

From *Flash*

Herberto Helder

Translated by

Alexis Levitin

IV

Mouth.

Brûlure, blessure. Where

the many channels disembogue, 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,
tumescent.

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.

Alexis Levitin's publications include contributions to *APR*, *Chelsea*, *Grand Street*, *Partisan Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New England Review*, and *Kenyon Review*. He has published twenty-three books, including *Forbidden Words: Selected Poetry of Eugénio de Andrade* (New Directions, 2003), and *Guernica and Other Poems* by Carlos de Oliveira (Guernica Editions, 2004). Levitin also translated poetry by Herberto Helder and Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, a project begun under a 2003-2004 NEA Translation Fellowship.
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