

Katia Kapovich

A BURN

When cleaning day descended upon junk,
the City Hall and our German host were found
in a remote compartment of the suitcase
they shared with a ball of socks, a torn hood,
you shivering in your swimming trunks
on the freezing beech where the German
encouraged us to join him for a swim.

I'll take my watch and bury it in pebbles
where it may grind the sand of emptiness,
waving its hands, bruising its elbows,
yet polish me a magnifying glass.
You asked the German to leave us alone,
gulped from the bottle, married someone,
but in my dreams lured me again
with nakedness under the autumn sun.

One last thing before I forget
the freckled skin, blue lips, goofy voice—
I'll take the magnifying glass
and show you what I meant.

SATORI

A linguistics professor in an old
moth-eaten coat, he traveled to the north
with his wife on her charity trips,
talked Inuit to folks in the cold,
caught a dog-sled ride through the wilderness,
gave the musher a generous tip.

Now he comes out with his flat-nose shovel,
tosses snow left and right,
throws salt along the slippery driveway,
with me nearby stuck like a lamppost,
hands in pockets, groggy after a sleepless night,
unwilling to fight for survival.

Let it snow three times, as in that old song.
Someone rewind my mind and dust the screen.
I am the one who confuses everything:
right and left, “safari” and “satori,”
the color yellow and his brother green.
I want isolation to be absolute,
like a dialogue between the blind and the mute.

HIDE AND SEEK

The 29th of February splits,
absconding from the calendar this year.
Its harsh debris consists of loosened wits
and long forgotten faces in the mirror.

The room is empty like a worn-out matchbox.
The curtain sails in a warm draft from the heater.
Riding at anchor, three lethargic clocks
can't synchronize the grinding stuff of winter.

Don't wait for the mailman, don't answer the telephone.
Better embrace the emptiness, the absence
of those you once loved – they are far gone.
Cold water takes the shape of greasy vessels.

Cold water gushes from the gelid pipe.
What takes it to be sane? Tell me, old liar.
Just time... But time is cheating on your life,
spilled on the run or sung up in a choir.

Biting on cheese and leaving bread intact
time sits out somewhere, quiet like a mouse.
The window like a frozen cataract
reflects the tenant shuffling through the house.

SATURDAY AT SCHOENHOF'S FOREIGN BOOKS

1.

Two gay guys, one Franciscan monk and me
 work the Saturday shift, as the intertwined
 piping across the basement's ceiling
 hums out the quiet morning hours. We read
 between dozing off, and visa versa.
 Father Paul puts aside Pascal's *Pensées*. Adjusting
 the brown cap over his sun-tanned tonsure,
 he prophesies, "Got a hectic afternoon coming."
 The annual regatta over, droves of freezing
 hungry people board all the stores,
 won't leave town until they've had their fun
 and pocketful of souvenirs. "Those regatta boys are so
 cute-yet-ignorant," sighs Mathew, a remark that gives
 our older and more managerial gay comrade a frown.—
 "Kindly return to your post and don't forget you're married,"
 grumbles Dean, and I,
 sensing the imminent alien invasion, escape to the patio
 for one last cigarette.

The blue abyss above redbrick well
 is clear, but one triangular cloud clings to the church steeple,
 even if not for long. Thus much for freedom.

As I pull the patio door open
 to go inside, two dry leaves blow into the hallway,
 pushy kids who always get ahead.

2.

Some Saturdays it's just us here and the regulars:
 two-three Harvardians and the bum called Stinky.
 He is an *omnia mea porto* guy
 and likes to stare into an obscure volume,

deriving a sort of cabbalistic pleasure
from “What the fuck is this script?”
His suitcase in the corner, he whiles away the hours here,
awe and happiness drawn on his face.
America is his motherland, but Schoenhof’s is his home.
The Harvard folks, on the other hand,
typically seem too bored and too tired to admire us,
and that’s why we have so much free time.
God knows how we keep this place in business.

3.

Stinky is already in, I can smell him.
He has no place to shower.
His hair style turns his head into a Pollack canvas.
Every other month he tries a cheap new dye
from the Harvard Square CVS.
To do him justice, he keeps his clothes in order:
a black suit, just one, from working long ago as a waiter,
visits the drycleaner more often than its owner sees a bathtub.
I wonder how he manages the cleaning process though—
does he have to sit in his underwear on a plastic chair,
electrocuted by a chilly draft from the front door,
while they take care of the pants and jacket?
Should I suggest to him gently that he should stop
pouring all those colognes on his skin?
Otherwise there’s no chance he’ll ever attract a woman,
even a homeless woman, even the one that always
sits by the CVS with plastic tubes in her nostrils.
And why do the darn pharmacists sample only the stinky stuff,
“Old Spice,” rather than “Drakkar Noir,” “Polo,”
or “Obsession”?

4.

God, if he exists, made us earn our daily bread
in blood, calluses and sweat.
He gave us two palms to hold the baby,

to open the notebook, to write a line of verse.
The wind-whipped Regatta crowds come rushing,
the front door slams, the bell chimes twice.
A monumental squared shouldered guy paddles his way in,
hulking over me at the info desk,
all chewing gum and Boston accent.
“OK, I know it’s kinda... a bookstore,
but do you carry pop music?”
Pop goes a pink bubble.
And because every story needs a punch line,
I reply, “Sure, and we also sell Cuban cigars.”

FLAMENCO EVENING

Because spring came a month late,
whole crowds descended into the streets,
including myself and that midget girl.
A band was playing flamenco favorites,
and she was all dressed up, as if for a date
who had stood her up
in front of all those people.

She started tapping her foot,
her shoes on unbearably high heels
caught the rhythm but never left the spot
between the neon of the Cambridge Trust Company
and the dismantled meadows of Harvard Flowers.

Her short white hands
pressed to her chest embraced
her broken heart
and held it like a bowl of milk.

She danced and danced,
her shadow growing longer than her body,
as the Square streetlights came on,
erasing footprints from the dust
but leaving standard paper cups to whiten
in the regular dusk.

GARBAGE DAY

They had to yell to each other
because of the wind the morning after Christmas.
I wish I could paint their portraits instead of using words:
one tall and rickety, the other short and fat,
both dressed in dirty orange jackets, sweatpants,
and black woolen masks over their mouths—
the guys of garbage day.
They caught up with me to perform their circus number.
The dark-blue recycling bin lifted by the veined hand of one
found itself in the arms of the other,
who whistled whatever he whistled
to the driver, and thrust the receptacle
over a pyramid of emptied trash cans.
I had just put some bad poems therein
from a previous winter, and now they are gone,
such a Buddhist moment. Thank you, man.