

Luisa Villani

AGAINST THE COLDEST HEART

Victor says I need a dacha,
a little piece of land. Off the balcony
a sparse tree echoes the truth of a new season.
Gray doves leave the branches
and land on the street, on an iron slab
that plinks with their steps. I've been beneath
that ferrous sky with Victor's son, Lhaysek,
a veteran of Afghanistan,
the Soviet equivalent of Vietnam.
In that hollow earth
of walls lined with glass--pickles, tomatoes,
cherries and beets--I thought only of Roethke
and the damp cellars of his youth. Lhaysek
handed me a yellow/red jar: "Don't tell
my mother I gave you these. They taste good
but the colors are bad for me."
On his left hand, two missing fingers.

Memory is a fiersome thing,
a firestorm against the coldest heart.
In the interlude
where narrative paused,
the writer gripped her collar,
turned it up against the chill.
"I have to go," I thought
but did not think to say it. "Say it,"
he murmured. "You want to run away."
Babushkas shuffled the street above.

Bells rang on bicycles.
A man halted to light a cigarette,
his match falling
like a yellow seed
to the dank dirt below,
where I found myself
sweating and touched,
as I haven't been touched before.