

Herberto Helder, from *Flash*

Translated by Alexis Levitin

IV

Mouth.  
Brûlure, blessure. Where  
the many channels disembody, as the word has it.  
Pure consumption, or in a murmur,  
amidst venous blood, or  
a trace of flame. Gangrene,  
music,  
a bubble.  
The awful art of passion.  
A monstrous pore that breathes the world.  
In it the dark, the breath,  
burnt air are crowned.  
Gold, gold.  
Sonorous tube through which the body filters.  
All of it, flowing away.

## IX

I wouldn't want you broken by the four elements.  
 Or caught by touch alone;  
 or smell,  
 or flesh heard beneath the working of the moons  
 in the water's deepest mesh.  
 Or to watch the operation of a star between your arms.  
 Or that falconry alone darken me like a blow,  
 the quivering nourishment among linens piled  
 high  
 upon the beds.

Magnificence.

It raised you up  
 in music, a naked wound  
 —terrified by richness—  
 that black jubilation. It raised you up in me, a crown.  
 It made the world tremble.

And you burned my mouth, pure  
 spoon of gold, swallowed  
 alive. Our tongue glittered.  
 I glittered.  
 Or else that, nailed together into a single, on-going nexus,  
 a marble stalk of cane  
 be born from a unity of flesh.  
 And someone passing cut the breath  
 of braided death. Anonymous lips, in the gasping  
 of arduous male and female  
 intertwining, creating a new organ within order.  
 That they might modulate.  
 With flickering tips of flames, faces throbbed, bursting into plumage.  
 Animals drank, filling themselves with the rushing of water.  
 The planets closed themselves in that  
 forest of sound and unanimous  
 stone. And it was us, this violent splendor, transformer  
 of the earth.

Name of the world, diadem.

## Untitled

I swallowed  
water. Deeply-water dammed within the air.  
A maternal star.  
And I am here devoured by a sobbing,  
weightless from my face.  
The glass made of star. The water so powerful  
in the glass. My nails are black.  
I grab hold of that glass, drink from that star.  
I am innocent, uncertain, quivering, potent,  
tumescant.  
The illumination that the stationary water draws from me  
from my hands to my mouth.  
I enter spacious places.  
—The power of an unknown food to shine  
in me; my face,  
when a dark hand grazes it, above  
the shirt sodden with blood,  
below hair dried by moonlight. I swallowed  
water. The mother and the demonic child  
were seated on the red rock.  
I swallowed deep  
deep water.

### Untitled

I cannot listen to such icy singing. They are singing  
about my life.

They have brought forth the taciturn purity of the world's  
vast nights.

From the ancient element of silence that devastating  
song arose. Oh, ferocious world of purity,

oh, incomparable life. They are singing and singing.

I open my eyes beneath silent waters,

and I see that my memory is the furthest thing  
of all. They are singing icily.

I cannot listen to their song.

And if they were to say: your life is a rosebush. See  
how it drinks in the anonymity of the season.

Blood drips from you when it's the time for roses.

Listen: aren't you lost in wonder

at the subtlety of the thorns and the tiny leaves?

—If they were to say something, I would be graced  
with a boundless name.

Do not sing, do not blossom.

I cannot feel life filling up this way

like an icy song and a rosebush

so spread out in me.

It could be this season of the year remained untouched,  
and my existence suddenly was flooded  
by all that fervor.

I see my ardent sharpness drain until it merges with maturity  
in a confluent

summer's minute.—Would I now be  
complete for death?

No, do not sing that memory of everything.

Neither the rosebush on blood-streaked fragile

flesh, nor summer with its

symbols of ferocious plenitude.

I would like to think my fingers, one by one,  
a zither dropped into my work.  
All of sadness like an admirable life  
filling up eternity.  
Songs like ice leave me a desert, and the rosebush  
sows discord among recoiling  
roses. Listen: in the sadness of enormous summer  
the oneness of my blood collapses.  
I myself cold sing a masculine name,  
my entire life  
so strong and sullied, so filled with the heated silence  
of what we do not know.

It isn't sung, it doesn't blossom. No one  
ripens in the middle of their life.  
Slowly one touches a suspended part of one's body  
and a high sadness purifies one's fingers.  
For a man is not a song of ice or  
a rosebush. He is not  
a fruit as if among inspiring leaves.  
A man lives a deep eternity that closes  
over him, but there his body  
burns beyond all symbols, without a soul and pure  
as an ancient sacrifice.

Upon icy songs and terrifying rosebushes,  
my connected flesh nourishes the miraculous silence  
of a vast life.

It could be that all is well in the pluralness  
of an intense world. But  
love is a different power, flesh  
lives from its absorbed permanence. The life  
of which I speak  
does not drain away or feed our daily  
superlatives. Unique,  
eternal, it hovers above the hidden fluidity  
of all motion.

—A rosebush, even though  
incomparable, covers everything with its crimson distraction.  
Behind the night of drooping  
roses, the flesh is sad and perfect  
like a book.

**Herberto Helder** (b. 1930), Portuguese of Jewish descent, is one of the most influential poets after the modernist Fernando Pessoa. The first edition of his collected poetry, *Poesia toda*, appeared in 1981; several new editions have been published since then. In recent years he published *A faca não corta o fogo. Símula e inédita* (2008), and *Ofício cantante* (2009). His short-story collection masterpiece, *Os passos em volta*, was published in 1963.

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