

CAFÉ EUROPE – HAVANA

Literary Café

Carles Torner; *Detranslating Europe*

Translated by Pauline Ernest

Detranslating Europe

The day is mild, the light is generous.
One summer Sunday
I saw the green coffins: two hundred and eighty two
of those eight thousand.
Dark part of the shadows, empty image of what had been
Srebrenica, your eyes are held, glaze over
see nothing.
Now I see nothing.
With my eyes, I pick up the spade.
I return in darkness
And return to you in response to your cry,
as if the route and your cry
were a flash of lightning twisting back in search
of a future alphabet. As if the cry were you,
voice, travelling on:
not a single cry, and all are cries.

I return in darkness, Bashkim,
because you've asked me to explore
what hidden geography
runs through the lines I'm now writing.
So I pick up the spade,
put on my speleologist's helmet,
switch on the torchlight of the psalms
and at the first bend, underground,
I come across you, reading:
a hole in the map only to be filled by
the hesitation and compassion

suggested by your eyes. What is there
further on? I move a bit deeper,
to the roots of this
hurried poetry: mapping things out like
a cartographer,
daring myself to be capable of preparing a poem
requested by a friend, to form part of a dialogue
with writers worldwide and come face to face
with the mothers embracing
the green coffins around which
from Vukovar to Srebrenica
all the voices are speechless
my whole voice
burns in poems
the pending
filiation.

What does it mean what do I mean what do you mean
when we cross when you cross when they cross
the market square and Kraków
emerges stripped bare
when you open wide
the window, the page:
The day was mild, the light was generous.
The German on the cafe terrace
held a small book on his lap.
I caught sight of the title:
'Mysticism for Beginners'.

But you read Zagajewski
without knowing a word of Polish
you translate translations
as if, by looking, you can flatten the angles
of houses where people live, shouting at their children
to get out of bed
to stay at the table till they finish their food
to see that books are sacred
and to devour, bathe and seek refuge in them
while the children, like beggars, search for eyes
- eyes -!
In order to comfort them
you soften the houses
with your translations of translated lines
while their origin escapes you
and you tell me it doesn't matter, Catalans, it doesn't matter:
we translate into the language of a country with no shape
where, day after day, our old outlines are erased
shrunk, perforated, uncontrollably deformed
how can we translate them, dilute ourselves, survive?

my beggar's hands request different eyes
- eyes to see with!

No shape, do you understand?
In the morning you wake up
not knowing whether you'll still have feet
for your shoes and in the mirror your tongue
stumbles, stammers, uncertain, nonetheless
emerging from a country
which is and isn't
nonetheless, nonetheless, nonetheless
a voice with no voice chants litanies
repeats translated words:

I caught sight of the title:

'Mysticism for Beginners'
Suddenly I understood that the swallows
patrolling the streets of Montepulciano
with their shrill whistles
and the hushed talk of the timid travellers
from Eastern, so-called Central Europe
and the white herons standing – yesterday? the day before? –
like nuns in fields of rice,
and the dusk, slow and systematic,
erasing the outlines of medieval houses
and olive trees on little hills,
abandoned to the wind and heat,
and the head of the Unknown Princess
that I saw and admired in the Louvre

and also the head of my princess
I know her, I call her
and she doesn't want to turn round
and then she returns my call
while she tosses in bed,
now you'll do it: make a map of me
Sara will make
the three angels laugh
now you'll say: take this, you're blind, sterile
now

Ruth comes she's removed her vest
and has a piercing in her breast
a golden sickle
hanging and jangling
and the unknown woman
has arranged to meet me with three faces
and the third is called my impatience
love is a little bag of letters
which spends the night between your breasts
and empties everything, honours you and is
infinite and not patience at all

translating Zagajewski's poem
wanting, hoping, longing for the poem
to be something that can be translated
not leftovers protesting out of reach

giving birth to foreigners spat onto the beach
in the golden light with no papers
with no paper or ink or alphabet
just the weeping learning to be a voice
the weeping that will bring forth the missing
that gives birth to a mother
greetings beautiful life
welcome beautiful one!
newly-born and already formed
suddenly
and you have a name
a woman's name.
Unknown, Sara, Ruth
you're the voice of a lineage
from which a mother has been born
without papers but with a name, her shape
slippery, weeping, explosive
rebellious, naïve brightness
root, lineage, missing
wherever we grow we become trees, trunks, badly pruned
consonants, vowels
huddled on the branches
prayers, lullabies, art
only art breaks the circle
*And the hushed talk of the timid travellers
from Eastern, so-called Central Europe
and the white herons standing – yesterday? the day before? –
like nuns in fields of rice,
and the dusk, slow and systematic,
erasing the outlines of medieval houses
and olive trees on little hills,
abandoned to the wind and heat,
and the head of the Unknown Princess
that I saw and admired in the Louvre
and stained-glass windows like butterfly wings
sprinkled with pollen,
and the little nightingale practicing
its speech beside the highway, and any journey, any kind of trip,
any trip also means the trips
you haven't made, that you'll never make again
only art breaks the circle*

which tries to conceal the criminal destruction of Muslims
at Srebrenica
making you choose either pious silence or obscene
banality when we are all born as
foreigners spat onto a beach, with no papers

with nothing you can write your name with
Europe is the Dutch government resigning
it's the great Mazowiecki resigning
it's millions of writers playing at being neutral
while Dobrica Cosic writes the foundations
of ethnic cleansing
it's resignation, erasing ones own name

and falling to ones knees on the beach
of this poem, Bashkim,
which is unable to admit its total failure
to translate one word, in time, failing
to know when it's time

at the required time when we have to dig with spades
and give birth to our own mother
uprooted

In a bookshop in Kraków
I read a title: "Mysticism for Beginners".
I suddenly understood that the image
of the green coffins with the embracing mothers, in the newspaper,
and the invitation from Bashkim
who wears his geography tattooed on his eyes
and my country, which has no shape
and Zagajewski's poem
which I can't translate
and the permanent present which is Srebrenica
and that PEN congress at the end of the century
which was the place where we admitted failure
so as not to waste our breath, our words
and the small sickle above the field of stars
and the laughter of the three angels
and the small ancient bag of letters
worn between your breasts each night

and de-giving birth to, de-translating
Europe back to its origins
in order to rise up again with them,
to give birth to ones own mother
and me calling her
and she not wanting to turn round
*and any journey, any kind of trip,
are only mysticism for beginners,
the elementary course, prelude
to a test that's been
postponed.*