

To Friends Behind a Border

I

I wrote to you so cautiously. But what I couldn't say
filled and grew like a hot-air balloon
and finally floated away through the night sky.

II

Now my letter is with the censor. He lights his lamp.
In its glare my words leap like monkeys at a wire mesh,
clattering it, stopping to bare their teeth.

III

Read between the lines. We will meet in two hundred years
when the microphones in the hotel walls are forgotten—
when they can sleep at last, become ammonites.

Out in the Open

1.

Late autumn labyrinth.
At the entry to the woods a thrown-away bottle.
Go in. Woods are silent abandoned houses this time of year.
Just a few sounds now: as if someone were moving twigs around
 carefully with pincers
or as if an iron hinge were whining feebly inside a thick trunk.
Frost has breathed on the mushrooms and they have shriveled
 up.
They look like objects and clothing left behind by people who've
 disappeared.
It will be dark soon. The thing to do now is to get out
and find the landmarks again: the rusty machine out in the field
and the house on the other side of the lake, a reddish square in-
 tense as a bouillon cube.

2.

A letter from America drove me out again, started me walking
through the luminous June night in the empty suburban streets
among newborn districts without memories, cool as blueprints.

Letter in my pocket. Half-mad, lost walking, it is a kind of prayer.
Over there evil and good actually have faces.
For the most part with us it's a fight between roots, numbers,
shades of light.

The people who run death's errands for him don't shy from
daylight.
They rule from glass offices. They mill about in the bright sun.
They lean forward over a desk and throw a look to the side.

Far off I found myself standing in front of one of the new
buildings.
Many windows flowed together there into a single window.
In it the luminous night sky was caught, and the walking trees.
It was a mirrorlike lake with no waves, turned on edge in the
summer night.

Violence seemed unreal
for a few moments.

III.

Sun burning. The plane comes in low
throwing a shadow shaped like a giant cross that rushes over the
ground.

A man is sitting in the field poking at something.
The shadow arrives.
For a fraction of a second he is right in the center of the cross.

I have seen the cross hanging in the cool church vaults.
at times it resembles a split-second snapshot of something
moving at tremendous speed.

Nocturne

I drive through a village at night, the houses rise up
in the glare of my headlights—they're awake, want to drink.
Houses, barns, signs, abandoned vehicles—now
they clothe themselves in Life.—The people are sleeping:

some can sleep peacefully, others have drawn features
as if training hard for eternity.
They don't dare let go though their sleep is heavy.
They rest like lowered crossing barriers when the mystery draws past.

Outside the village the road stretches far among the forest trees.
And the trees the trees keeping silence in concord with each other.
They have a theatrical color, like firelight.
How distinct each leaf! They follow me home.

I lie down to sleep I see strange pictures
and signs scribbling themselves behind my eyelids
on the wall of the dark. Into the slit between wakefulness and dream
a large letter tries to push itself in vain.

Alcaic

This forest in May. It haunts my whole life:
the invisible moving van. Singing birds.
 In silent pools, mosquito larvae's
furiously dancing question marks.

I escape to the same places and same words.
Cold breeze from the sea, the ice-dragon's licking
 the back of my neck while the sun glares.
The moving van is burning with cool flames.

Six Winters

1

In the black hotel a child is asleep.
And outside: the winter night
where the wide-eyed dice roll.

2

An élite of the dead became stone
in Katarina Churchyard
where the wind shakes in its armour from Svalbard.

3

One wartime winter when I lay sick
a huge icicle grew outside the window.
Neighbour and harpoon, unexplained memory.

4

Ice hangs down from the roof edge.
Icicles: the upside-down Gothic.
Abstract cattle, udders of glass.

5

On a side-track, an empty railway-carriage.
Still. Heraldic.
With the journeys in its claws.

6

Tonight snow-haze, moonlight. The moonlight jellyfish itself
is floating before us. Our smiles
on the way home. Bewitched avenue.

Streets in Shanghai

1

The white butterfly in the park is being read by many.
I love that cabbage-moth as if it were a fluttering corner of truth itself!

At dawn the running crowds set our quiet planet in motion.
Then the park fills with people. To each one, eight faces polished like jade, for all
situations, to avoid making mistakes.
To each one, there's also the invisible face reflecting "something you don't talk about."
Something that appears in tired moments and is as rank as a gulp of viper schnapps with
its long scaly aftertaste.

The carp in the pond move continuously, swimming while they sleep, setting an example for the
faithful: always in motion.

2

It's midday. Laundry flutters in the gray sea-wind high over the cyclists
who arrive in dense schools. Notice the labyrinths on each side!

I'm surrounded by written characters that I can't interpret, I'm illiterate through and through.
But I've paid what I owe and have receipts for everything.
I've accumulated so many illegible receipts.
I'm an old tree with withered leaves that hang on and can't fall to the ground.

And a gust from the sea gets all these receipts rustling.

3

At dawn the trampling hordes set our quiet planet in motion.
We're all aboard the street, and it's as crammed as the deck of a ferry.

Where are we headed? Are there enough teacups? We should consider ourselves lucky
to have made it aboard this street!
It's a thousand years before the birth of claustrophobia.

Hovering behind each of us who walks here is a cross that wants to catch up with us,
pass us, unite with us.
Something that wants to sneak up on us from behind, put its hands over our eyes and
whisper "Guess who!"

We look almost happy out in the sun, while we bleed to death from wounds we don't
know about.

Allegro

I play Haydn after a black day
and feel a simple warmth in my hands.

The keys are willing. Soft hammers strike.
The resonance green, lively and calm.

The music says freedom exists
and someone doesn't pay the emperor tax.

I push down my hands in my Haydnpockets
and imitate a person looking on the world calmly.

I hoist the Haydnflag – it signifies:
“We don't give in. But want peace.”

The music is a glass-house on the slope
where the stones fly, the stones roll.

And the stones roll right through
but each pane stays whole.

The Half-Finished Heaven

Despondency breaks off its course.
Anguish breaks off its course.
The vulture breaks off its flight.

The eager light streams out,
even the ghosts take a draught.

And our paintings see daylight,
our red beasts of the ice-age studios.

Everything begins to look around.
We walk in the sun in hundreds.

Each man is a half-open door
leading to a room for everyone.

The endless ground under us.

The water is shining among the trees.

The lake is a window into the earth.

The Nightingale in Badelunda

In the green midnight at the nightingale's northern limit. Heavy leaves hang in trance, the deaf cars race towards the neon-line. The nightingale's voice rises without wavering to the side, it is as penetrating as a cock-crow, but beautiful and free of vanity. I was in prison and it visited me. I was sick and it visited me. I didn't notice it then, but I do now. Time streams down from the sun and the moon and into all the tick-tock-thankful clocks. But right here there is no time. Only the nightingale's voice, the raw resonant notes that whet the night sky's gleaming scythe.

After a Death

Once there was a shock
that left behind a long, shimmering comet tail.
It keeps us inside. It makes the TV pictures snowy.
It settles in cold drops on the telephone wires.

One can still go slowly on skis in the winter sun
through brush where a few leaves hang on.
They resemble pages torn from old telephone directories.
Names swallowed by the cold.

It is still beautiful to hear the heart beat
but often the shadow seems more real than the body.
The samurai looks insignificant
beside his armor of black dragon scales.

The Couple

They switch off the light and its white shade
glimmers for a moment before dissolving
like a tablet in a glass of darkness. Then up.
The hotel walls rise into the black sky.
The movements of love have settled, and they sleep
but their most secret thoughts meet as when
two colours meet and flow into each other
on the wet paper of a schoolboy's painting.
It is dark and silent. But the town has pulled closer
tonight. With quenched windows. The houses have approached.
They stand close up in a throng, waiting,
a crowd whose faces have no expressions.

Track

2 A.M. moonlight. The train has stopped
out in a field. Far off sparks of light from a town,
flickering coldly on the horizon.
As when a man goes so deep into his dream
he will never remember he was there
when he returns again to his view.
Or when a person goes so deep into a sickness
that his days all become some flickering sparks, a swarm,
feeble and cold on the horizon
The train is entirely motionless.
2 o'clock: strong moonlight, few stars.

Under Pressure

The blue sky's engine-drone is deafening.
We're living here on a shuddering work-site
where the ocean depths can suddenly open up
shells and telephones hiss.
You can see beauty only from the side, hastily.
The dense grain on the field, many colours in a yellow stream.
The restless shadows in my head are drawn there.
They want to creep into the grain and turn to gold.
Darkness falls. At midnight I go to bed.
The smaller boat puts out from the larger boat.
You are alone on the water.
Society's dark hull drifts further and further away.

Icelandic Hurricane

No earth tremor, but a skyquake. Turner could have painted it, secured by ropes. A single mitten whirled past right now, several miles from its hand. Facing the storm I am heading for that house on the other side of the field. I flutter in the hurricane. I am being x-rayed, my skeleton hands in its application for discharge. Panic grows while I tack about, I am wrecked, I am wrecked and drown on dry land! How heavy it is, all that I suddenly have to carry, how heavy it is for the butterfly to tow a barge! There at last. A final bout of wrestling with the door. And now inside. Behind the huge window-pane. What a strange and magnificent invention glass is—to be close without being stricken. . . Outside a horde of transparent splinters of gigantic shapes rush across the lava plain. But I flutter no more. I sit behind the glass, still, my own portrait.

The House of Headache

I woke up inside the headache. The headache is a room where I have to stay as I cannot afford to pay rent anywhere else. Every hair aches to the point of turning gray. There is an ache inside that Gordian knot, the brain, which wants to do so much in so many directions. The ache is also a half-moon hanging down in the light-blue sky; the color disappears from my face; my nose is pointing *downward*; the entire divining rod is turning down toward the subterranean current. I moved into a house built in the wrong place; there is a magnetic pole just under the bed, just

under my pillow, and when the weather chops around above the bed I am charged. Time and again I try to imagine that a celestial bonesetter is pinching me through a miraculous grip on my cervical vertebrae, a grip that will put life right once and for all. But the house of headache is not ready to be written off just yet. First I have to live inside it for an hour, two hours, half a day. If at first I said it was a room, change that to a house. But the question now is this: Is it not an entire city? Traffic is unbearably slow. The breaking news is out. And somewhere a telephone is ringing.

(Translated, from the Swedish, by John Matthias and Lars-Hakan Svensso

Answers To Letters - Tomas Tranströmer

In the bottom drawer of my desk I found a letter that first arrived twenty-six years ago. A letter in panic, and it's still breathing when it arrives the second time.

A house has five windows: through four of them the day shines clear and still. The fifth faces a black sky, thunder and storm. I stand at the fifth window. The letter.

Sometimes an abyss opens between Tuesday and Wednesday but twenty-six years could pass in a moment. Time is not a straight line, it's more of a labyrinth, and if you press close to the wall at the right place you can hear the hurrying steps and the voices, you can hear yourself walking past on the other side.

Was the letter ever answered? I don't remember, it *was* long ago. The countless thresholds of the sea kept migrating. The heart kept leaping from second to second like a toad in the wet grass of an August night.

The unanswered letters pile up, like cirrostratus clouds promising bad weather. They can make the sunbeams lusterless. One day I will answer. One day when I am dead and can at last concentrate. Or at least so far away from here that I can find myself again. When I'm walking, newly arrived, in the big city, on 125th Street, in the wind on the street of dancing garbage. I who love to stray off and vanish in the crowd, a capital T in the endless mass of the text.

C Major

Translated by Robert Bly

As he stepped out into the street after a meeting
with her
the snow whirled in the air.

Winter had come
while they were making love.
The night was white.
He walked fast from joy.
The streets slanted down.
Smiles passed ---
everyone smiled behind turned-up collars.
How free it all was!
And all the question marks started to sing about
 God's life.

That's how it seemed to him.
Music was free at last
and walked through the blowing snow
with long strides.
All things around him on the way toward the note C.
A trembling needle pointing toward C.
An hour risen above anxieties.
How easy!
Everyone smiled behind turned-up collars.