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Appendix 1

Wild Horses

Minarets of burdock
clang in the copper marsh, the grapes'
frozen skins flood with sweetness.
Winter trees burned to black wicks.

Harnessed, longing cuts
with every turn. Time has one direction,
to divide. Invisible, it casts shadow
canyons, tools furrows into leather fields,
carves oxbow rivers of birds
into cold November skies.

Then, the first stars' faint static,
the sacred transmissions, the hair's
breadth of the intimate
infinite. Iron-oxide sun stains travertine sky,
sudden colour like the ochre
horses of the Dordogne, stampeding into lamplight.
Liquid grasses overflow like dark ale.
Twilight is a cave, pungent
with wet hides, torches of resin.

Under the pulling moon, the strap of river
digs into the flesh of field.

Michaels (2001: 145)

Appendix 2

What the Light Teaches

*“I break open stars and find nothing and again nothing,
and then a word in a foreign tongue.”*

Elisabeth Borchert

1

Countless times this river has been bruised by our bodies;
liquid fossils of light.

We shed our ghost skins in the current;
then climb the bank, heavy and human.

The river is a loose tongue,
a folk song. At night we go down to listen.
Stars like sparks from a bonfire.
We take off what we are,
and step into the moon.

2

When there are no places left for us,
this is where we'll still meet.
Past the white fountain of birches,
green helmets of willows.
Past the boulder that fastens the field
like a button on a pocket.
Here, where trees that you planted are now twice our height.

In winter we'll haunt your kitchen, our love
an overturned bowl, a circling lid.
We'll visit the creaking bog with its sunken masts;
fly over a death mask of snow
and the frozen pond striped with grass –
to our river, humming between closed lips.
Attentive as your favourite poet,
Tsvetaeva – who listened with the roots of her hair.

3

Birds plunge their cries like needles
into the thick arm of the afternoon.

Beyond the closed window, soundless pines –
a heavy green brocade; and the glowing, stiff
brushcut of the corn.



Wands of wild calla.
Lilies tall as children.

You're sleep on the couch, head up, as if in a bath;
summer heat turns thin white sleeves
pink against your skin.
Sleeping as if you'd waited years
for a place to close your eyes.

Everything familiar:
dishes and smells, faces in oval wooden frames,
tins of Russian tea
with their forest scenes, their borders of black and gold,
lining the shelves.

We float in death,
the ordinary world holds together
like the surface tension of water,
still and stretched, a splash of light.
The shadow pattern of leaves,
a moving tattoo on your bare legs.

4

Sometimes I am afraid to touch him,
afraid my hand would go right through him.
But he is alive, in a history
made more painful by love.

I prayed to the sky to lift our father's head,
to deliver him from memory.

I wished he could lie down
in music he knew intimately, and become
sound, his brain flooded by melody so powerful
it would stretch molecules, dismantle thought.

5

Suspended in flux, in contortions of disorder,
in the frozen acrobatics of folding and faults,
the earth mourns itself.
Continents torn in half and turned into coastlines,
call for themselves across the sea.

Caves, frantic for air, pull themselves up
by the ground, fields collapsing into empty sockets.
Everywhere the past juts into the present;
mountains burst from one era to another,
or crumple up millennia, time joining at its ends.

We also pleat time.



Remembering, we learn to forget.
The kind of forgetting that stops us, one foot
in the spring soil of your farm,
the other in mud where bits of bone and teeth
are still suspended, a white alphabet.
The kind of forgetting that changes
moonlight on the river into shreds of skin.
The forgetting that is the heart's
filthy drain,
so fear won't overflow its deep basin.

Even in its own confusion,
in its upheavals and depressions,
the earth has room in its heart.
Carefully, part by part, it replaces us.
Gently, so bones may embrace a little longer,
mud replaces marrow.

The dogs slip like mercury through the long grass.

How can we but feel they're here,
in the strange darkness of a thermosensitive sky,
even as light gushes over rocks
and the sun drips sweet fat the colour of peaches
over fields. Here, in the noise of the river,
a mother gives birth in a sewer;
soldiers push sand down a boy's throat.

Theirs are voices we hear
but can't hear, like the silence
of parents rounded up in a town square,
who stopped their tongues with time,
saving children by not
calling out to them in the street.

Our father's daughters, we can't dream ourselves
into another world, see things differently.
Instead, we try to withstand memory
with memory, to go back further, to before;
back to the dacha in the high forests of Kochtobel,
to the Moyka in our mother's silvery photo of Petersburg,
to the wooden sidewalks of Kiev.
You read poems in the old language
even our parents can't speak –
what we save, saves us –
and in your mouth the soft buzzes are natural as cicadas,
the long "ayas" like bird calls.

Language is how ghosts enter the world.
They twist in awkward positions
to squeeze through the black spaces.
The dead read backwards,



as in a mirror. They gather
in the white field and look up,
waiting for someone
to write their names.

Language remembers.
Out of obscurity, a word takes its place
in history. Even a word so simple
it's translatable: number. Oven.

Because all change is permanent,
we need words to raise ourselves
to new meaning: tea and dacha and river.

6

It stopped me, the first time
I looked out at our father in the yard and saw
how she leaned her head on his shoulder –
familiar, and full of desire.

Together they looked at a nest in the bushes,
inspected strawberries.
Although the air was humid with lilacs,
heavy with insects and rain,
she was cool in a dress the colour of the moon.

You were reading by the open door.
The sound of a lawn mower made everything still.
Then a moment like night cereus
that blooms only in the dark, waking us
with its alarm of scent.

It wasn't seeing your face so suddenly like his,
or the sight of death in her white dress;
or the glaze of the summer light
hardening into crust. Not the accustomed sadness
of what we'd lost,
but a new injury, a gash
bleeding into everything
what we were losing.

7

When there are no places left for us,
we'll still talk in order to make things true:
not only the years before we were born,
not only the names of our dead,
but also this life.
The simple feel of an apple in the hand.
The look of the table after a meal, *en déshabillé*,
rings of wine like lips staining the cloth,



the half-eaten fish in its halo of lemon and butter.
Nights of tastes, of different smoothnesses;
nights when the twister of desire touches down
and tears up sleep;
of drowning in the shadow of your own body.

But if memory is only skin,
if we become dervishes spinning
at the speed of the world, feeling
nothing,
we spend hours by the river, telling everything.
So that when we are gone, even our spirits
weighed down with stones,
the river will remember.

8

It was a suicide mission, to smuggle language
from mouths of the dying
and the dead; last words of the murdered mothers –
Germany, Poland, Russia.
They found that what they'd rescued
wasn't the old language at all;
only the alphabet the same.
Because language of a victim only reveals
the one who named him.

Because they were plucked from the centre,
because they shared the same table, same street,
there was no idiom to retreat to.

What was left but to cut out one's tongue,
or cleave it with new language,
or try to hear a language of the dead,
who were thrown into pits, into lakes –
What are the words for earth, for water?

The truth is why words fail.
We can only reveal by outline,
by circling absence.
But that's why language
can remember truth when it's not spoken.
Words in us that deafen,
that wait, even when their spell seems
wasted;
even while silence
accumulates to fate.

Prayer is the effort of wresting words
not from silence,
but from the noise of other words.
to penetrate heaven, we must reach



what breaks in us.
The image haunts me:
the double swaying
of prayer on the trains.

9

Whole cities were razed with a word.
Petersburg vanished into Leningrad, became
an invisible city where poets promised to meet
so they could pronounce again
“the blessed word with no meaning.”

A writer buried his testimony
in the garden, black type in black soil,
trusting that someday earth would speak.
All those years of war and uncertainty after,
no one knew of the power of his incantation,
calling quietly from its dark envelope.
From his notebook grew orchids and weeds.

Words are powerless as love,
transforming only by taking us as we are.

Reading letters from Tsvetaeva to a friend
we cried together in your barn;
“you’re the only one I have left.”

After all these years I still feel closest to you
in the hours reserved for nightmares,
even in our distant bedrooms.
Because I know you’re awake too,
if not this night, then another,
watching your husband’s sleeping body
rise with breath.

10

For years I’ve driven towards you in spring rain,
storm sky of green marble,
slow traffic a caravan of swinging lanterns,
windshield wipers like clock hands.
Poems by Tsvetaeva on the seat beside me,
flowers in wet paper.

As the hours pass, the hard seeds in my heart
soften and swell as I think of your kitchen
with its stone floor
like a summerhouse in Peredelkino,
and of Mandelstam, exiled to Yelabuga on the Kama;
“if you must leave the city,
it’s best to live near a river.”



You fly out of the darkness at me,
twisting open the tin sky.

The thunderstorm becomes other storms:
darkness steeping like tea above Burnside Drive,
with its slippery crease of rusted leaves;
or the night on High Street, rain
streaming like milk down the windshield
the moment the streetlights clicked on.
I think of young Akhmatova,
under a black umbrella with Modigliani,
reading Verlaine in the Luxembourg.
All the languages they spoke –
Russian, Italian, French –
and still, their lovemaking was with roses!
Language not enough
for what they had to tell each other.

Never to lose this joy,
driving to one who awaits my arrival.

Soon I will be standing on your porch, dripping
with new memory, a thin dress soaked in May rain.

Rain that helps one past grow out of another.

11

Language is the house with lamplight in its windows,
visible across fields. Approaching, you can hear
music; closer, smell
soup, bay leaves, bread – a meal for anyone
who has only his tongue left.
It's a country; home; family:
abandoned; burned down; whole lines dead, unmarried.
For those who can't read their way in the streets,
or in the gestures and faces of strangers,
language is the house to run to;
in wild nights, chased by dogs and other sounds,
when you've been lost a long time,
when you have no other place.

There are nights in the forest of words
when I panic, every step into thicker darkness,
the only way out to write myself into a clearing,
which is silence.
Nights in the forest of words
when I'm afraid we won't hear each other
over clattering branches, over
both our voices calling.



In winter, in the hour
when the sun runs liquid then freezes,
caught in the mantilla of empty trees;
when my heart listens
through the cold stethoscope of fear,
your voice in my head reminds me
what the light teaches.
Slowly you translate fear into love,
the way the moon's blood is the sea.

Michaels (2001: 117–29)