

GENTIAN ÇOÇOLI

In the Author's Hand

for Parid Teferiçi

I: 1921

Just like Nikolai Gumilyev
with feet dragging, attention,

a winter compass set for the final course;
Iliad in hand, he stretches out his arms,

to put into perspective what is about to happen—
when the bullets will fall like stresses on his body

and that which is proper to him will emerge from its hiding place
to take the new path inscribed on his forehead.

Then a deep silence will fall,
lighter than this day's snowfall on yesterday's drifts;

polite whispers in Russian and ancient Greek will come
from behind the broken door: ink-black,

leathery, heavy, bookish, "Please, madam, ladies first,"
and "I insist, madam, ladies first."

II: 2005

December. Piazza d'Autore. Fontana della Lingua.
Conference of marble gods. But indulgence
has softened and soiled their bodies, even the strongest among
them.

And in that transparent air, even *he* seems etched through some
design.

One of the figures, more solitary, sinks back
into the material, a bas-relief, unfinished,
and even if the man's own features are better defined,
the one that troubles him still casts a human shadow.

In his teeth he holds a piece of wood (also of marble)
though why this has been stuck there in the figure's body the
author fails to specify:
all the water flowing invisibly up through his Adam's apple
and down past his ankles, emerges in a thin stream

from the crack that a chisel's tip, held in a leathery hand, once
opened in his forehead.

III

Residents of the year 1995. Not far from here,
a siren of our age sounds,
afterwards shots, screams, a silence easily explained.
Then everything all over again from the beginning.

The human season has begun.
But farther off from us,
an ancient forest, attentive, brooding,
still has the strength to pull its heavy gates closed.

This time for good.

IV: 1998

In the silence of an unfamiliar house, in foothills
heavy with the autumnal pathos of vineyards,
the translator Lirim sits down to break meaning from a marble
language—

a rare occasion when a thousand eyes watch, as if projected on a
screen,
the tip of the arrow, which has found at last
one vein in the long-scrutinized trail of death,
the one which threads, finally, down to the ankles.

But that blinding light which makes him squint does not come
from the copper clasp of ancient sandals; it comes
from the barrel of the shotgun of sniper No——, who from the
hilltop,
hidden amongst the cottages where the grapes' rich sugar ripens,
wastes no time this afternoon in splitting the pen's point,
which in a second almost poured out and prints its hexametric
magma
So close was language, but it was not to be written.

V: 1997

In March 1997 the library of Girokaster was nearly destroyed by unidentified armed men. Its preservation was due to the heroism of then-director Petraq Qurku and local residents. This poem is dedicated to them.

“Holding my unloaded shotgun, I waited for them to come.
A hundred thousand books placed by my own hand, squeezed into
rows,
now covered by fear, flickering, burning red.

Uselessly I made a sign with my rifle, a kind of star—or Saturn, just
for something to do.
In the silence of the courtyard, I practiced my move (like Ed
Harris in *Sniper*),
an empty gesture, the book in my other hand,
and my hand more bird than hand, trembling—

then a chaos of lead, of glass, of shouts and groans,
as if all at once all those pinewood shelves collapsed, pell-mell,
 with the book over my head
grazed and charred through by a sharp-eyed bullet,
(a soothing layer of plaster dust preserved its features for me for
 later);

I got up, barely able to stand, and out of a false sense of elation
kicking in my insides like a child, I took the book under my arm
and in an instant I was outside, running, with the single thought

to deliver that book to the author myself, directly into his hands.”

Translated from the Albanian by Erica Weitzman