

HISTORY LESSON

“What a glorious day,” my uncle says as he sits by me.
There is an April light dripping gold on the trees,
blue hyacinth bells swaying under the weight of bees
heavy with pollen, and us, on the stairs to the porch,
eye feasting on the beauty of morning.

Uncle is shriveled-thin, white haired, his black coat
thread-bare at the elbows, loose on the shoulders,
wool socks on his feet, as if part of him still dwells in winter.
He doesn’t say much, coughs a lot. His body trembles
fighting for air like a dangling fish on a hook.

Last week he returned from Alba Labor Camp.
Mother touches my lips with a finger,
But child, don’t say the words, not aloud.
The walls have ears. Doors open to evil men.
At night, monsters wander the village roads.

I don’t ask. I wait for the word to unfurl its meaning
like a bud of white peony in that *palm of heaven*
Grandmother calls her garden, mostly on Sundays
when she skips church and reads her prayers
in the cool shade of our mulberry tree.

“Beauty to heal the wounds of the world,” Uncle says
as if he is selling the view as remedy for the feeble.
I watch him looking, but he is not in the looking.
There is sadness in his hands resting on knees,
sorrow like frost mist at the fringes of his body.

I shiver, want to run to Mother, yet I don’t leave
that nameless place of fear, as if I want to learn it by heart.
What did I, a child of five or six, knew of prisons?
Of bones splintered by hammers, nails thrust into fingers,
of men killing men?
History lessons taught at home begin with silence.

Elena Lelia Radulescu
28938 Endeavor River Rd
Katy, TX 77494
Elena.radulescu@hotmail.com

THE SILVERWARE

The story goes that my mother
and her older sister buried
the family silverware
under a quince tree
in full view of the moon,
three days before the Russians
marched in.

Did mother ask God
to safeguard the tiny spoons
fit for a child's mouth,
her beloved bell-singers
at the hour of sweet linden tea?

Did my aunt's fingers touch
her husband's prints
left on the knife blade
when he carved a roasted lamb
at All Saints' Day Feast?
Did she think of him caught
between birch trees and bullets
on that gruesome green land
by the elbow of Dniester River?

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Katy, TX 77494
Elena.radulescu@hotmail.com

EVENING MOMENT

“If I go before you,”
says the husband,
“give my hedge trimmer
to our next-door neighbor.”

“If I die before you,”
says the wife,
“remember to water the orchids,
once a week. They’ll bloom
in the spring.”

Behind a window glass,
the couple watches the sky
turn pewter-blue
above the craggy hills.

There are no more words
only silence,
so deep they can hear
the wind pluck the trees,
and the last golden leaves
tripping on air, falling.

“We are here now,”
finally, the man says.
“Yes, we are.” the woman echoes
and closes the window curtains.

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Katy, TX 77494
Elena.radulescu@hotmail.com

AFTER THE FUNERAL

We return to the house
where we grew up and apart,
my brother and I,
two strangers bonded by loss.

We clean Mother's room,
remove the black cloth
from the old, tarnished mirror.
For three days the veil
has covered her soul
adrift in the silvery brume.

My brother works fast,
lifts chests, sweeps corners,
his trembling hands crave
the shape of a glass,
the brandy that lures and
numbs with kisses of fire.

I linger, sit on her chair,
finger the curtain, a fold
in the lace hugging the light;
leaf through her book
eager to hear a word trapped inside
like a rare edelweiss
left between pages.

Brother steps out for a smoke.
Half-hearted I follow.
He talks about money and lawyers,
money and our family land
seized by the state
long before we were born.

His litany of lost hopes
rains cold between us
as we sit on the porch
looking out at the blue
shades of September
rolling in from the hills,
announcing my leave,
the distance we share.