

ANNIVERSARY, 2019: SANT'ANNA di STAZZEMA

I

Another milestone, my aunt tells me,
three-quarters of a century, and yet the memory
of it never slips into an emptiness,
never more than disappears.

The language hasn't changed, nor the trees this August,
the lawn splurging abundantly with weeds.
But this is what we know of peace, a gentle breeze
that blossoms in the moment.

Whenever she speaks, I try to understand,
her English still coated under a heavy accent
even after all these years, but I manage
to string the syllables into words, the words into phrases.

The barns were burned, she says; the livestock
were tortured and slaughtered by the few
who had only sought to drive their spears
into a body of blood and flesh. But the animals

did not run, they did they not fight back and kill.
It's that distant thread to the animal in *us*,
clothed in human form, so perhaps the animals
simply took pity on them, rendering them inhuman.

II

Almost everything reverberates in total recall
like a breeze fluttering through the leaves.
The spirit transforms into another spirit
between the then and now, echoing the memories

of the same event. She wishes
that she could hold them in her hands like a ball
that she could throw into a field of tall grass,
forget where it lands. But it was she who had landed

beneath her mother when the bullets shot a long line
of buttonholes into the flesh and bone
of every woman and child there. A massacre—
blood gushing out like a red tidal wave over the few

wearing the blackest swastikas. An enemy stealing
more fortune than thieves, killing more
than just the shadows. DONE, they claimed,
IN THE NAME OF PATRIOTISM!

III

She remembers the barn, an old scythe
propped against the wall that somehow caught the eye
of the light filtering in from the hayloft window.

She remembers her mother turning her back on the guns;
how she wrapped her body around her like a robe—
the same as she did on those nights when they sat fireside,

the war peering through the window as her mother
told her stories about love. But love speaks
in a visual language to a child just as hatred does in war.

It was in the soldiers' eyes, she says.
That's where it begins, where a child knows to look.
She saw the iris in the soldiers' eyes kindle a bloody orange,

the pupils bursting into tiny flames. The only love she felt
was in her mother's arms tightening around her waist
like a belt that held her securely in place.

The last thing she had seen before she and her mother fell
was the scythe. What did it mean, that scythe? Why,
she asks, would she even remember it?

IV

Eighty-one years are sewn tightly into every wrinkle
in her face, into every strand of hair that she coiled
into a topknot. How much longer will she live to remember
a child too bruised to crawl out of a graveyard?

Every anniversary, she would sit for an hour or two
among imaginary headstones, as she is now,
and wait for the sun to casually wander down
to the horizon where the light would soon begin to dash

like a child into the dark. She would watch the moon
as it would sometimes rise in full, crowned in a glow of citrine
high above a metropolis of stars. The sky at night.
It would always remind her of that day in the war

when she learned how to focus her eyes so that she could see
in the dark. A star would emerge as the supreme sparkler,
the one and only to fire asterisks into that space
where so many others were pulled at the end of their lives.

V

After all these years, she still remembers
her mother's face; remembers her mother's eyes,
warm and dark like a double shot of espresso
that would sometimes spill over her lashes at the mere whisper

of her husband's name. He had joined a brigade of partisans
to rip out the swastikas, wring out the black shirts
and hang them upside down on the clothesline to dry.
Gone for months into the dark, a secret plan for disruption,

tying their hope to the boxcars of victory.
She remembers her mother telling her in a voice
that was a soft blend of almond and flowers to not ask
about Papa. *You must never speak of him, no, not to anyone.*

That was the day when the air was littered with ash,
when the blood and bone were all too fragile.
When at last her father returned, it was to a fog of smoke
that hung like laundry on a line that went from house

to house, from barn to barn. A stillness
of where he would find the dead, the fallen women,
infants not yet reaching the canal of childbirth.
Where there had been a house, a terminal of children

lay smothered in ashes. The church, drained of its color,
lost its effect, the pews were used for burning,
corpses tossed onto a funeral pyre. Never again
had there been a time in her life that was as dangerous,

she tells me, her withered fingers slipping through
her mother's beads, dangling a silver Crucifix.
The enemy had left it behind along with all the useless
and unsparing things their hands had done.

VI

Someone had carried her away from the barn,
away from the cold stiffness of her mother's arms.
Her father had found the scythe, used it to cut through

to the deeper roots of survival. She would leave behind the hills
and the olive trees, the spirit of the flesh in the empty fields
and step into the foreground of a new geography,

mapping the distance into tomorrow. It's where she would find
an aisle of sunlight, the perfume and the flowers of a world
that was no longer invisible. And yet, the light has never strayed

from the memory. It keeps its presence; its shadow,
a brushstroke on the calendar, always linked to the country
she never went home to and to the life she never lived.

DEPARTURE

A child at the age of ten, with your hand in your father's,
you left your home, the ghostlike chill of a Tuscan village

lying between the broad-shouldered hills and the sea,
the olive trees and the stone. The war was several years

over by then and the past, having been buried
beneath the anguish of monuments, was never meant to stray

from the starting point of another story.
And so you remember the home that you left as a shrine

with its poetry and its art, its lullabies of love, its mirror
of memories that hung on the wall, often reflecting

the grief in your father's eyes that had forever widowed
his heart. For years, he smelled the smoke in the olive trees,

the toasted straw in the barn where the women and children
fell, saw the ash and debris of what had been real,

ever so fragile, land in the foreground. It's what a war
will do, he told you, those daily reminders that are visibly lit

and recurring. And yet, on the day of departure,
with your hand in your father's, you stood on the deck

of the ship, its horn, a blaring bassoon, awakening the moment
to be lived, as far as it would take you from the wet rope

and sea salt—and the simple charms you might have packed
with whatever else had been put into your baggage.

AMERICA, HOME, FREEDOM

of the bells, the words your father had spoken
in your native tongue until his voice was mute.

It burned from hunger, a wartime eruption,
burned from a spirit digging for hope

beneath the rising peaks of ash. Yet this new home,
had in its English translation a bedrock austerity: tenements,

fire escapes, alleyways and trash cans, the asphalt
and pavement, all beyond salvation, longing for the nutrients

of the soil, the fresh Tuscan green of the olive groves
you had run through as a child—the rareness of things lost.

It's where the rays of the sun will try to squeeze through,
shell shocked by brick and mortar, the yellow hydrants,

laundry hung out on the line where the anatomy of streets,
in full dress, are attached to the nametags

of their own "little" country. And yet, there's a sense
of permanence, embodied in nostalgia, a trusted unity

among the poorest and the most common, invisibly shadowed
and fearing to speak of a greater desire in this new land.

But it's here, that your ancestral mothers and grandmothers
will take you in, show you where in the pews of a church

you can pray when no one else is there. And always
through the tolling of the bells, a life interrupted,

the tiny haloes of the votive candles flicker with the hope,
the promise, and the dream of a world unknown.

A DREAM OF SEEING YOUR MOTHER

Her smile defeating grief, kept alive by the spirit.
It is an image that embodies the light she moves through,

eternally sealed in the moment, free of the flesh.
She brings you into her garden, shows you where to look,

a gap that is not quite visible amid the trumpet flowers
and the angel. It's where a spider is binding its web

to a wing, spiraling like an acrobat in midair,
a perfect balancing act in the dark.

What it does is to simply follow a pattern,
a natural tendency to continue its delicate cycle

from beginning to end, an invisible net to catch
whatever it can as if it can bind the real to the imagined,

the real to the passage of time. It's in that space
you see your mother, where every now and then the light

will strike a match to whatever is dark, a tiny flame
in the network of lace between a wing and a petal,

the past and the present, enduring, yet vulnerable—
that single thread to which you are bound to not let go.

YOUR MOTHER'S SEWING BOX

Vintage Florentine,
a painted replica of Madonna
of the Goldfinch on the lid, sealing within
a garden of multi-colored thread, a pin cushion bush,
and buttons strewn all over like seeds.

You lift the lid and the blue sky
suddenly ascends. What we have seen is a pattern
cut into a triangle, the Madonna, a warm light
on this side of the field, vigilant
of two children;

one, holding a goldfinch
that will one day pluck a thorn from the bush.
It's what she left behind that day, a sudden interruption
in a patchwork landscape; her death, a seam ripper
that had cut into the fabric

of what she had yet to sew into a lifetime.
Everything she touched, and saved for future use,
is still kept under the lid: her thimble,
shining like a star into the eye of the needle
she would push and pull

through whatever she needed to mend.
Her measuring tapes, now tangled like honeysuckle
in a world preserved around the many spools
of color, seemingly without end
in what had been left undone.

You were the child, the one
holding the goldfinch; your mother, a warm light
as it had been then on this side of the field; and as it is now,
to be kept for years under the lid that separates
the ordinary from the divine.

