

ROBERT MEZEY

How Much Longer?

Day after day after day it goes on
and no one knows how to stop it or escape.
Friends come bearing impersonal agonies,
I hear our hopeless laughter, I watch us drink.
War is in everyone's eyes, war is made
in the kitchen, in the bedroom, in the car at stoplights.
A marriage collapses like a burning house
and the other houses smolder. Old friends
make their way in silence. Students stare
at their teachers and suddenly feel uneasy.
Some of us move slowly as cattle feeding,
oblivious, looking down, and others spooked,
rolling their eyes skyward, while the young
walk aimlessly all night and can't stop talking,
or sit in a circle naked, speechless, hallucinating.
Small children roam the neighborhoods armed
with silvery guns, gas masks, and plastic sticks.
Excavations are made in us and slowly
we are filled in with used-up things: knives
too dull to cut bread with, bombs that failed to go off,
cats smashed on the highway, broken pencils,
slivers of soap, hair, gristle, old TV sets
that hum and stare blindly, blackened light bulbs.

Bridges kneel down, cities billow and plunge
like horses in their smoke, the tall buildings
open hysterical burning eyes at night,
the leafy suburbs look up at the clouds and tremble—
and my wife leaves her bed before dawn, walking
the icy pasture, shrieking her grief to the cows,
praying in tears to the softening blackness. I hear her
outside the window, crazed, inconsolable,
and go out to fetch her. Yesterday she saw
A photograph, Naomi our little girl
in a ditch in Viet Nam, half in the water,
the rest of her, beached on the mud, was horribly burned.

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Terezín

In your watercolor, Nely Silvinová
your heart on fire
on the grey cover of a sketchbook
is a dying sun or
a flower
youngest of the summer

the sun itself
the grizzled head of a flower
throbbing
in the cold dusk of your last day
on earth

There are no thorns to be seen
but the color says
thorns

and much else that is not
visible it says also
a burning wound at the horizon
it says Poland and winter
it says painful Terezín
SILVIN VI 25 VI 1944
and somehow
above the body on its bed of coals
it says spring
from the crest of the street it says
you can see fields
brown and green
and beyond them the dark blue line of woods
and beyond that smoke
is that the smoke of Prague
and it says blood

every kind of blood
blood of Jews
German blood
blood of Bohemia and Moravia
running in the gutters
blood of children
it says free at last
the mouth of the womb it says
SILVIN VI 25 VI 1944
the penis of the commandant
the enraged color
the whip stock the gun butt
it says it says it says

Petrified god
god that gave up the ghost at Terezín
what does it say but itself
thirteen years of life
and your heart on fire

Nely Silvinová

To the Likeness of a Captain in Cromwell's Armies

Even the walls of Mars would not impress
This captain, whom the Lord's word fortifies;
From another light, another age, his eyes,
That have looked out on slaughter, look at us.
On the sword's hilt the hand just now alighting;
The war moves through a countryside of green;
Beyond the dark smoke England can be seen,
Horses and glory and your day of fighting.
Ambition and desire, captain, are snares:
Vain is your armor, vain the pride and power
Of man, whose whole existence is an hour;
All of this has been over now for years.
The steel destined to wound you has turned to rust,
And you are now among the damned, like us.

after Borges

A Rose and Milton

Of roses in their infinite blossomings
That have been lost to time in time's abyss,
I want one to be spared from nothingness,
One without stain or sign among the things
That once existed. Fate grants me the grace,
The honor of first naming that sublime
And wordless flower, the rose that one last time
John Milton held a hairs-breadth from his face,
Not seeing it. From gardens long disperse,
O thou, yellow or white or burning red,
Come as by magic from thy myriad
Lost centuries and flourish in this verse,
Ivory, gold, or blood, or vague shadows
As in his hand once, O invisible rose.

after Borges

To the Americans

Not till every blackened church has been rebuilt,
and you have repented in dust and ashes—
 of God mocked in the universities,
 blasphemous jokes in the chic galleries,

repented, even though you yourself be guiltless,
of covetous hearts, of ears uncircumcised,
 deaf to others' pain, of worshiping
 wealth and filth, of overweening power,—no,

not till you call to mind the ancient mystery:
only obedience to Him commands obedience,
 will you face your shame, Americans,
 and only then begin to make amends.

You have already faced the Lord's fierce anger,
faced the humiliation of being forced
 to watch one of your sons, a naked
 corpse dragged through the dust of Mogadishu,

all around him the faces of his killers,
grinning savages, one wearing his dog tags;
 and bombed-out embassies, innocent
 Africans butchered for your fathers' sins;

and our own streets in flames, drifting with tear gas,
tears for the future. The long oozings of lust,
 rage and rebellion steeped three decades,
 the venom gathering strength month by month,

—until today, the nubile preteen reveling
in hip-hop, her virginity twenty times lost
 (discarded, rather), lies dreaming of

what new taste-thrill? whips? threesomes? Whatever.

Meanwhile, one who could be her older sister,
her mother even, stands ready to open
her scented privacies to a stranger,
some stockbroker buddy of her husband's

(and her husband knows: he was the go-between!)
Cunt on the house. Or else she's off on her own—
what fun to find her own whoremaster,
lift her skirts for him in her marriage bed.

Not from such unclean loins did the lean farmboys,
the hardbitten wranglers and factory stiffs spring
who waded ashore at Normandy,
those the bullets hadn't yet cut in half—

no, those who bled for and saved us, those who died
in the Solomons, in the Ardennes, in the sky,
tough, God-fearing young men who sweated
blood in the blast furnace, rode the tractor

long past sundown, or else rode the rods, cooking
a thin slumgullion in the hobo jungles
or sold windfall fruit on grey sidewalks,
thin shirts and sharp faces against winter,

they came of better stock. May God have mercy.
Their grandchildren, so licentious, so greedy,
go on dancing, drinking and snorting,
lovelessly fucking, all frantic, manic—

Degeneration doesn't come suddenly
to an end; shrugged at accepted, it takes over.
Who will die to save *their* grandchildren,
come face to face once more with real evil?

after Horace

Einar Tambarskelver

(Heimskringla, I, 117)

Odin or red Thor or the White Christ...
They matter little, the names, the gods behind them;
There is no other duty than to be brave,
And Einar, leathery captain of men, was that.
He was foremost among the Norwegian archers
And expert in the handling of the sword,
Of ships and men. Of his trajectory
Through time, there now remains to us one sentence,
Which gives off light in the chrestomathies.
He said it in the din of a sea battle.
The lost day's fighting done, the starboard side
Open to boarding, a last shot snapped his bow.
The king asked him what was that that had broken
Behind his back and Einar Tambarskelver
Replied, *Norway, my lord, between your fingers.*
Centuries later, someone saved the story
In Iceland. And I now transcribe it here,
So distant from those oceans, from that spirit.

after Borges

from “The Wandering Jew”
Part III

For years I ate the radish of affliction
Until my belly sickened of its tang.
The sparks flew upward while my old affection
Sagged with my arguments of right and wrong.

The homeless swarmed on the stone slopes of the city,
Armed children sacked each drowsy neighborhood,
And I who had seen with nothing more than pity
Saw beast and angel mingling in their blood.

Tasting my bondage in the lives of others,
I found it bitter, indigestible food.
If all the wretched of the earth were brothers,
Where would I find our father in my God?

I could find rest until a dream of death
Flooded the mechanism of my heart:
Nightly now, nomads with broken teeth
Come mumbling brokenly of a black report.

Reeking of gas, they tell what ancient fame,
What mad privation made them what they are,
The dead, the dying—I am one of them—
Dark-blooded aliens tagged with David’s star.

A flock of people prey to every horror,
Shattered by thirty centuries of war,
The sport of Christian duke and *Hauptsturmführer*—
Is this the covenant we were chosen for?

Sometimes, at noon, the dull sun seems to me
A *jahrzeit* candle for the millions gone,

—As if that far, indifferent fire could be
Memorial to one blackened crumbling bone!

Tempted and fallen, the Lord God is brooding
Over the ashes where Job sat in pain,
And yet His tribe is ashes, ashes bleeding
And crying out to the sun and to the rain.

I speak of those that lived by rope and spade,
Of those that dug a pit for friend and brother
And later lay down naked in its shade—
There, at last, the prisoners rest together.

I speak it in an anguish of the spirit.
What is man, I ask—and what am I?
One who is one of many to inherit
A barren mountain and an empty sky.

It is a modern habit of the mind
To look at flesh and tear its clothes away,
That makes consoling speech a figment of wind,
Deliverance like something in a play.

The nights are darker than they used to be.
A squalid ghost has come to share my room.
And every night I bring him home with me—
If one can call dissatisfaction home.

All week long I have read in the Pentateuch
Of how I have not lived, and my poor body
Wrestled with every sentence in the book.
If there is Judgment, I will not be ready.

The book I read last night will be my last;
I have come too far lacking a metaphysic.
Live, says the Law—I sit here doing my best,
Relishing meat, listening to music.