

Boris A. Novak

FATHER

As long as they live, parents stand
with their own bodies between death and us,
their children: destiny appears as if through a curtain.

I was hurt by your thin arms
when you died, o my only father :
still yours, but already foreign, too deep

they fell where I could not reach them,
into the air, yet quite near, here, to the spring
of tears, where I fall upon my face and weep.

In that terrible evening
when we washed the withered body
to return sweet unrest to the all-embracing peace,

I took upon myself, crystal-clear and amazed,
my own human death : since then I
am the father, I am the naked wound desperately

protecting the child against the hailstones
with the death of my own body
that grows from memory into the future

and sings, the rhythm of dance, the snow of farewell.
I fly across to the other side, bound by the law of the flock
of migratory birds, and I cry when I return to you,

my father.

*(on the third anniversary of his death,
December 30th, 1994)*

Tr. by Mia Dintinjana

CONFESSION

Who am I?

A traveller. Away from everything I love,
I travel far, to the end of the world, to an unseen
horizon where I am safely alone: to foreign lands.
My heart is deadly curious. But there is nothing
left here. Everything has been erased. There is only
the vertiginous emptiness: the permanently
frozen beloved faces, the remembered hailstone
of touches, painfully present.

Who am I? A killer.

I behave systematically, cruelly and radically.
From an incomprehensible, but inner necessity.
I flee from all that is known and regular.
Foreign lands sweep over me.
From my birthplace, I have only the wealth
of words: the knife that cuts the sharpest.
Now I write a shameful, lonely letter to all
of you who I love and who I kill, that we are no more.

Who am I? A killer. I kill with my absence.

Tr. by Erica Johnson Debeljak

LETTER

Mysteriously, more often do I think of you
in whom I do not believe. And yet, only
before you in silence does my knee
bend, ripping off the patches
of words and bleeding like in childhood.
You are familiar with the disheartened poverty
of all the hands that share a mortal fear of wounds.
Tell me, Jesus, did it hurt badly?
The lightning of pain tears the night and the palm.
Yet without the wound nothing remains whole.

You, who are not, follow me as a softness,
the first story's fear, the blue snow that wafts
from a dream, a cast-off sword at the bottom of a brook.
With light you shade the light soil of the grave
where I am smothered by evergreen boughs.
I am alone. I cannot cross the thirst
that forever divides our spines,
and yet I feel you close to me, like a shadow.
Tell me, Jesus, did it hurt badly?
Whatever is, or not is, hurts. Unbearably white.

You know what it is to be only for the others.
Not a whit for yourself. To watch your mother
weep alone upon the hill as you leave.
You could do it. You who are not.
Which is why I think of you now.
I cannot endure. Let the measure for my palm
be human, from dawn till dusk.
For the palm is a letter. Meant for touch. For children.
Tell me, Jesus, did it hurt badly?
If I were there, I would take your bleeding hand
in mine. It would make you feel better.

Tr. by Mia Dintinjana

Borders

We gaze at the same full moon... horizons
far away, too far from each other. Mountains
rise between us. A soft, mossy crust
grows over our footsteps. All alone

you crossed all borders and came to a foreign country,
to the homeland of my arms. Dangerously alone
I crawl past the keepers of borders: I travel to the
Northwest, where I am bitterly ashamed

of the screeching of the soul among smooth, horrible walls.
I stand before them, a dark man from the Southeast,
with a conspicuous name, shuddering, as naked as prey.
I cannot escape. Border is destiny.

Now you know: although you cross the border, you don't erase it.
Rising even higher it will measure your steps, like doubt.
A map is not an illusion. So speak more softly.
Beyond all borders your lips are my home.

Tr. by Lili Potpara

ALBA

Beyond the reach of sleepy dawn
in an unmade bed of half-light, fearful
of morning coming down from white mountains
between us with the sword which will not wait,

we lie, one against the other, still warm,
making a poor pretence to sleep,
while my palm, ever more breathlessly,
seeks to hold the willingness of the skin,

that melts beneath a starry touch.
Every instant takes you farther into the distance.
All that remains with me is your hidden picture.

Through the long but all too short night,
your warm head lies upon my shoulders.
And I hide my tears, my miraculous vulnerability.

Tr. by Erica Johnson Debeljak