

István László G.

Burger King

As if their heads were conkers,
brown cracks of light pressing through split cases,
the men eat.
They don't think about women, the waiting years,
but unravel instead the grease – proof paper,
the mayo bleeding the white napkins,
and sink into the burgers,
pulling away like gauze from half-healed skin.
The food turns in their mouths,
gropes about the palate of bone
as if it might be born in this swallowing,
the men eat, alone.

translated from the Hungarian by Owen Sheers

The Fishmonger

This then, is the age of the fishmonger, not the fisherman –
his cap tipped as a sergeant's, unsteady on his quiffed head
as he sizes up punters, measuring their movements.

He reaches for a carp as easily as you or I
might dip our hand into a bucket of apples,
feels for the fish, his ingrown nail smarting in the salty water,

and lifts it out, understanding as only he can,
the foil disc of the silver eye, the wight of the blade,
the engine-stroke of his heart, finely tuned to this cruel kindness.

Understanding as only he can, the spot between the knuckles
where a nail might enter as if through butter,
how to slice flash as others cut celery,

how to pare his speech as he might men
were he hurt and pushed to fight.

But like a tree hit by lightening, there is no healing bark

about his struck heart and the wood and the trunk's centre
pulses and grasps for growth like a fish
struggling for its last breath as if biting the air for water.

(Owen Sheers' adaptation)

Headwaiter

Not his strength; he employs his accurate
gaze, his deodorant-tone; a sleepy
musician disregarding his beat,
he moves things around – waste paper, stained table-cloths,
drips of wax varnishing his nails, a blindly
accomplished ritual among the paraphernalia
of the acolyte's long service.

table five wants the bill.

There is no elevation of the host, but the palming of the tip,
starched thanks.

Flat footed. Casual attention. reserved,
measured rests.

In his head, the faces of his guests are a graveyard.

A ritual without *kaddish*, as if he's digging,
he brings in round upon round, the orders for *afters*.
So many stomachs for the earth to swallow down,
to inter, invisibly. A new company.

Elegiac pose, sweet laughter, the gourmet's salad of leaves.

Salt is spilled. A plate slips, falls.

Every one is family, every one bereaved.

Every one is happily deceased.

translated from the Hungarian by Antony Dunn

Cronos

He hated order. The promise of fire dissolved
inside him in the noise of thunder, he could not
bear his spirit being trapped in a vice.
Lava suppresses orders, goodness has no space there
even Rhea he loved only so he could lock her
in the orbit of his appetite, true passion does not
decide people's fates, he imprisoned her
in his hands, in the tree-roots that formed about his body
and never even looked at her. Then she remained alone
her eyes yet brighter till her clumsy female body cracked,
and she thrust a new face into mortality, a face like hers.
That, he had to swallow. His roots suppressed the rising
body, there was to be no flowering once broken,
without a trunk, no allowing a helpless ember
to start glowing, no sudden realisation between
two voids that one should not leave an heir or god,
no kind of pleasure. Because even immortal life,
when subject to fate, makes one nervous, like
the earth-sky horizon line on the sea, stuck between
mother and father, while shoreless within. He
saw it in Rhea's deepening iris, understood what order
required, that each new generation locked out
his heart. To look on children was like searching about
in a hard current and finding in place of your eyes
two stones.

Translated from the Hungarian by George Szirtes

Abraham

You have to laugh at those aging thighs
when they sag a little propping up that torso,
they struggle even downhill on a slope,
the thinning beard, the sparse body-hair
a transparent layer to veil the body
the way the knowledge of death is a cataract on the soul.
Hang on and laugh if your desire should flower
among weeds, if the orphaned blossom of early
winter shares your fate and launches
an avalanche, a generation; the word is weed
but out of its loins springs a promise
to the fateless, to reproduce at last, in vain.
Laugh at yourself and hang on to your stick
as to the present day, grin with your toothless
gums between aged thighs, as if Sara were giving
birth into the wind, the child an uprooted marrow,
and carve your old face henceforth into the newborn
into its infant mouth and laugh, laugh at Isaac.

translated by George Szirtes

Mary

On his foot a fly alighted, inching along
the wound. On top of his apple-shape
bigtoe-nail it rubbed its forehands, as if
mocking a prayer. After the drowning
the body unbends, cracking, from the cramp,
when the breath gets shortened and frozen, the time passed
is a split of ice. How long we watch this? The soldiers
look up from guffaw, they spy the relief
of their headache, like the soothsayer
sees the overcast sky, yet the word is born
in me, my son, for I need no conscience,
nothing conscious, for me you have taken
nothing on you, immaculate and alone
I stand. Just I. On the way home the dust
in the sandals rubbes red the sole, just I
think of myself always, not of you, even now,
even the taste of vinegar in my mouth gets mixed
with other spices, for the bereavement, the decay
avoid me, they fear me like the living the carcass,
the sea the moon, I watch your erosion,
the void where your face was, like one
who can become a statue, but never a human.

translated from the Hungarian by István Géber

The Road to Autumn

In the leather-covered back seat of the taxi
you nestled in beside me as if about
to lay an egg. You might even have been
wearing furs like a bird in a wrap, our driver
puffing at his cigar, bored and insolent. You extended
your nails the way a predator hands over
its prey, what's it to do with me? I rubbed
at the lacquer with the ball of my finger like someone
waiting a long time for this. The rain wept in the street,
sparking off mudguards as if each street corner
were lighting a match. You too lit you cigarillo as if
you could taste it, silent, glittering and twitching
in your mouth. I never could bear pregnant women.
The silence sits in them like a stone. I have never needed
that sleepy look at the heart of which nothing is dreaming
only time. What after all is there to bequeath to posterity?
How many more streets before we get out of the taxi. There are
birds, possibly penguins, where it is the father
that broods over the hatchlings, but we are fine as we are.
I talk of this or that, that we'll soon be there. When we arrive
you at last confess that you never wanted children. There's blues
of some sort playing, I don't ask the driver to turn it off.
Emergency of course, the hospital. I tug at you till
you're out as if I were delivering you from the narrow taxi.

translated by George Szirtes

The cat

Cats without mice are pointless, no use
to anyone, they guard kings on their deathbeds,
their gaze the farside of the significant moment
willing to help the fresh-out-of-the egg
bird-shaped mess on the car or the bins
to its death, to spread an infection that is not
a disease but scratches away under the skin
of conscience, to keep sharpening their nails
while feeling an aversion to time, disgusted
that what confronts them, here, in the misted mirror
does not fill it and cannot address them –
because there is no trace of night in those eyes,
which are light without shadow bare as
plain canvas. The true aristocrats are those
who fossick among rotten grapes and tin cans
to discover someone's jar of cockles
while their whiskers never get dirty
who eat with indifference even when hungry
the way time gazes through trees.

translated by George Szirtes

The Lake

As if the water were of bone,
its spinal arch, rib, shoulder blade thickened
into a body by the current of waves.
I cannot swim in this, I said.
Nobody sent you, never allured you.
The sharpness of the sun, a disk tattooed
on the sky, beamed from a deeper blindness.
No need to submerge, the surface is calm –
the lake, like a secret too soon disclosed,
became boring and simple. I knew
it would taste sweet, yet in my mouth
the rock salt started cracking like popping candy.
So how many heads you have? Someone asked.
So how many? Just one. Then plunge alone.
As if the water were of bone – on it
the shadow of my head-on dive, an X-rayed fracture.

translated by István Géber

Feast

You salt food within an inch of its life
the way the man who was frightened by pigeons
strangled them in the square. A grunt.
Food required. City squares can accumulate like this,
in an overcrowded place they multiply at tourist tempo,
street opens on street, meals turn aggressive.
You salt your meat, you blanch it
among stolen silences, between bites,
with razor thin lips you chew the fat,
nod dumb answers to unasked questions.
Whoever clears up will be master here, crumbs
shards, everywhere the wreckage of what has been swallowed,
the table laid with bones only, spattered tablecloths,
the leftovers like a pair of wings, fly on
deep in recumbent bodies, with no particular route

translated by George Szirtes

In the *Cukrászda*

The marzipan rolled along the cold marble-topped
table of the *cukrászda*. Your teeth sparkle
like fake jewels, the taste of coffee, a dull
afternoon. All you do is ask questions,
each a rusted hook snagging under the skin. Your mouth
smells of standing sugar, in the midst of your
questioning you fiddle with your thumb
picking dirt from under the nails of your ring finger.
Believe me, if you made me sick I would not
be sitting here with you. I patiently hear out questions
that make my head ache and think of grandchildren
sitting on my knee. You would forget to go
and fetch them, you'd stuff their mouth with giblets,
you'd call me pappy in front of them because it's 'nicer'.
Yes, and you'd have a double chin too, but not of fat,
your dewlap wobbling each time you asked a question.

translated by George Szirtes

If You Were Not

If you could turn away from me, my Lord,
a space would open – to live again – for me,
as if you were not – so I would have to be:
a devotion – locked in the dispersed soul,
like a prayer placed into opened hands,
to the place of breath – wording another word,
a shift of falling asleep to awaking,
to rest in light, to fear of darkening:
so that – in rest of night, or fear of light –
you can't try turning away from me, my Lord.
Just looking back on you – I can't afford.

Translated by István Géber

Down to Sleep, Thy Soul to Keep

You can't burn my Lord, for the burning
is inconsumable, and you hold the cloud
in your face – please, don't try to water
my world: it is not your own.

You can't soak either my Lord, for your eyes
still remind us of the flame,
although from your burnt-out gaze the soul
flies sooner off, as you may well know that
there is no phoenix, only a casual wing
without a bird: so is the case my Lord.

In a reversed world now you can't play Noah –
I'd sooner make my peace with thy
self, and scratch my sign on the sky,
than seeing you send off, to re-hold,
again and again, from hand to hand,
for the bough your beakless herold.

translated by István Géber

Navigare

In the grimy-white foam of the sink the green
stone of your ring is a tossing boat.
I don't take you along, no evening in common.
As yet I don't know that your face will peel
off you and out of your yearning, like a migrating
bird seeks a new continent. You are
wrapped in growing terpine smell and covered
by petrified cave-layers of many springs,
their fragrance you feel only in your sheets.
Don't touch me, please, for I'm tired.
I like the point-light of your eye searching
where there is nothing to find – domesticated
greed, you conquer a lot with it. I can't see
as yet, that you seek the way out of your body
with such a rage as you look back now.
Why don't you take off your ring? The stone
gets soaked out, I don't know, pitted by the chemical.
Your anger shows a colour of wax, almost
a devotion – flutter of wings in your throat, deep swallowed
time in which, under so many wrinkles, I'll seek
among the hieroglyphes of your face a chance
to know, until the bored dissector arrives, if there is
still a way to navigate with you, some time.

translated by István Géber

Tired Theseus

You took down the pale blue garbage-bag
with yogurt caps, banana skins, colours
like tired oil. So much remains
after us by the morning, a streak of dust
on the bathtub, lipstick on the tiles, your gaze
lined with scale. With dull, used up kindness
you rest your hand in mine. The memory too
ferments, the time in common, like cider does –
I always wake up to the smell of something sour.
Perhaps the carpets. So many patterns in them,
to follow those – to roam about with you
in the usual comfortable maze. You clean
the corners, the dust bunnies crawl out
tiredly, they feed on air, you bend your grey
figure like one who rented a life
in advance. I close my eyes. I could furnish
a space without you.

translated by István Géber

Crystal-study

Your neckline, like a glacier
among the ice-slopes of your skin, displays
that it's cold under the surface. Often
you look at me. I don't mind. A waning
moon is your soul, the sickle thinning
until new moon. Some women, I'm saying
this offstage, have between their fingers
a web of ice, these are watery creatures.
Now tell me, when I get home would you help me off
with my coat, putting on the rack whatever
can be stuffed on a hanger of a day, saying
perhaps, I missed you, like someone
who drops a cube of ice in the crystal glass
and offers the treat clinking, your pearly nails
would never reach to the dish,
such a one
dreams frost on my sight when she doesn't even
look me in the eye, gazing at the mirror,
on her own light, forever skating.

translated by István Géber

The Jungle

It was dark like the inside of a
piano, the twanging of the instrument
fills your eyes, I said you looked through
octaves, the sound is made in the closed
coffin, it comes to life in the depth
of the grave, I never said, please, look
somewhere else, the piano twanged,
swelling on me, the promise
dissolved my all. Now the dark –
if it's good for the wood, why not for me?
They say the sun, before stepping into the sky,
dwells in the jungle, gathers darkness,
so do I, from your eyes, forever burning.

translated by István Géber

The Star of Bethlehem

The year at Christmas, attention, please,
steps among the others, joins the fold,
with no warmth of the pen though, rather the growing cold,
like space among the stars. You too
have put your hand in my hand so many times
that it is so many hands – then we count.
But there's the rub, in place of many
there is but one. I do things one-handed,
if this is a poem, this one too. In my dream
I had a daughter, I tried to set out, but she
called me back always. The stars have space
to turn – but at Bethlehem-time – untraceable.
My daughter warned me. Father, if you go
out to die, find something darker than my eyes,
for I may lose you there. Then take
water and bread for resurrection. If I went
out to die. If I went out. If I had a daughter.

translated by István Géber
