

bee purple



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Carroll Klein

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*For my travelling companions,
especially Greg*

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A S I A M I N O R



KADIKÖY MARKET

in the soft hollow of evening
and after rain
I press through the heavy air
toward the bright noise
of the winter market

behind me there is silence an absence of light
and the odd comfort of narrow streets
cobble and sleek a safe place
where solitary walkers stare
and move on

ahead of me stalls
extravagant with lemons and winter greens
out-of-season eggplants the bitter shine of olives
and gut shops windows swagged handsomely
in liver and tripe feathered in dill
and stylish in their gore

the Gypsy flower seller her cigarette held
thumb and forefinger like a Polish spy
leans against the wall of the Armenian church
indifferent to theology
she calls out holding up the spiky greens
tied with clustered red berries
from some other place such marvellous fakery
I always buy choosing to believe
in her improvement

I pass the gold shops strung with lights
and heavy with unnatural orange bangles
shops with expensive foreign oatmeal
roasted sheep's heads cheap gin
the incendiary tapes of mullahs
calling from another country
for a holy war

there are friends in the smoky restaurant
where we meet trading stories
of schools run by aging fascists
post offices without stamps
apartments with too many roaches
and not enough water
it is sordid and contagious
irresistible this talk
of strangers who have yet
to learn the will of Allah

I leave behind the ashtrays the discontent
to breathe the fish smell of the docks
shopkeepers in the last moments of evening
sit outside drinking tea and smoking
it is cold now and quiet
but for the muffled horn of a ferry
the splash of my boots in oily puddles
I pull on gloves green suede and tight-fitting
I wrap myself in this night



IN PERA

In Pera in these days
there is a man
who watches from doorways
beneath the maze of ancient wires
that hold the city in a tenuous light

a mild man foreign and tall
gathering news
in a place where worlds unstitch
where countries bleed their children
where Greeks Jews Armenians Turks
shift lives hold murder in their hearts

he listens
knowing he is witness to history
to men in love with violence
to women in love with such men

the old city
is only a stop on his long journey
a place of whispers
where he is sometimes seen
leaning on broken stone
quiet and counting the dead



BITHYNIA: LISTENING

early morning when the night
has not yet cracked away
from the crease of the world
I awake in a land
where tortoises lie bleached in the fields
and hedgehogs sleep uneasily dreaming
of sheep dogs of playing dead

the air is thin
across the night there are sheep
rustling their bells sweet severe sounds
that break the dark then silence
I am weighed down by strangeness
the deep breath
of a country I can never know

in that moment
when the black night is a fist
on my chest and I survive
because I have knowledge of dawn
palpable imminent
a song slides across the quiet
invokes the greatness of god
from the stubby minaret
of a village mosque
an hour's walk from here

if I listen carefully
I can hear old men
washing their feet at the fountain
hedgehogs moaning softly
in their precarious dreams
I can hear
the sinuous ribbonlight that crackles
like telephone wires light waves
like the morning



NICAEA: DAY TRIP

what is left here
is the rubble of stone walls
curving through the shabby suburbs
 precarious stately gates and
 a dome of black earth bones
easily scuffed up with a sandal
when I ask the playing children shrug
 one throws a finger bone at me

I believe in God the Father Creator of Heaven and Earth

the main street all charm and leafy trees
shades us from the hot Turkish sky
kebab houses tea gardens
shops with pale copies of the pots and tiles
that gave this place its secular fame
centuries after the patriarchs gathered
to count angels adjust their robes
lay down the Law

and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord

we pass rows of storks nesting on chimneys
a locked museum vegetable stalls
and are drawn to the water the dark pines
we order fish and grilled peppers
in an empty restaurant

I believe in the Holy Ghost the Holy Catholic Church

later I buy silver and old coral beads
from a man who serves us tea
he has the considered spine of a scholar
the kind eyes of a man at peace

the communion of saints the forgiveness of sins

those Church Fathers when they met
to purse their lips and write the list
of what we must believe in got it wrong

they should have thought
of olive trees of shade
gracious old men and sweet tea
storks rising lazily from their nests
should have found in these

the resurrection of the body and life everlasting



WOLF VILLAGE: WATCHING

wolves live here now
only in memory
in the long blank faces
of watching women

this is a village of rapacious eyes
and I am the stranger observed
buying bread from an old man
bewildered by my presence
chicken cheese chickpeas
from the jolly grocer who doffs his hat
and calls me *hoca hanım* lady teacher

in the teashops the men smoke and play backgammon
their faces turned to the dusty street
some with eyes that flicker and shift
when I catch them staring
some who stare and stare unheeding
burning holes in my infidel garb

in the grey light of early evening
I drive away
at the edge of the village
in a field of pale scrub there are eyes
wolf-silver and watching me



AT KAYA

At Kaya
the stones left standing
hold the voices of old women

the men are not here
they have gone
they have taken their sons
across water

this is a place
of stilled hands and whispers
poppies lean into the wind
sun breaks the paths
worn smooth by those
whose children are now strangers

dropped like stones
into the sea
the hearts of exiles lie heavy
yearning for poppies
imagining the wind



PERGE: RUNNING
for Murray

a long summer day
we spent climbing the warm stones
of this ruined city

in the shadow
of an olive tree
we ate salted cucumbers
talked of home
of our mother long dead to others

did we inhabit the same family?
were these stories blood relations?

thirty years gone by
we could share this distant place
talk about books
the colour of poppies
you said you often thought of me
that it helped dismantling your old life
to know that I had done it too
you told me things you knew
so different from my knowledge
stone building children long silences

late afternoon
the sun golden slanted on the old stones
dazed with heat and revelation
we talked of shaded corners cold beer

then you stopped
startled by the last ruin
tidied of the ravages of earthquake
and asked for time

I donned my straw hat once more
and seated on the stadium's sloped stone
became the watcher

as you ran that oval distance
your arms spread in a kind of ecstasy

grey-haired man brother
your youthful runner's body shone
I clapped cheered you
in the hot foreign sun
joy radiated in the still air
spanned
the distance between us



E X I L E



WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO LIGHT A LAMP?
A Belgrade Diary

1

mornings the bleak light of Belgrade
presses on filthy glass presses against my body

beyond the door of this room
where we live now
there is an old woman
who winds and unwinds bandages
around her shattered legs
she is silent and uncomplaining
I avoid her fearing
her kind eyes

my children continue to eat
expect good bread and meat soup
from the chaos and grease
of the shared kitchen
I kill cockroaches with my fist now
and no longer fear the black rat
behind the cupboard though I watch for it

what I fear is the others
who inhabit this place
strangers
who wander the halls in stained flannel pyjamas
who eat tins of cheap oily meat
and light fires with books
from my uncle's library

my husband hunches on the bed smoking
pushes his hand again and again through his hair
and weeps it is silent and terrible
a contagion that I must not enter

my task is to keep moving find food
take my reluctant children
through broken streets to school

they quarrel and whine ask questions
for which there are no answers

in our old house in Osijek
the walls were covered with art
our books reminded us of who we were
and the children had fine wooden toys
made by their father
we wrote ate stuffed pancakes
and drank plum brandy with friends
my husband sang the songs
of Serbian gypsies
songs of longing and displacement
now there is only silence

2

after work I linger in the Stari Grad
away from my hungry children
my husband's sadness
thinking of shoes sleek Italian leather
smart loafers with matching shoulder bags
and wallets fat with dinars

last week on a swaying bus
someone picked my pocket I didn't feel a thing
till afterward
and then I felt like dying
I had no money that was nothing
but my papers official documents affiliations
all gone
and where can I go now emptied
in a country whose open veins
bleed across the land

3

on Vasina St. the night is
cold steel on my tongue
a homeless autumn
bookshops nudge the city
and lean graceful with language
into the Balkan street
huddled in forty-watt bulbs carved stone
the shadow of long confusing wars
cheap editions of poets
Matos Ujevic Krmpotic
tempt me but bread before poets
dangerous choices
feed me in these hard days
once I read their books and wept
now there is reason for tears
and only the words remain

4

tonight my eyes open
to a change of season
blank insistent wind
and the lights of Simina St.
suspicious as tribes gnawing
on the bones of lies
a border crossing smell in the air
the terror of empty space and men
in dark woollen coats
we sit up late with Gordana and Mirko
talking of exile
and the ring of malice that tightens around us
but our speech stumbles
unreal as circumstance
when they leave Gordana kisses me
three times I am weeping
she leans against me whispers words
we learned in girlhood before we needed them
"I have a country but I bear it only in my heart"

5

most journeys begin with a belief in destination
some final peace for the traveller
for me there is only a doubtful ticket
and movement into the dark

each village each stretch of road
is a victory a temporal shaking off
of artillery and young men
with hard crazy eyes

along the river Sava
the bridges are tinker-toy catastrophes
of ribs and struts
in the flat afternoon light we detour for hours
past knots of old women in black scarves

in the night I walk across a no-man's-land
to the new border
watched by boys with blurred faces
they could be my children or my murderers
but are neither they murmur
and let me pass

on that long road
bounded by wire the precise sweep
of lights that search for the desperate
I am lost
there is no solace in my own land
the earth is not sacred here or forgiving

6

it is late afternoon the soft light
in lattice shadow cuts across my face
I sit in the wicker chair
a book on my lap Kandinsky
a dark abstract on the cover
I run my hand across it
feel the heavy ink
seep into my fingertips run through my veins

in this place of dead plants
and dusty blue teacups
I am the queen of memory.

this is what I dreamed of
to return to hold my best cup
in formal silence
and breathe the pale air of abandonment
to stare at the spines of books
telling a history that pulses and recedes
less potent now
than this solemn and ambiguous day



T R A N S F O R M A T I O N



JOURNEYS / TRANSFORMATIONS

water

through broken sun
that carves the green
in pale symmetrical terraces
I watch my own watery dying

for one moment
my hands press for surface
seek the scattered light
where grief and pleasure lock
in fatal embrace

I breathe and sigh breathe and sigh
my body undulates turns
with a flicker of bright scales
and I scull down to the dark water
down to a new place

earth

under earth
beyond the cold cave the chilly winter
that sees no sun
a busy heat tunnels to the centre
of all things

I dig through my own blood
hands broken and relentless
in the search
blind with dirt and tears
I cry out in silence

the dead air returns a soft growl
my scent sharpens to musk

air

I dream of air
the precise movement of a backyard swing
the long stretch legs pumping
then launched a flight
into the empty sky

And caught by winds
Warm playful thermals
that drop and lift
my hair streams catches in my mouth
I call out my voice no longer mine

goshawk goshawk
let me join you in the bright ascent
in the flutter of wings

fire

how many women taken by fire
for their wisdom
for age bad temper an ugly face

did they weep
fling curses at the righteous
as the flames licked their flesh
to bone

I enter the fire
the furnace of a dark past
to find them
in a place where words crumble like burned paper

they are all here these women
they smile at me
palms open to the possible transformed
into light and the certainty of stone



IN THE DORNEY GARDEN

in this monochrome of stillness
dry sticks and camouflage
there is a duck nesting

unflickering she watches me
bend toward her
my own breath held
intent on thoughts
of duck tasks
brooding and silence
staying and letting go

a late spring
she whispers to me
without a feather's turn
when the green comes
this will be done



HISTORY LESSON

you know the meaning of those dark years
I needn't reiterate
now that we stand in the sun
and brush the past aside
like so much tiresome memory
like straw not spun to gold

we can look to the light
our hands shading us from its brilliance
it would be easy now to be blinded
by an excess of possibility

we know the dark time never disappears
it trails along behind us unseen
unless we turn suddenly without blinking
before it slides behind buildings
holding its breath flattened against the wall
of war and famine and torture

so in the light the dark is never lost
as no thing is truly lost
once it has been known
balance requires both the weight of darkness
anchors the light
keeps us from flying too close to the sun



CAT

the old cat
sheds his whiskers in odd places
gifts in geriatric white
for me to find on a plaid throw
or books piled on the kitchen table

see he says I go where I want
I am old now stiff in my loving
but I am yours as much as I can be
an occasional whisker
is a small price a talisman
for you to find to hold

elusive this old cat
days go by when we don't talk
or lie together
he prepares me for his leaving
and plants white whiskers in the dark
where beyond his presence
like stones thrown up by frost
they will appear in time



WAITING

this memory
crouched its breath coming shallow
watches the pale evening fade
into the summer night

the room is full of objects
waiting to be noticed
cheese sweating on a plate
a photograph of a woman showing her teeth
a sparrow beating its wings against a window

I wait for the door to open
for the moon to rise in the bruised sky

now the sparrow is stilled
and the last of the light
casts a long shadow across the floor
I am not alone I am visited always
and know what memory is
and fear its darkness



IN SPRING

In spring you will find me
under the snow
curled into the bank
that slopes beyond the flat stones
months have passed so long now
that my absence is expected
I am no longer a question
on your lips
you have learned to live without me
in the warm house
and you wake early not knowing
what the silence means

the cats will notice first
there will be a certain agitation
as they pad about
and ask each other questions
sooner or later a tentative paw
will touch my face

should I have told you in the fall
that I wished to sleep away the winter
that would have been a kindness
but I slipped away in silence

now I return
inside I know what winter is
I have learned a song of desire
that pushes its notes restless
nomadic toward the sun

warm me with your breath
and I will teach it to you



IN PROVENCE
for Annette

years past we shared the soft light
of the sea
in a breath we were here
or there
tramping the ruins through still afternoons
and waiting for miracles in damp churches
in mosques
where the airless curved space smelled of socks
at night we ate olives and slept with sailors
now uxorious grey-haired men travel with us
reminders of our homes gardens cats
you smiling and astonished
have a child who plays at our feet
and claims the shape of these days
nothing much has changed we still talk
receive in quiet arms each other's sadness
aging parents wayward friends
the perplexing trails of failure and loss
we still talk
watching the terraced hills the apricot trees
at dusk explaining our lives to ourselves
irony lounges near by intent on our words
and jasmine fills the night air
like a question



S H I F T I N G L I G H T



POSTE RESTANTE
for Greg

tonight I write
from this bleached shore where
you will never reach me

all day you have shimmered and hummed
part of the dust the heat
the silver of these old trees
your presence palpable as air
your voice a scalpel whisper

now you fade with the lights
of the night fishermen
my hand reaches for your crisp hair
palms words instead

they beat and wash across these distances
this ocean of imagining and regret



GARDEN: NORTH LONDON

beyond the glass doors the mossy brick
event and presence nudge
the cracked afternoon light
fuschia Solomon's seal Japanese maple
tremble with sun
and cats saunter by their arrangements made
with the fox
who watches me unmoving

he is diffident
his eyes flicker and hold mine
defy my carapace of words
we have only surprise to share
the unspoken language of incident

in time he turns a casual disappearance
into the pale grass
the air shifts darkens with loss

through the long night
I wait for him
and in the cold bright morning the deep afternoon
a nearness surrounds me
soft as pelt
and the breathing of fox



PRAIRIE MORNING

My brother's child rises early to make coffee
her children sleep
heaped like kittens on the couch
their lips parted in dreaming
they never stir

we speak in low voices
make promises to write
to phone more often
her hair is freshly cut and shining
her face older than it should be

I had almost forgotten what it is
to love this girl this woman
to feel the particular grief of seeing her
set aside her dreams
while the rest of life stretches
like a summer prairie relentless
one might say without feature

I leave her before the light breaks
and drive into the coldest hour
of my journey
though it is still summer
I can taste winter on my skin
silence embraces me

there are no trees here to interrupt the sky
and no answers
the day lightens
across fields of wheat
I have known this place all my life



UP NORTH

This was a place where I was young
when I still walked in snow
with pleasure
and smelled the emptiness in the frozen air
where spring days stretched light across the snye
and dazzled the candle ice the stands of scrub

always there were tracks
the breadcrumb trails of dogs and cats
unsettling the grainy crusts of snow
the scat of wild things
I didn't know enough to fear
and small ruined corpses rabbits mice

I found a lynx once dead in a trap
a thin bloody corpse whose long dying
went unattended
a frozen unforgiving moment
on the edge of my life
uneasy as wind on the wide tundra



BERWYN, 1964

years ago I lived in a trailer
a tinpot affair with mice
and clogged sewers
and Lorelei a dirty girl
with greasy hair she seldom bathed
her teeth were yellow and she smiled
and smiled again
a large seething smile full of assurance
she'd been a farmerette a cow queen
where she came from
and all the boys adored her

I buried my head in a book
she condescended
I snapped pages
knowing that someday I would be somewhere else
and Lorelei would still be there
president of the Catholic Women's League
a matron with a large bosom and a tight perm
and a husband who smelled like a barn

I did escape no surprise in that
but still sometimes
I dream of her riding a tractor at harvest
like some heroine on an old Soviet poster
and smiling smiling
in the fall sun



IN THE STEPPES
for Rosemarie

we know the dangers of grass
the razor edge that slices
thin white legs in summer

whistles blades to be woven
once I twisted a handful
from the hard earth
and drenched my palm in blood

we are prairie children
raised to an empty landscape
to history no longer than a shudder of aspen

together we travel
under the bleached skies
of a late windy spring
and in a field of wheat so like the fields
that edged our young lives
I take your picture

there is no end to this exposure
the bared skin of our yearning

here where your parents once breathed
there is now
an old woman with geese
who stands in her green mathematical garden
surveying beets and potatoes
and trying to remember

there is more here than struggling hollyhocks
and a cranky daughter
standing arms folded at the door
more than the hot familiar wind
of the steppes

in the thin dust she scratches us
a map behind the fenced cemetery
there are graves she shrugs
and turns to her menacing birds

old enough now
to see the need for pilgrimage
we are given broken stones
instead
I watch you kneel
on rough tussocks of grass
and brush away dry litter from a stone

eine aufrechte Frau
the rest is claimed by time
and the small burrowing creatures
who breathe beneath the earth
on beds of grass



FATHER'S DAY

In middle age
my father sat for hours
staring at his hands
baffled by his life

I was impatient then
with his slow dying
the slipped shunts blood at 3 a.m.
emergencies that lost their sharp edges

only in old photographs I see him now
a young thick-bodied man
heavy-humoured self-conscious
stylish in a long overcoat and hat
propped against his '37 Ford
his arm slung around my smiling mother

he was unfaithful to her
my brother says
I am silent furiously disbelieving

I am as old now as he was
in those dying years
with no children to chronicle my time
illicit loves the image of my hands
so like his in shape

Father
what secrets did you keep from your women
wife and daughter
who watched you die for years
while you stared and stared
at your graceful treacherous hands.



MORNING POEM

so early the day is barely morning
 is breathing and cool
and not yet caught
by broken promises

by the steps arthritis and intent
the old white cat laps at the dew
hovering in fat discrete pockets
on leaves ruffled like the collar
of some ancient lizard

the cat drinks and drinks
moving from one pleated leaf
to the next
his pleasures intersect with mine
deep green quenched
and waiting for the day



EGGPLANTS

each day in your absence
I sit with the eggplants in our garden
and watch them
deep in solanaceous concentration

I whisper to them of fate
baba ganoush moussaka
eggplant salad with basil vinaigrette

once you told me of a man
who tattooed his cock
to look like an eggplant
even now I think of this
when I touch their silkiness

and each day
in their quiet aubergine houses
I watch them swell yearning
in the hot sun
for the cup of an attentive hand



EMAIL FROM VILKOVO
for Greg

I see you in the pale morning
moving through the narrow canals
of the village

*the lilacs you write are heavy
a cash crop for old women
with nothing else to sell
and every tidy garden aches with its growing*

I tell you potato jokes from childhood
mostly my mother aghast
as the neighbour wives
their big bums tipped to the sky
planted the front yards in spuds
we had a ratty lawn some portulaca
different from your people
with their sour cream
and sausage their noisy broken English

you cut through the milky green water
the houses are silent and the air
has not yet turned to day
absentminded you zip your jacket against the damp
and compose today's letter

*you will like it here you write
they grow potatoes in their front yards
it will remind you of home*



STONES

stones settle into earth
like cats in winter
dissolve into the soft shapes of rooms

stones submit to their fates
ease their roots down and down
to the warmed earthy dark

stones keep their quiet history
years pass time beyond counting
and the stars still wander universal vagrants
the breath of humanity blows and is silenced
the earth opens and closes
catastrophe and salvation stalk the hills

where stones live windworn turned to the sky
breathing in unison edging into circles
where the brown grass sways and sways
heedless of the stone dance the old song



BEE PURPLE

We sat on the back porch, my mother, my grandmother, and I, shelling peas. The women smoked, I ate the peas I shelled, but the creamy enamel bowls filled anyway, one high with pods, the other with peas, dewy and fragrant.

It had been a day waiting for a summer storm. Now, in the late afternoon, the storm came, transforming the high prairie sky to low dark cloud. The temperature dropped suddenly and the smell of rain blew in on the rising wind. We counted the seconds between lightning and thunder as the storm drew nearer. The air was thick, weighted down. We were waiting, silent. When the rain came, it started in slow, fat drops that hit the dust and mined shallow craters; soon the yard was slick with mud. I burrowed between my mother's knees and watched the clap and spark of the storm, the rain so heavy it obscured my swing.

When the rain stopped and the others went into the house, I stayed outside. Barefoot, I surveyed the realm of storm, squished mud between my toes, shook the leaves of bushes and soaked my sundress with their pockets of rainwater. The yellow rose bush glowed in the eerie afterlight. The yard was still, holding its breath, the only sound the quiet squelch of my feet in the mud.

Here was the dominion of miracles, a place between absolute silence and the waking sounds of the natural world, rustles and cheeps, the straw-clatter of a broom sweeping water from a porch. I entered a new place here, aware of a whole world on the borders of my consciousness, wishing to be amazed. I stared and stared into the centre of a yellow rose, waiting for the unseen to be made apparent, for the shift of light that would draw me into the flower, into the sweetness that awaits the child who can see bee purple.

