

Aleš Debeljak

Eyewitness in the Garden

If it's true that people call to each other
from solitude to solitude, call one another in vain,
then here, in front of thousands of faces
fixed like statues staring blank and blunt,
I want to look, for the last time, at a flower:
a poppy as it waits for rain, perhaps,
a crocus or tulip refusing to bend,
or an iris that blooms three hours
before it fades—it doesn't matter.
I only want to make doubly sure
the world will be less than perfect
if you miss my being near. I just want
to take you in my hands, squeeze you
at the stem, weigh you and crush you
inside my fist, stagger and turn to liquid
and flow to where no place existed before.
In the air that inhales this fragrance
I want to breathe as long as there is breath,
to trickle through your hair and through
its roots, travel up the stiffened tube
all the way to the petals, at the top I want
to swear like a bead of water
the light shoots through, testify to the vertical
surge and make myself dizzy rising on my own.
The avalanche of blood in my fingers
takes away whatever power I had.
Forgive me if I'm a torrent of the past,
a memory that calls your name to make it stay.

Guardian of Solitaries

I keep forgetting, I forget, lean forward and reach
beneath myself, between the pages of a book
I read with one hand only, by heart I fumble
my way across the lines, toward the gate, through
hallucinations of young nuns who repeat the prayer
so there will be room for what is yet to happen:
for a moment, at least, I'm safe, though I must say
I shiver like a tiny bead of roe, which understands
that soon enough it will become a wave. All I really want
is a faithful manual for saying a private prayer,
courage amid the pattern of stains, beauty inside
a flashlight beam and unspent cartridges. A fidelity
dictated, after all, by someone who, standing
in the rose window of the belfry on that hill,
is, like me, obedient to another will, and caresses me
with a generous hand and lies on top of me, and every hour
expects the plea, the drying seed, to be answered.

Angels, Close Relatives

Homage to Marc Chagall

How there is neither anger nor bliss
on the faces of women, faces of men.
How the glow around their heads is sustained.
We accept it in slow surrender. Their destiny
pinches at the back of the neck. And how,
in their finest clothes, they fly above lost villages,
sift through flour sacks and through the hollow,
carmine sky, as the student of shadows
follows them, alone though not without trouble,
across the dunes, deserted streets, apartments
emptied in ancient ritual, so later he will know
the word for nothing, to comfort the witnesses who prove
how slight their bodies are, how they hover
within the canvas frame, beautiful and sad,
in grains of sand that sheen an hourglass,
how the wings of their coats rustle overhead
as the sand and glass are ground
beneath our feet, along our trail toward home
that doesn't change. Without them sensing
a rapture, or rancor, the freedom our faces feel,
features never given to simple sobbing —
as if tears had some lesson to teach.

Hymn to the Favorite City

The ground is soaked with weeks of high water,
and thieves of sanctuaries beside the lagoon
are on the run, my eyes follow them,
somewhere close, a robin's breast collapses
under the pressure of a thumb: only a little while
before the dock a slender boat leans against
is covered with drops of blood, useless
as a song two people can hardly hear. Well,
maybe it's merely a melody without words.
This city has baptized a dozen generations
in the sacrament of war, but I go on
all the same. I don't have a choice.
The harlequin from the Palazzo Grassi,
the one who inspired Picasso, has meaning for me
only when I see you rendered blue,
faint and luxurious, with the violence
beauty uses to enter certain homes:
indivisible, unable to end, like a cloud
that houses thunder, beneath which I work
my memories and widen channels
and clear out passageways, so the voice
that surges out of you can spill downstairs
to the living room, and cross the yard
in a rush basket I can barely see.
Carried by the echo through whirlpools
and across the shores of death, it says: no.

Blind Faith

Don't leave me, don't run,
cruel like lava across a continent.
Don't slip away, an arrow's shadow
into the writing, the wall. At nightfall
the presence of eyes, never to be forgotten
and big, like saying goodbye to a flag
and its figures, delivered to your mercy
long ago—has it really been years?—
me, a fugitive, fleeing from errors,
rumors that turn into family legend
sure as the embers of houses turn
to stone. Don't leave me now
as my debtors have left me, don't send me
back to the foot of a cross, silent on a hill,
or the towns where I wandered
streets lined with trees, trying to get rid of
semen that boils, looking for refuge
in fur that itches and wets at the very sight.
Don't leave me now, as I do not
abandon the harvest fruit, I smear it on you
wherever you want me to. Every move
of your body a test, trying me and the truth,
your panting says you'll stay here
after all. I give up myself, ask nothing.
Don't want to interrupt these hands
that steal, like gun smugglers, along the inner
arch of your thighs, celebrating the rare hours.
In the name of a law known only to you
you bend me, tenderness to the tight cord,
and multiplied by a hundred under the eyelids
you drone and take my sight away from me.

Translated from Slovenian by Andrew Zawacki and the author