldn’t—this terrible pact between life and death manifesting itself in that useless death rattle—couldn’t continue eternally. I could hear him clearing his unfeeling throat and it struck me that it wasn’t air entering the body, or rather that it wasn’t a human body inhaling and exhaling it; it was
a machine that puffed and made capricious pauses, playfully, to kill endless
time. That wasn't a human being; someone was playing with that snoring.
And the horror, against which I was helpless conquered me—I started
breathing to the broken rhythm of the death rattle, breathe, suddenly cut,
choke, breathe, choke ... no longer able to hold back, until I realized that
I had fooled myself about the meaning of the game, because what I truly felt
was the suffering and the asphyxiation of someone dying. In any case I went
on, on, until there was nothing but breathing, nothing but inhuman breath,
nothing but pure agony. I felt more calm, terrified but calm—I had torn
down the barrier, I could simply let myself go and wait for our mutual end.
It seemed that with my surrender, my unconditional alliance, that would be
resolved quickly, it couldn't continue, it would've fulfilled its goal and its
persistent search in the void.

No good-bye, not even a sparkle of pity for me. I continued the mortal
game for a long time, from a place where time no longer mattered.

The shared breathing became more regular, more calm, though also
weaker. It seemed to return. But I was so tired I couldn't move, I felt lethargy
definitely rested inside my body. I opened my eyes. Everything was the same.

No. Far away, in the shadows, there's a rose; alone, solitary, and alive.
It's there, outlined, bright, its petals fleshy and light, radiant. It's a beautiful,
simple presence. I look at it and my hand moves and remembers how it
feels and the simple action of putting it in the vase. I looked at it then; now
I know it. I move a little, blink, and it's still there, full, exactly like itself.

I breathe freely, on my own. I pray, remember, doze off, and the un­touched rose mounts guard of the light and the secret. Death and hope transform.

But now dawn is breaking and in the clear sky I see, at last!, that the
rainy days have ended. I sit for a long time watching through the window
how everything changes as the sun is born. A powerful ray enters and the
agony seems to be a lie; an unjustified joy fills my lungs and I smile in spite
of myself. I turn towards the rose like an accomplice, but I can't find it—the
sun has withered it.

The luminous days, the enervating heat returned; people worked, sang, but
don Apolonio wouldn't die, rather, he seemed to get better. I kept taking
care of him, but no longer happily, my eyes lowered and unburdening in
the effort to serve him perfectly all of my remorseful and exacerbated
abnegation—what I desired, with full awareness, was for it to end soon, for
him to die once and for all. The fear, the horror of his gaze produced in me,
his touch, his voice, were unjustified, because the tie joining us wasn't real,
it couldn't be; and, nevertheless, I felt it like a load and through kindness and remorse I wanted to unburden myself.

Yes, it was plain to see that don Apolonio was getting better. Even the doctor was surprised; he couldn't explain it.

Precisely the morning I sat him up for the first time, propped up against the pillows, I caught that look in my uncle's eyes. The heat was suffocating and I almost had to lift him all the way up in my arms. When I got him comfortably in place, I noticed it—the old man was staring with strabismal fixedness at my heaving breast, his face distorted and his trembling hands unconsciously reaching for me. I moved away instinctively, turning my head aside.

"Please, close the shutters part ways, it's too hot."
His nearly dead body grew warm.
"Come here, Luisa. Sit next to me. Come."
"Yes, uncle," I timidly sat huddled up at the foot of the bed without looking at him.
"Don't use uncle, call me Polo, after all, now we're much closer relatives."
There was a sarcastic trace in his tone.
"Yes, uncle."
"Polo, Polo," his voice was again sweet and terse. "You'll have to put up with many things; I'm old and sick, and a man in this condition is like a child."
"Yes."
"Let's see, say, 'Yes, Polo'."
"Yes, Polo."
That name pronounced by my lips seemed an aberration, producing in me an irresistible repugnance.

And Polo got better, but became irritable and fastidious. I realized he struggled to be again the man he had been before; but no, the one reviving wasn't the same man, it was someone else.

"Luisa, bring me... Luisa, give me... Luisa, fix my pillows... bring me water... move my leg..."
He wanted me to be around him all day, leaving, approaching, touching him. And that fixed stare and the distorted face of the first day reappeared each time more frequently, superimposing themselves on his features like a mask.

"Pick up my book. It fell under the bed, on this side."
I knelt and stuck my head and almost my entire torso under the bed, but I had to stretch out my arm as far as possible to reach it. At first I thought it had been my own movement, or perhaps the rubbing of my own clothes, but with the book in hand, ready to come, I froze, crushed by what I had felt
would come, had expected—the rupture, the scream, the thunder. An anger never felt before shook me when I was able to believe that what was happening was real, and his trembling hand was taking advantage of my astonishment to become more assured, heavier, amusing itself, wandering unrestrained, feeling and exploring my hips, a fleshless hand that stuck to my flesh and shook it with pleasure, a dead hand impatiently looking for the hollowness between my legs, a hand by itself, disembodied.

I got up as quickly as I could, my face burning with anger and shame; but when I confronted him I forgot about myself and entered, like a robot, into the nightmare—he laughed quietly, with his toothless mouth. And then, suddenly becoming serious, with a coldness that left me terrified:

“What's wrong! Aren't you my wife before God and before mankind! Come here, I'm cold, warm up my bed. But take your dress off, you're going to wrinkle it.”

What followed I know is my story, my life, but I can barely remember it like a disgusting dream, I don't even know if very short or very long. There was only one thought that kept me going at the beginning: ‘This can't go on, it can't go on.’ I believed God couldn't allow it, that he would prevent it somehow, He, personally. So feared before, now death seemed the only salvation. Not Apolonio's, no, he was a devil of death; but mine, the just and necessary death for my corrupted flesh. But nothing happened. Everything went on suspended in time, without any possible future. Then, one morning, without any luggage, I left.

It proved useless. Three days later they told me my husband was dying and he was calling me. I went to see my confessor and told him my story.

“What keeps him alive is lust, the most horrible sin. That's not life, father, it's death, let him die!”

“He would die in despair. That can't be.”

“What about me?”

“I understand, but if you don't go it will be murder. Try not to give him the opportunity, entrust yourself to the Virgin, and remember that your duties...”

I went back. And sin pulled him out of the grave again.
Struggling, struggling without rest, I was able to win after years, to overcome my hatred, and at the end, at the very end, I also overcame the beast—Apolonio died peacefully, sweetly, he himself.

But I was never able to be again the person I was before. Now vileness and wickedness shine in the eyes of the men who look at me and I feel like the occasion of sin for all of them, worse than the most wretched prostitute. Alone, a sinner, totally consumed by the implacable flame enveloping all of us who, like ants, inhabit this cruel, endless summer.
Dve reči tek da se kažu dodirnu se
I ispare u nepoznato značenje
Koje s njima nikakve veze nema
Jer u glavi postoji jedna jedina reč
A pesna se piše samo zato
Da ta reč ne bi morala da se kaže
Tako reči jedna drugu uče
Tako reči jedna drugu izmišljaju
Tako reči jedna drugu na zlo navode
I pesma je niz oslepljenih reči
Ali je ljubav njihova sasvim ocigledna
One žive na račun tvoje komotnosti
Sve su lepše sto si nemočniji
A kad iscrpeš sve svoje snage kad umreš
Ljudi kažu: bogamu kakve je taj pesme pisao
I niko ne sumnja u reč koju nisi rekao.

Branko Miljković

KRITIKA METAFORE
A CRITIQUE OF METAPHORS

Two words hardly spoken touch each other
And fade into an unfamiliar meaning
That has nothing to do with them
For the mind knows only one word
And a poem is written for only one reason
To avoid having to say that word
Thus words teach one another
Thus words conceive one another
Thus words lead one another astray
A poem is a sequence of blind words
But their love is quite plain
They live at the expense of your ease
They grow more beautiful as you grow weaker
And when you exhaust all your strength and die
People say: My God the poems he wrote
Yet no one suspects the word you never spoke
Branko Miljković

KAP MASTILA

sta sve može da stane u kapi mastila
jedno nenapisano sunce
jedna nepotpisana ptica
jedan nenacrtani cvet
i jos ce ostati toliko
da se napise epitaf:

dve su zvezde zanocile
u cijem srcu u cijoj noci
zatim su dva cveta nikla
iz cije krvi iz cije krvi
i dve su ptice poletele
iz cije glave u ciju noc
dve zvezde dva cveta dve ptice
niko ne zna cije su
niko ne zna odakle su
Branko Miljković

DROP OF INK

The things a drop of ink can hold
an unwritten sun
an unsigned bird
an unpainted flower
and still enough ink remains
to write this epitaph:

two stars lodged
but in whose heart in whose night
then two flowers bloomed
but from whose blood from whose blood
and two birds took wing
but from whose head into whose night
two stars two flowers two birds
no one knows whom they belong to
no one knows where they've come from
Branko Miljković

BEDA POEZIJE

Reci mi nešto što je šuma
Reci mi nešto što je more
Ko zna šta je to što treba reči
Bos i gorak potucaš se od reči do reči

Vatra gorča od dima
pod čelom ti gori
Ona će ti pribaviti mnoge počasti
Ako ne sagoriš pre vremena

Ali ako budeš hteo
Da učiniš stvarnim tude reči
Da pohvališ tude srce
Onda ćeš zažaliti što si pesnik

Jer pesma se ne piše ona se živi
Pesma nije pesma ako nije radosna
Ko nikad nije pohvalio tude srce
Taj se predao na milost i nemilost rečima.
Branko Miljković

THE WRETCHEDNESS OF POETRY

Tell me something that is a forest
Tell me something that is a sea
Who knows what it is that needs to be said
Barefoot and bitter you straggle from one word to next

A fire more stifling than smoke
Blazes in your mind
It will bring you many honors
If you don’t burn out before your time

But if you try
To make another’s words come true
To give praise to another’s heart
You’ll be sorry you’re a poet

For a poem isn’t written one lives it
A poem is no poem if it doesn’t rejoice
Those who’ve never praised the hearts of others
Have placed themselves at the mercy of words
Branko Miljković

Tanasiju Mladenovicu

PRIJATELJU PESNIKU

Srecan ko ispisujuci pesme i posvete
Izbegne njihovom prejakom smislu razumljivosti pogubnoj
Cudovistima lepote noci beloga stiha
Bolesnoj vatri koleri rdavo voljenoj reci.

Srecan ko zivi posle svega sto je rekao
Srecan ko izade iz opevane sume ko prebrodi opevano
More i opsta mesta od svega strasnija
Srecan ko svoju pesmu ne plati glavom

Ali suvise vesta pesma cemu koristi
Ona sve izvrda donji i gornji svet slaze
Zednoga te preko vode prevede
Ismeje ravnotezu kao sto papagaj opsuje nebo
Branko Miljković

TanasiJe Mladenovic*

TO A FRIEND AND POET

Happy the man who writes dedications and poems
Yet escapes their overwhelming sense, their fatal lucidity,
The fiends of beauty, nights of blank verses,
The ailing fire, the plague, words loved poorly.

Happy the man who lives on after his words,
Who flies the rhymed forest, sails the rhymed sea,
Surmounts those vague places dreaded the most,
Happy the man whose song doesn’t cost him his life.

But what’s the use of too artful a poem
It evades you, deceives the nether and upper worlds
It outwits you, makes a mockery of harmony
Like a parrot blaspheming the skies.

*Serbian poet and editor of a number of literary journals
Carmen Vazquez-Vigo

CLEANING DAY

Juana arrived punctually, as usual. She pulled on her glasses, tied the apron around her waist and shook the dress which was waiting for her so that the remainder of the basting would fall out.

"Shall we try it on?"

Elisa made a gesture of indifference.

"If there's no other way ... Today I woke up tired, I don't know why. I was supposed to do a general cleaning, as I do every Thursday, but it was all I could do to dust the furniture. Mother, with a worried look on her face, asked me anxiously if I were ill."

The seamstress sucked the end of the thread she had cut with her teeth and as she tried to slide it through the eye of the needle, she said:

"Pedro Ribera has come back."

She paused, to dramatize her words.

"Didn't you know?"

"No."

"He must have come back because of the inheritance"—continued the woman, knowingly, gossiping. "Since his aunt died last month and he is the only heir ... I don't think it amounts to much, but something is something. And, they're saying, things didn't go well for him in America."

The needle threaded, she sighed:

"You dream, you go away and then ..."

"Where is he?"

Juana looked up, not understanding. It was difficult for Elisa to clarify her question, but it was necessary.

"He, Pedro. Where is he living?"

"At the Continental Hotel. Doña Amelia saw him when his bags arrived. Do you know that Doña Amelia's daughter is getting married? In July, to a German who's settled in Palencia. I have to make him six nightshirts and ..."

Eliza couldn't listen any longer.

"I'll see you next Thursday, Juana."

Sharply, the woman replied:

"All right. But if you don't want to try the dress on today, don't come to me later saying you're in a hurry."

When she had closed the door behind her, Elisa went to the window and
opened it wide. Ever since she'd heard Pedro's name she had felt an unbearable pain. "I'm going to be ill. Now, any minute, I'm going to collapse on the floor. No one will be able to help me, no one will hear me. And mother isn't coming home until nine. She will wonder what happened to me and she will never know. That is the way, simply, those who are alone should die."

The fresh air revived her. She breathed more easily and the pain became the weariness of convalescence. She was almost sorry. It would have been as good a time as any to die. Why later? Waiting, still. Waiting still longer. For what?

She went to the bureau, opened a large box and took out the package of letters tied with a gold cord. It was the one which had decorated the box of candy he gave her for her birthday, the last one they had spent together.

Everything in the box smelled of lavender. She was always embroidering little bags of batiste she later filled with perfumed leaves. Sometimes she gave them to her friends and they agreed that Elisa was very refined and very accomplished.

She read several paragraphs from different letters, even though she needn't have done so. She knew every word by heart, the date and the place where they were written. "Be patient," Pedro's handwriting was even and small, like that of a careful child. "Soon I'll send for you or I'll come back and get you. But bearing in mind the cost of the passage it would be better if you came alone." He was a practical man. To this Elisa replied that they could marry by proxy, but he never specified any dates nor did he mention the matter again. "This climate doesn't agree with me," he said in a letter dated in Quito, "it must be the altitude. I am considering the possibility of taking over an important business in Sao Paulo."

She had imagined herself living, successively, in Ecuador, Brasil, later in Argentina. Six years of waiting and changes in the dream, until none of her letters was answered. Love provided her with ingenuous explanations. "The letters were lost or perhaps I wrote something that displeased Pedro. He's very busy, he doesn't have time." And in the end, destiny now accepted: "That American climate, so unhealthy, it must have killed him."

She wept without stopping. Irritated, her mother scolded her:

"Don't be a fool, child. There are other men in the world. There's no need to go further than the pharmacist's son, who looks at you with such admiring eyes."

In order not to worry her, Elisa stopped crying. And going out, and seeing her friends. She read, looked out the window for hours on end, as if waiting for someone and she embroidered little batiste bags, each more exquisite than the last, to imprison the lavender she picked in the garden.

Now Pedro had returned, he was near, she had something to feed her hope. "He hasn't written to tell me because he's afraid I would be angry. It
would have been natural, but if he comes to talk to me I won't approach him about the past. It will be as if we had seen each other just yesterday. Everything the same, as before."

She looked at herself in the mirror hanging over the bureau. She saw her aging face, a few grey hairs among the chestnut. "I must go to the hairdresser. She will give me a tint. A discreet color, something that looks natural. And I'll call Juana and tell her to hurry and finish my new dress."

She ran to the telephone trying to remember, in her confusion, the seamstress' number. "Although perhaps Pedro won't ever come," she admitted, frightened. "He won't dare. It's hard for a man to admit he's failed. I should go, now, right now."

Impetuously, in order not to think, she put on a blue dress—Pedro used to say it was her color—and wound a bun at the nape of her neck. She didn't have that many grey hairs, after all. And it was still shiny, like when she was a girl. She could almost hear her mother's voice: "If you brush your hair a hundred times every night . . ."

The street was empty. It had begun to get dark and there were stormy gusts of wind. Elisa quickened her pace. If she stopped, she would lose her courage. She had to run, to shorten the distance separating the moment Pedro went away and the place where he now was.

It seemed to her as if someone else were speaking when she asked the concierge at the hotel: "Don Pedro Ribera?"

She was shown into a small room decorated with two ceramic pots holding frail palm trees and several prints, scattered haphazardly over the walls, representing hunting scenes. In one of them a pack of hounds was tearing apart a stag. The artist had not spared the realistic detail of the animal's intestines hanging from the dogs' throats.

"Were you asking for me?"

The voice she heard behind her didn't sound like Pedro's, either. It sounded faded, distant. Elisa turned. "Yes, it is he. Heavier and wearing glasses. He didn't wear them before. They make his eyes look smaller. And I would have sworn he was taller. Whenever anyone gains weight that happens, it's as if he were shrinking."

She hated herself for having such thoughts and she held out her hand with an enthusiasm which, strangely, she didn't feel. Pedro, embarrassed, shook it and said:

"What a surprise . . . Sit down."

They sat down, across from one another, in some easy chairs of an indefinite color.

"You look wonderful."

"No . . . "

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“And your mother?”
“She’s well.”
A waiter went by carrying a tray with glasses and bottles.
“Would you like something?”
“No, thank you. You have something, if you want.”
“Between meals it’s not good for me. I have a regimen. The food over there
ruins everyone’s stomach. You know it’s very spicy?”
She nodded as if she knew perfectly well what is eaten in each South
American country.
“You were very kind to come see me. I was going to stop by tomorrow,
before I leave.”
“You’re leaving already?”
“Yes.”
“Abroad again?”
“No, to Palencia. I heard about a good deal.”
Elisa had to make an effort not to laugh. It was funny that the word
Palencia had been mentioned twice in the same day and for such different
reasons. Only to be polite she asked:
“What was it like, all these years?”
“There was a little bit of everything. Life is difficult and since I’m not
disposed to content myself with just anything . . .”
“Of course.”
A bellboy came over to tell Pedro he was wanted on the telephone. It was
a relief for them both. Elisa stood up.
“Well, I’ll go now.”
“I can have them call me back.”
“Don’t bother. Good-bye.”
They shook hands. His hand was damp and Elisa let go of it quickly, with
dismay.
“Give my regards to your mother.”
“I shall, thank you.”
It was dark now and had begun to rain. Large warm raindrops were
falling. Elisa lifted her head, breathing deeply and a raindrop wet her lips.
She licked it delicately, as if it were the juice of an unknown fruit.
In spite of the rain she walked slowly, happy, free. “Tomorrow I’ll do a
thorough cleaning. I’ll wash the curtains, I’ll shine the silver, I’ll throw away
everything that’s useless. The little bags of lavender, for instance. And the
letters.”
Petre Ghelmez

VUIET STELAR

Potoleste viscolul acesta, mama,
urletul acesta, de felina turbata,
care ne izbeste in fata,
sugrumindu-ne cintecul
cum sugrumi gitul unui cocos
rasucindu-I sub aripa fierbinte.

Opreste vuietul stelelor, neiertator,
care suiera-n oase,
precum boabele de griu
in virtejele morii.
Limpezeste copacii si pietrele,
si aplee riului, mama,
dind la o parte
valorile grele, de muschi incileit,
de pe boturile pestilor
inalbiti de luceafar.

Curma vintul acesta lin,
care macina fapturile subtiri
ale fluturilor rataciti in lumina.
Spulbera gheata marunta
ce s-adauga-n privirile noastre
odata cu somnul.

Imprastie zgura aceasta aprinsa
ce ne-apasa pe umeri,
cum apasa polenul
in toamna albinelor
ratacite prin bruma.

Daruieste-mi o clipa rotunda
si limpede, mama,
cu boaba de roua,
in care soarele meu se scufunda,
cu-o zare mai mult sa-mplineasca,
nevesnica, spornica ardere.

58
Calm this snowstorm, mother,
this howling, rabid feline
lashing at our faces,
choking our song
like the rooster’s neck
twisted beneath the burning wing.

Stop the roar of stars, the ruthless roar
that whistles in our bones
like the grains of corn
in the wheeling of the mill.
Wash the trees and the stones
and the water of the river, mother,
remove
the heavy waves of tangled moss
from the muzzles of fish
whitened by the evening star.

Still this gentle breeze
that grinds the frail essence
of butterflies straying in the light.
Dispel that fine ice
enhancing our vision
when we sleep.

Shed this burning dross
lying heavy on our shoulders
as the pollen lies heavy,
in the autumn of the bees,
astray in the frost.

Offer me a moment
ripe and clear, mother,
like a dewdrop
into which my sun will dive
to complete, with yet another horizon,
the uneternal, crescent burning.
Vasily Shukshin

MR. CHEREDKO AND THE CIRCUS

A circus came to a small Black Sea coast resort. Mr. Cheredko, resource and development manager, came to this town for a vacation. He found pleasant accommodations and felt completely at ease, so much so that he thought nothing of bawling out the girls at the beer stall for selling warm beer.

Saturday night he went to the circus.

The next day, Sunday, there were three performances, and Cheredko went to see them all. He laughed his heart out when an olive-skinned clown with long hair and a non-Russian sounding name did his tricks. He worried as he watched seven scary lions being chased around the tall cage that protected the spectators by a young fellow in a red shirt who cracked his whip at them. But it was not because of the clown and not because of the scary lions that Cheredko shelled out six rubles for the shows. No sir, not for them. He was touched to the quick by the circus girl who opened the show. She climbed up a rope way up high, and up there she turned, twisted, and rotated her body to the music... Never before in his entire life did Cheredko get so stirred as he did when he watched the limber, fearless circus girl. He fell in love. Cheredko was a bachelor, even though he was over forty. That is to say, he was married once, but something or other went wrong, and he and his wife got divorced. That was a while ago, but since then he felt not so much as contempt for women: he had calmed down a bit and treated them with slight condescension. He was a person of great self-esteem, was quite status-conscious, and knew that once he hit fifty, nothing would stop him from becoming an assistant director of the small furniture factory where he presently worked in the resource and development section. Or a state farm director, if it came to worse. He took evening courses in the agricultural institute and was about to take his degree. He was patient. He was well respected. Time worked for him. “Once I become an assistant director, I’ll get everything, wife included.”

That Saturday night, the night before the Sunday performance, he had difficulty falling asleep; he smoked, tossed, twisted. Half-asleep, he dreamt of strange masks, roaring lions and the brassy music of the little circus band... He woke up several times, each time with the circus girl on his mind, and his heart ached as though the circus girl were already his wife.
and were cheating on him with the wiggly clown.

On Sunday he felt he was at the end of his rope and had to do something. A circus attendant, who would not let anyone in to see the artists and lions, let him know that the girl was from Moldavia, her name was Eve, she earned a hundred rubles a month, was twenty-six years old, and single.

Cheredko left the last show early, drank two glasses of red table wine in a stall outside, and went to see Eve. He paid two rubles to the circus attendant and learned where to find Eve. He stumbled over ropes, cables, and belts for quite some time in the darkness of the circus tent before he stopped a lady for help. She said that Eve had already left and that she did not know where she lived. She only knew that she did not live in a hotel but rented a room somewhere. Cheredko gave another ruble to the attendant and asked him to find out Eve’s address from the circus administration. He drank another glass of wine and went to see Eve at the given address. “Adam is going to see Eve,” he thought to himself. He was not very bold at this sort of thing, was aware of it, and prompted himself as he went up the hill, up and up, to some Zhdanov street where, as he was told, he had to go.

Eve was tired that day and was getting ready to go to bed.

“Hi!” Cheredko greeted her, pulling out a bottle of red wine and placing it on the table. He had given himself a good pep talk on the way and so felt bold and resolute now. “Nikolai Petrovich Cheredko himself. Project developer. And you are Eve, right?”

Eve was quite surprised. She was not spoiled by suitors. In their circus troupe, only three or four people were really popular: the olive-skinned clown, the horseback vaulter, and, somewhat less popular, the Gelikanov sisters, the gymnasts.

“I’m not bothering you, I hope?”

“I was kind of getting ready to go to bed. I got tired today. What can I do for you? I don’t quite understand. . . .”

“Really, you must have had some day, today! . . . Tell me, this circus band of yours, doesn’t it bother you?”

“No.”

“I would turn it down a bit for my liking. It’s way too loud. No kidding. . . .”

“No bother to us. . . . We’re used to it.”

Cheredko made a note to himself that at close quarters the circus girl was not as pretty, but it only helped him to keep his cool. He made up his mind and was dead serious about bringing the circus girl home with him and marrying her.

That she was a circus girl no one would know; they’d keep it a secret.

“Would you be so kind as to allow me to offer you . . . ?” Cheredko picked up the bottle from the table.

“No,” said Eve firmly. “I don’t drink.”
“Not at all?”
“Not at all.”
“Not a teeny little drop?”
“Not a drop.”
Cheredko left the bottle be.
“It was just a writer’s warm-up exercise anyways,” he said for some reason. “I myself drink in moderation. Take my neighbor, for example, a construction engineer. . . . He drinks his last shirt out and doesn’t have a cent left for his hangover the next morning. At the crack of dawn he knocks at my gate, slippers on his feet. I have my own four-room house. The gate, you understand, I bar at night. ‘Nikolai Petrovich, gimme a ruble.’ Vasily Martynych, dear friend, I say, it pains me. Not that I don’t want to give you a ruble—it pains me to look at you. What a waste! A person with higher education, a talented engineer, they say. . . . What are you doing to yourself!”
“What about the money? Do you give it to him?”
“What else is there for me to do? But, you know, I have to give him credit, he always pays it back. But really, who cares about the money. I’ve got a good job paying a hundred and sixty rubles a month plus bonuses—and there are other ways. Money is not the point, you understand. It’s hard to see a person go down. Whatever’s on him, he doesn’t care, slippers and all he goes to the liquor store. . . . People are looking. . . . I myself am about to take a higher education degree. I reckon that obliges one to behave in a certain way. Have you received higher education?”
“Vocational school.”
“Hum.” Cheredko did not understand whether that meant higher ed or not. Although to tell the truth, he did not care. As he was providing her with all that information about himself, he was getting more and more convinced that it was time to skip all that sweet talk and come to the point. “What about your parents? Are they alive?”
“Yes. Why do you want to know?”
“Maybe you’ll drink a little, huh? Just a sip? I feel uneasy drinking alone.”
“O.K., just a sip.”
They drank up. Cheredko drank half a glass. “I should be careful not to go overboard,” he thought.
“You see, the point is, Eve . . . Ms. Eve . . . ?”
“Eve Ignatiev.”
“Ms. Eve Ignatiev.” Cheredko stood up and started to pace the tiny room, one step to the window, two steps to the door and back. “How much do you make?”
“Enough.”
“O.K., so be it. But at some fine moment in your future . . . I beg your pardon, just the opposite—at some tragic moment in your life you’ll slip and
fall from up there to your death. . . ."

"Wait a minute, you . . ."

"On the contrary, dear love, you wait and listen. I saw it all and know what it all leads to, all those lights, flowers, ovation. . . ." Cheredko became terribly excited walking so, up and down the tiny room, and driving his point home, calmly and convincingly. "No, dear lovey-dove, you don't know life. Our kind does; we studied the book of life up and down, and know it in all its aspects." It dawned on him now what he was missing all his life long—an Eve, a girl just like this one here! "Who would want you then? No one."

"Why did you come here? Who gave you the address?"

"Ms. Eve Ignatiev, let me be up front with you, that's my nature. I'm single, a man of solid reputation and position in society. I earn, as I told you, close to two hundred rubles a month. You, too, are single and lonely. . . . I've been watching you for two days. You've got to quit the circus. You know how much you'd get on disability? I can figure it out . . ."

"What's with you?" asked Eve.

"I have a large cedar home—but I'm all alone in it. I need a wife to run it. That is, I need a friend who would bring light and warmth to my house. I want to hear kids' voices ringing through that house and see it filled with joy and peace. I have forty-five hundred rubles in my savings accounting, an orchard, and a vegetable garden. To be quite frank, it is not too big, but more than enough to relax in and get your mind off things. I'm a country boy, you know, and I love digging in the soil. I understand, I'm speaking now in resonance with your art. But believe me, Ms. Eve Ignatiev, your life is no way to live. Here today, there tomorrow . . . You hole yourself up in these here tiny rooms, eat irregularly, always on the go . . . Meanwhile, your golden years fly by. . . ."

"I don't understand, are you proposing to me or what?" The circus girl was bewildered.

"Yes, I suggest you come along with me."

Eve burst into a loud laughter.

"O.K., all right!" Cheredko was excited. "You don't have to take my word for it. I understand. Take a week's vacation without pay, come with me and see for yourself. Take a good look around, talk to the neighbors, visit my job. If it turns out that I've lied to you on any account, I'll take my words back. Your trip, there and back, all expenses I'll take upon myself. Is that a deal?"

Eve took a long merry look at him. Cheredko met her eyes squarely, as openly and as gaily, even playfully. . . . He liked the way he acted, honestly, responsibly, and down to the baseline.

"Oh yes, I'm going on forty-two, I forgot to mention. I'm just about done with my studies at the agricultural institute. I have few relatives left, so no one would butt in. Give it a thought, Eve. My coming here is not a whim
out of the blue. . . . I'm not good at sweet talk, but I know that we would live in harmony, like two birds. I'm not a schoolboy anymore. My purpose in life, as I see it now, is a satisfying job that would allow me to provide well for my family and kids. I promise to love and cherish you and take good care of you. Don't tell me that you're not sick of your life on the road, this bogueumian . . ."

"Boheme."

"Huh?"

"Bohemian. It's spelled with an 'h'."

"Well, what difference does it make? It's all the same. The form, you may say, is different, but the content is the same. I would like to save you from this life. I would like to help you . . . begin a new life, a life physically and morally healthy." Cheredko began to feel deep respect for himself, for his lofty, though soft-spoken, nobility; for his honesty; for his rational, sober outlook on life, his own and others'. He felt completely at ease. "Just imagine you found a man in your life, say, this clown. He may be younger and perhaps more interesting. . . . What's next? You'll go on living like nomads, travelling from town to town . . . is that the big idea? As for kids, get the very ideas of kids out of your head. What do they care! . . ." Cheredko meant the spectators. "They have their laughs and go home to their cozy warm hearths. They all have someone who needs them. And you? You go back to your hole, pardon my saying so. No one needs you anymore. You're sick to death warming yourself up by someone else's fire!" (this phrase he prepared beforehand). "Anyhow, this was a quote. But, really, if you're looking for a heart to make you warm—here it is, take it!" Cheredko pressed his left hand to his bosom. He nearly cried from the emotion that overwhelmed him at this moment and from the burgundy. It would take awhile to describe his feelings now . . . . There was an affection, there was a feeling of the stronger person's superiority and concern; a hero, a victim, and an educator all now dwelled in one person named Cheredko. Some uncanny higher sense, though, suggested to him that he should go no further, that going further would make things worse or would add nothing to the effect. . . . It was time to leave. "I don't wish to keep you up any longer. I'm leaving. You have until tomorrow to think things over. Leave a message for me with the attendant, you know, the one with the wart and the hat. . . ."

"I know."

"Fine. So leave a message with him saying where we would meet."

"Very well, I'll do."

Cheredko shook the circus girl's strong little hand, smiled and patted her on the shoulder with prompting affection.

"Have a good rest . . . I beg your pardon, just the opposite, have a restless little night."

The circus girl also smiled.
"See you."

"No, not a beauty, but quite, quite lovely," thought Cheredko. "And those tiny little downy hairs on her lip! I'll be damned, there's something in it! They say that speaks of a sensual nature."

Cheredko came out on the street and walked for a long time along some semi-dark alleys, not knowing where he was heading. He smiled to himself contentedly. "Not bad at all, pal!" he congratulated himself. "You won the game in two moves."

Later when he was walking down a well-lit street, having had his full share of self-admiration for his swift decisiveness (he simply stunned himself with his decisiveness today), it suddenly occurred to him: "Didn't it happen kind of all too quickly?! Hard to tell, of course, but it came off awfully easy. . . . Who the hell knows, but I sure wouldn't want to be a fool. Maybe they don't think all that highly of her in the circus, maybe she is . . . who knows . . . kind of. . . . I don't know anything about her, and yet here I am, proposing and all. I should've first found out all there is to know about her!"

On the one hand, he was glad to have pulled it off so brilliantly, but on the other hand. . . . He was troubled by the ease with which this woman's heart was won over. The fact that he knew, as it turned out, how to act when it really counted brought him on to another thought: wouldn't it be better to show his true worth at home? After all, there are good women back there, and they're not circus girls, you know. Take this one schoolteacher. She's a widow and a beautiful woman, she carries herself well and is thought of highly at her job. Why not, just tell me, why not come to her one evening, and unload it all on her, in the same straightforward fashion he did today? Didn't he have thoughts about this schoolteacher before? Didn't he? He did, but he was afraid. But what was there to be afraid about? No, really, what is there to be afraid about?

"Well, well, well." Cheredko went all the way to the end of the seafront street to the pier and turned around. Once doubts crawl into your heart, what could be worse? It may very well be that the true measure of really strong individuals is that they know no doubts. Cheredko was eaten up by the doubts. "It is, of course, possible to hide the fact that she is a circus girl, but. . . . How can you hide her nature? There isn't much you can do about covering it up. Her ways, those of a circus girl, will remain. After all, her character has been formed, the kind of character which alienates itself from family concerns, motherhood, and cosy homelife. O.K., I could lie to the people, I could tell them that she was, say, an administrator in a hotel. . . . But could I lie to myself?! Why the hell should I lie to myself! After all, this here blessed virgin Eve has likely seen more such Adams than I've imagined having women in my entire life. Most likely she's tried everything in life, really hot stuff. . . . with those downy, hairy lips of hers." Not doubts now, but remorse and anger.
were eating at Cheredko. He was walking along that seafront street, tightly closed fists in his suitcoat pockets. He walked this way for a long time, not a single peek at the women passing by, completely engrossed in his thoughts. “Well, well, well. . . . Here I am, happy as a lark because I conquered the woman right away! And she is probably thanking her God right this very second for turning up a fool who wants to marry her. Had she been known to be a good girl, wouldn’t some man have been right by her side by this time? She’s twenty-six! Well, Nikolai Petrovich, you asshole, congratulations! Some fair princess you’ve found for yourself beyond the seas. All the clever ones have had a good time with her and then ‘so long, baby!’ But one stupid one is taking her for his wife. And then, it’ll turn out she can’t have kids. Or even worse, she’ll sleep around, get pregnant and tell me it’s mine. And who can blame her, it’s in the system, like alcoholism: a need for titillating sensations. If you want to divorce her, she’ll demand half of the house. And then, pal, try to convince the judge that you took her off the tight rope. It’s like digging in a pile of dirt, you know, and coming across a greatly dented precious little thing at the very bottom of the pile.” The widowed schoolteacher back home came to his mind again. . . . He nearly shuddered at the stupendous mistake he could have made! “Just to think that I could’ve brought this Eve home with me! She would’ve made a couple of scenes in her fashion, and then I’d just shut my eyes from embarrassment, cover them tight and run far away, to the end of the world. Oh boy, I would’ve made the entire town roar with laughter! Oh me, oh my, they would’ve come undone at the seams! Just go back home, you idiot, buy yourself a bottle of red wine, just like yesterday, or, better yet, a bottle of brandy, and a box of good candy, and drop in on the schoolteacher. Have a good talk with her. Remember, she knows who you are, that you’re not a wino, that you’re a responsible guy, and that people think highly of you. . . . Have a real good talk with her. You can do it, as we know now! Pretty soon you’ll have a degree under your belt. So what else is there to keep you waiting?! Lovey-dovey romantic asshole!”

Again he could not fall asleep for a long time. He thought about the widowed schoolteacher. In his mind he was already a married man. . . . He would come home from work and say merrily to his wife, “Fetch the dinner, mamma!” These were the words the senior engineer of his furniture factory used to say, and it always sounded funny. He imagined going to the picnic with his teacher-wife, taking pictures of her. . . . He saw himself drinking a few with his co-workers on the sly in the bushes, and singing “Those were the days” riding a bus. . . . He thought about the kids left home with the babysitter. But while he would still be carousing with the men, his teacher wife would already be rushing home in her thoughts, her heart would leave the picnic and the fun and would be hurrying back home to her kids! She was already home with the kids; he knew, for he watched her through his side-
sight. Whatever you say, damn it, one can yet have a good life! A damn good life!

He sweetened his heart with these dreams so much that the circus girl seemed a distant and unpleasant sin. He tried to sit the circus girl in place of the teacher-wife. . . . No, the circus girl was completely out of place. She did not fit. As she started to dash her eyes from this one to that one. . . . God forbid, no!

“So what should I do tomorrow? Should I forget about going to the circus? That wouldn’t be nice. I showed up, talked to a storm and then what—nothing? No, I’ll go and see her there. I’ll say I’ve been called back to work, got a telegram or something. So, I’m leaving, I’d say, but we’ll write to each other. And that’ll be the end. These remaining few days I’ll try to stay out of her sight. The circus must be leaving town soon anyhow.”

With that thought Cheredko fell asleep. And he slept solidly until morning. He had no dreams.

The next day he spent at the beach getting a suntan. Later, after the circus show had started, he went to the circus.

The attendant greeted him like a dear friend.

“You’ve got a letter!” he exclaimed with a smile bigger than his hat. He waved his finger at Cheredko: “Don’t you be bad to our circus folk.”

He likely wanted to get more money.

“You know what you’re gonna get—nothing! Fatso!” thought Cheredko. “Just look at his mug, it’s gonna pop any minute.”

The letter was placed in an envelope, and the envelope was glued tight. Cheredko slowly headed for the bench, sat down, lit a cigarette. . . .

Under the cupola of the tent he could hear shrieking sounds of the disgusting music, and, at times, the loud laughter of the audience, probably in response to the tricks of the long-haired wiggler.

Cheredko gave a little whistle, leaning over the back of the bench. He held the envelope with the tips of his fingers and waved it slightly in a fan-like fashion. To look at him from a distance, you may think that he gets such envelopes regularly, at least three times a week, and it’s tiring. Not at all. Cheredko was anxious. A little bit. Something inside him, down deep, was shaking. Admit it, the situation was awkward. Granted, he got this idiotic idea to propose to a woman. But why does this poor thing have to suffer when, having accepted it, she is stood up?

Cheredko opened the envelope.

There was not much written on the sheet of paper. Cheredko read it. He turned around to look at the circus. . . . Then he read it again. And then he said aloud, but not too loudly, and with a relief:

“That’s just fine.”

The letter said:
“Nikolai Petrovich, at the age of forty, one ought to be a bit smarter.
Eve.”

And just below it, in a different handwriting, smaller and hurried, it said:

“Are there orangutans in Turkey?”

Cheredko read the second phrase again and laughed:

“A real joker.” For some reason he decided that the second phrase was written by the clown. “A real joker! ... I am a man of conscience, pal. A man of conscience, but you wouldn’t understand it.”

Cheredko got up and went down the street, toward the sea. He was talking to Eve in his mind:

“You say ‘smarter’? Yes, siree, we’ll certainly try. We’ll certainly do our best, Sir Eve. We all wish to be smart alecks, don’t we? But a time comes when something happens. ... As they say, even the clever ones go amiss. So in this case, we’re dealing with ‘amiss’. ... So, you’re giving Nikolai Petrovich a piece of your mind, and it is to be smarter? Ah, my little hairy dove! Although one must give you credit, you’re a past master of rope-climbing. So, who knows, maybe there isn’t a better person, a person better equipped for advice giving: ‘I can see clearly from up here!’ You’d be better off, though, minding the long-haired one. See that he doesn’t slip away with another chick tonight. He may very well go out with another one on his arm, and you’ll be minding your own advice all alone all night long. You can’t afford many such evenings alone by yourself. How could you! One life to live! Your body is still limber, it hasn’t aged much yet. To spend an evening at home all alone? Why, that’s impossible! Positively out of the question! Your kind turns every day into a grabber, ‘pluck the apple of fortune’! Keep on plucking! ... Made over, painted fucking dolls!”

Cheredko dropped the envelope in a garbage can, came out on the boardwalk, had a glass of wine at the stall, sat on a bench, lit a cigarette, crossed his legs and started to look at a humongous steamer, Russia. Next to him he heard a young man talking softly to his girl friend.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to go on a cruise somewhere. ... Far, far away. Wouldn’t it?”

“When you’re on a steamer like this one, you probably forget that you’re afloat. Although when you’re on high seas. ...”

“Go ahead—cruise!” Cheredko unconsciously joined in on the conversation as he kept looking at the steamer. “Go right ahead! ... Fucking babies!”

He felt free and easy sitting there on the bench. The glass of dry wine pleasantly warmed his bosom. Cheredko began to whistle a waltz, “Blue Danube,” softly, just under his breath.
WOMAN

1.

Hand and foot and bowels and heart
Lips and eyes and hair and blood—

Moist lips in broad daylight
Broad daylight overflowing her lips
Raining down a glittering noon

Blood
Women's blood

Life overflowing her lips
In the center of her life, a rock
In the center of the rock, blood
In the center of the blood, ice
In the center of the ice, fire
In the center of the mouth in the center of woman—
The aftertaste of fire

Guilt
The fever of guilt
The heaviness of the fever
The heaviness of the length of the hair,
Of the black of the hair, of the white of the skin
Of the red of the blood

Heavy
You are heavy No
Weighted by you, I am heavy
The fire in the center of woman is heavy
2.

Sword Pierce the sky
Cold dew moon Of a crane’s talons
Pierce Pierce Pierce Egg
Wetness Inside the thin shell

Needle Sews across the sky
The white belly of the needle
Pregnant, with a ray of rage

Blood flows across the sky
Pierce Pierce Pierce Cloud
The sword’s ray of light
In a crack of the cloud’s wound
Pierce Pierce Pierce Me!

Is there any response . . .
Does the sky overflow with wetness . . .
Does blood drip from the red cloud . . .
Is the heart pierced from behind?

but like the sky, out of reach—
Pierce Pierce Pierce Life.

The fire darts
The fire pierces
It flickers, swirls, aches Then
The sky dies
The ray of light dies
A broken sword is left in the hand
And you Die even more
Yoshihara Sachiko

DRUNK

Drinking down a cup of seawater
My jeans sopping wet
As I get up to the beach
It's not because I'm drunk
That right away I stumble
It's because I'm running away from
The bay's flickering seduction
And the waves of regret that are approaching

Blood dripping from my nose
Embracing the rocks
I'll sleep
Sleep just like this
Sleep just like this
Finally at peace
In the warmth of my own living blood
For the first time I am drunk

At the entrance to a long sleep
In the sea's dark roar
With a soft breeze

For the first time rocks are gentle
Nichita Stanescu

MAMA MEA SI SOLDATUL EI

Nu, nu, nu
striga in dureri mama mea, nascindu-ma
nu, nu, nu
striga ea nascindu-ma ; —
viata nu e pentru ucidere
viata nu e pentru ucidere.
Soldatul nadusit zise:
—Ce singe, cit de mult singe
si ce miros si ce strigat
da femeia cind naste
si fara de nevointa glontului, —
acestea zise soldatul nadusit,
azvirlind cu pistolul sau
dupa un fluture.
Nu, nu, nu
urla mama mea in dureri, nascindu-ma
viata nu e nascuta pentru a fi ucisa
nu, nu, nu
striga mama mea, nascindu-ma.
Fluterele zbura in zig-zag
revolverul soldatului era cotrobait de furnici
pe mare si pe deasupra marii
soldatul dezbracat
rasarea odata cu luna.
Nichita Stanescu

MY MOTHER AND HER SOLDIER

No, no, no
my mother cries in labor, giving birth to me
no, no, no
she cries giving birth to me—
life is not for killing
life is not for killing.
The sweating soldier said:
—What blood, so much blood,
and what a smell and what yelling
from a woman in labor,
who is not in need of a bullet—
this is what the sweating soldier said
throwing his pistol at a butterfly.
No, no, no
my mother howled in labor, giving birth to me.
The butterfly flew zig and zag,
the soldier’s pistol was ransacked by ants—
on the sea, above the sea,
the naked soldier
rose, together with the moon.
Nichita Stanescu

BASORELIEF CU EROI

Soldatii cei tineri s-au asezat in vitrina,
chiar asa cum au fost gasiti, impuscati in frunte,
ca sa fie vazuti s-au asezat in vitrina,
respectindu-si intocmai miscarea lor ultima,
profilul, bratul, genunchiul, miscarea lor ultima,
cind au fost impuscati pe neasteptate in frunte
sau intre omoplati cu acea flacara mai subtire
decit un deget de copil care arata luna.

In urma lor a ramas goala baraca,
mirosind a obiele, a tigari strivite, a fereastra inchisa.
Valizele de lemn care umplu baraca
mai clantane inca din fierul minerelor,
asa cum clantane luna din fierul minerelor
acum, cu putin inainte de-a fi deschisa,
ca sa se caute-n ea scrisorile vechi si fotografiiile vechi
ale timpului.

Soldatii cei tineri stau dati cu ceara
pe fete si pe miini, ca sa luceasca,
dati cu ceara ca sa luceasca, dati cu ceara,
si asezati intocmai asa cum erau in secunda
cind viata s-a rupt si moartea a-nghitit secunda.
Stau asa nemiscati, ne-ncetind sa luceasca,
si noi ne uitam la ei cum am privi luna
rasarind chiar din mijlocul pietii.

Pentru noi, care sintem acum de-o virsta cu ei,
desi ei stau de ani lungi in vitrina,
pentru noi, care i-am ajuns din urma si trecem de ei,
si inima batind avem, si memorie,
o proaspata, din cale-afara de proaspata memorie,
soldatii cei tineri s-au asezat in vitrina
si se imita pe ei insisi intr-una,
ca si cum ar fi vii.

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Nichita Stanescu

BAS-RELIEF WITH HEROES

The young soldiers have taken their seats in the window exactly as found, shot in their foreheads—to be seen, they were seated in the shop window, true to their ultimate gestures, profiles, arms, knees, their ultimate gestures, as when they were shot, unawares, in their foreheads or between their shoulder blades with that flame finer than a child’s finger pointing to the moon.

Behind them the barracks was empty, smelling of leggings, crushed butts, a closed window. The iron handles continue to rattle on the small wooden suitcases filling the barracks, as the moon’s iron handles continue to rattle now, before being opened to search for old letters, old photos of time.

The young soldiers remain, polished with wax, their faces and arms, so that they shine, polished with wax so that they shine, polished with wax and seated exactly as they were at the moment life broke and death swallowed the moment. they stay so, fixed and shining forever, and we regard them as we would the moon rising in the middle of the square.

For us, who are now the same age as they, though they have stayed long years in the window, for us who have caught them and are passing them by, and have beating hearts, and memory, fresh memory, exceedingly fresh—the young soldiers have taken their seats in the window and mimic themselves, each to the other, as though they were living.
Nichita Stanescu

DESIGUR

Desigur, ea e o bratara
purtata la mina de un zeu
ea e mai linistita spre seara
desi e nelinistita mereu.

Ea luceste toata in luna
cind zeul isi ridică bratul zimbăind,
o lebada bruna
cu plisc de argint

Zeul e invizibil. Nu se vede
decit ea la glezna mâinii lui,
batind în cerul negru și verde
vederea mea ca un cuil.
Nichita Stanescu

**OF COURSE**

Of course she is a bracelet
worn on the wrist of a god—
she grows quieter at sunset,
though she is always disquieted.

In the moonlight she is radiant, wan—
when the god raises his arm, smiling,
a brown swan
with a silver beak—

The god is unseen. You may only spy
her at the ankles of his hands,
hammering into the black and green sky
my sight, like a nail.
Simon Perchik

I should wear gloves, these white pages
unpacked from their pad, laid out
as a surgeon would your snapshot
till only the closed lips can be seen
and my table begin to tremble
—who can work this way
not know your lips won’t move.

I need glasses, that new lens
urged in the journals, my eyes
would enter your skin
go at your heart
while the dead, writes the inventor
just by a blink toward the door
and under that faint breeze
everything breathes again
—you rise from your photo
as once turning from a mirror
you crowed, Not bad, eh!

There was
except now everything needs enlarging
no page is wide enough
—even my pulse falling off
before it dries into a word
into a question mark at last at rest

—I should practice grammar
let these sheets read
how their blood too will clot
become that small and smaller
just the right cut and your lips

fly! I should huge fans
surround your picture and in my arms
the pages louder and louder
work this way.
Because all roofs want to endure
I formed a procession: tiles, nails, ladders
as a mill-stream still in its chute
will arrange till the river
stretching endless and unbroken

—along this roof even skylines drain
with pageantry: sunfalls
escort the hillside till the roof

is everything, its nails
lit, its tiles
firm as scales on a shark
slide over the skin-tight splash
to ignite its wake: its flash
headlong, follows forever
half each tile covering another half

and still the rain: blades
reaching under, calling out loud two by two
there is no room: you and I

don’t talk during the repairs.
We listen for the soft, durable feathers
that still follow every flood
that will fit great wings over our lips
over our thighs and kisses—we hear

the smallest nail towing our breath
floating the world
behind the ferries that keep leaving forever

—we can hear the long, slow, frail
quiver along the ailing roof: a swelling
ready for the worst, we listen
to hammers higher than branches
will iron-work their leaves—you and I

hang on by listening to nails
as stars all night their replacements
—by listening to a roof
constantly in need—we don’t talk
while the ridge is struggling, we hear
the tiles, the ladders
we can hear the nails.
Simon Perchik

* 

Your lips overtake
as time-lapse photography
will pace the light even faster
race the rot around a tree
till it tumbles into foam
branches sprout like rockets
then ferment under their smoke.
It takes only seconds

for a stone to digest its meal: a kiss
inside you, speeded up.

Seconds for your lips
to harden and crush
and I'm burning too.

In those seconds I saw the sun
leaving your heart, disguised
as arms: the fiery cascades
a teardrop once ate to the bone
—I saw my kiss
holding you against the wall
like a movie will freeze its screen
so not even a breath escapes
by changing its shape.

I know they're in there: 30 years
weeping next to each other
burning themselves out as moonlight.
In seconds.

It takes so long!
You wouldn't recognize my kisses either.
They're now the sky inside you
or wherever you are.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

INES ARREDONDO is a Mexican writer whose works have appeared in numerous journals.

BRUCE-NOVOA is a professor at the University of California in Santa Barbara. He translates the work of Ines Arredondo.

THOMAS C. CARLSON, a specialist in American literature at Memphis State University, has published widely on Poe, Melville, and American popular culture. From 1982 to 1984 Professor Carlson was Senior Fulbright Fellow at the University of Bucharest. He is currently completing a book-length translation of Nichita Stanescu's poetry.

VO DINH was born in 1933 in Viet-Nam. He is a published author, translator, and illustrator with over 20 books to his credit.

LORI FISHER has published translations of the work of Reiner Kunze in numerous journals. Excerpts from her translation of his volume *zimmerlautstarke* were published as a chapbook from Swamp Press.

DAVID ESCOBAR GALINDO, born in 1943, is El Salvador's most renowned poet of the younger generation. His poetry has been translated into German, Italian, French and English. He is the editor of *Cultura*, the journal of the Secretary of Education of El Salvador, and a professor of the University Dr. Jose Matias Delgado in San Salvador. *Cantos a la noche* received the Poetry Prize given by Fulbright in Costa Rica in 1983.
FOREST GANDER is co-editor of Lot Roads Publishers in Providence, Rhode Island. As well as translating the work of Veronica Volkow, he is also editing an anthology of new women poets.

EVA GERLACH is a pseudonym for a young Dutch poet who has so far succeeded in keeping her “real” identity invisible. Her most recent volume of poetry is entitled *Dochter* (Amsterdam, 1984).

PETRE GHELMEZ (b. 1932) has published six books of poetry since his debut in Bucharest in 1955. His latest collection, *Conversatia*, appeared in 1981. In 1976 Ghelmez was awarded the Mihai Eminescu Poetry Prize by the Romanian Academy. Ghelmez lives in Bucharest where he is editor-in-chief of *Tribuna Romaniei*, a multi-lingual literary journal.

ANYA KROTH holds a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literature. Her translations have appeared in several journals. She was among the faculty involved in the Summer Translation Institute at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she is presently teaching in the area of Russian language and literature.

REINER KUNZE is the author of numerous volumes of poetry and also of translations from Czech. He published the best-selling *die wunderbaren jahre* in 1976, and received a number of distinguished literary prizes, including the Georg Buchner Prize in 1977.

CHEIRON McMAHILL is a translator currently living in Tokyo. Her main field of interest is Japanese women’s literature.

CYNTHIA MILHOUS is a graduate of the University of California, Santa Cruz. She specialized in theater arts with a strong emphasis in Russian and Soviet dramaturgy.

BRANKO MILJKOVIC, whose meteoric poetic career has left an indelible mark on contemporary Serbian poetry, was born in Serbia in 1934. He was one of the leading representatives of a generation of poets which emerged on the Yugoslav literary scene in the mid-fifties. Well-read and actively involved in literary translation, this generation of poets created a newly cerebral poetry characterized by extreme erudition and intellectualism.

ELIZABETH GAMBLE MILLER is an Associate Professor of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Southern Methodist University. She is the American translator of Hugo Lindo’s poetry and of David Escobar Galindo’s fables.
VO PHIEN is a leading Vietnamese writer.

VASILE POENARU is poet, translator, and journalist. He is at present editor of the English Page of Tribuna Romaniei, a Bucharest literary journal. His third collection of poems, Investigatii, appeared in 1984.

YOSHIHARA SACHIHO is one of Japan’s leading modern poets. She was born in Tokyo in 1932, studied acting at Tokyo University, and after a brief stage career turned to poetry. She is very widely published, and appears frequently at readings in the Tokyo area.

MYRA HEERSPINK SCHOLZ is the American translator of the Dutch poet Eva Gerlach. She is presently living in the Netherlands.

NICHITA STANESCU was Romania’s leading contemporary poet until his death in 1983. The recipient of numerous poetry prizes in his own country, Stanescu was also awarded the Herder Prize in Vienna in 1976 and the Gold Wreath for Poetry from Yugoslavia in 1982. His work has been widely translated in western Europe and the United States.

VERONICA VOLKOW is a contemporary Mexican poet. Her two books are Litoral de Tinta and El Inicio. She now lives in Mexico City.

SARA HEIKOFF WOEHRLEN translates the works of Jose Elgarresta and Carmen Vasquez-Vigo. She currently resides in Michigan.

CARMEN VASQUEZ-VIGO’s work has appeared in numerous journals. “Cleaning Day” was part of an anthology of stories granted the “Silver Chest” prize during the years 1970-72.
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Crushing the body, absence

Ma main au serment léger
My hand, damp orphan of whiteness

Le temple du sabot
The temple of the boot

Je lance au fond du puits
I hurl the skein

Le tissu nerveux, l'eau-de-vie
Nervous tissue, fire water

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Os frappe de stupeur
Bone struck dumb
ICBM
ICBM

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From Calcites
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Accord breath crystal or nothing
Je parle au nom d’un glacial orgueil
I speak in the name of glacial pride
Quand il aura rendu
When he returns
Ni le cérémonial hautain
Neither the lofty ceremonial

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Aux heures secretes de l'hiver
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Silencieuse entrave au temps
Silently standing in time's way
Tant que mon pic sera de pluie
As long as my pick will be rain
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