

Jo Shapcott

War and Peace

The woods of Normandy are hot with stars
underfoot, resistance and memory.
It's the Queen's birthday and we know
the stars are flowers in reality because
today flowers are everywhere for her.
Yellow smoke hangs over the bridge
at Mostar and someone has taken
huge bites out of the town, chewed up
apartment blocks. Yes, it's peacetime.
Grab your shopping trolley at Tesco's
and read the sign: DO NOT HESITATE

WHEN PASSING THROUGH THIS GATE
and you don't, you don't hesitate
knowing you're about to by a world
in the supermarket someone else
lost recently. Peacetime. Here in Mostar
still dressed in yellow smoke. The Queen
marks her anniversary by doing a bungee jump
at Crystal Palace, a two hundred feet plunge,
in full regalia. She yo-yos up and down
as her tiara crashes to the ground.
A mess of yellow clouds passes

Behind the roof of the chateau,
windows and their frames are blown out
and works of art are moved elsewhere.
The problem is not living together, pulling together,
the problem is dying. A little boat
leaves the bridge at Mostar and shudders
towards the white mists of Niagara,
whose plunge and roar is thrilling all the tourists.
Peace. The engines grind against the undertow
as the captain takes us as far into the mist
and thunder as he thinks we dare to go.

Today I am Vogue Model

Giovanni, trained in Paris, has now spent
twenty-three minutes making me up.
Never before have I shown my whole body,
the full length of my torso, the visible
panty line, the unfurled rump to you,
my public.

The photographer has planted me
in deep white space with perspective muddled on
purpose.

I can't stand up straight. He doesn't understand
that I fall over sometimes and, anyway,
leaning is natural. But this is Vogue
where the upright and obedient send out
for anything they like.

The Statue of Liberty
might do better. She is over three
hundred feet high from torch to foundation.
Made of copper sheets beaten out by hand,
her first name was, 'Liberty Enlightening the World.'
She stands up straight without trying, but then
four gigantic steel supports run through her body.

And what will be at stake in this photo?
It's not an explicit language, but look
how I am snarling at the photographer.
I am snarling at his lenses and through it a world
in which my teeth, my eyes, my taste – and not
there words, these little deaths, these individual
devils, these visions of the whole damned lot –
become the way I give out to you.

Motherland

after Tsvetayeva

Language is impossible
in a country like this. Even
the dictionary laughs when I look up
'England' , 'Motherland', 'Home'.

It insists on falling open instead
three times put of the nine I try it
at the word 'Distance' – degree
of remoteness, interval of space.

Distance. The word is ingrained like pain.
So much for England and so much
for my future to walk into the horizon
carrying distance in a broken suitcase.

The dictionary is the only one
who talks to me now, says, laughing,
'Come back HOME!' but takes me
further and further into cold stars.

I am blue, bluer than water.
I am nothing while all I do
is waste syllables this way.

England. It hurts lips to shape
the word. This country makes me say
too many things I can't say. Home
of me, myself, my Motherland.

A Letter to Denis

in memoriam Dennis Potter

Deep in the strangest pits in England, deep
in the strangest forest, my grandfathers
and yours coughed put their silicotic lungs.
Silicosis. England. Land of phlegm
and stereophonic gobbing, whose last pearls
of sputum on the lips, whose boils and tropes
and hallucinations are making me sick.

I have to find a strategic use for fury
as you have taught, old father,
my old butt, wherever you are.
Still rude, I hope, still raucous and rejoicing
in the most painful erection in heaven
which rises through its carapace of sores
and cracking skin to sing in English.

You are as live to me as the tongue
in my mouth, as the complicated shame
of Englishness. Would you call me lass?
Would you heave up any stars for my crown?

La Serenissima

I was on land, but the land didn't belong
to earth anymore, was allowed to rest
in floating patches here and there.
The pavement rippled under my shoes.
Everything I could see belonged to water:
liquid churches, theatres, monuments, houses,
liquid sun and sky. My hands wandered
into water, cupped water. My face turned
towards rainclouds. I could feel the membranes
in my body tremble with the fluid
they contain, and the stately flow of lymph,
the faster pulse of blood. A boat's engine
vibrated through land, through waves, through my feet
into my torso. Slow - slowly moving, I stepped on.