

Conversation Pieces
Volume 43

Ghost Signs

Poems and a Short Story
by
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They also say that I bring back the past;
For instance, Helen comes,
Brushing the maggots from her eyes,
And, clearing her throat of several thousand years,
She says “I loved...”; but cannot any longer
Remember names. Sad Helen. Or Alexander, wearing
His imperial cobwebs and breastplate of shining worms
Wakens and looks for his glasses, to find the empire
Which he knows he put beside his bed.

—Christopher Fry,
The Lady's Not for Burning (1949)

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Ghost Signs

Prologue:
Kalligeneia 2012

And one year when the sighs of suicides
lay spent in the gutters like newspapers after a war,
you fell in love with Charon, coming out of the dark
with his half-light smile, taking tickets for the river's
underground.

He calls your name like a buried station,
torch-flicker off weeping mosaics and rust-railed ties.
His eyes are blue as a windbreak of crocus.
(Vergil and Dante—out-of-towners—lied.)
For the dead, he makes change from crimson seeds
and asphodel, but from you he asks nothing
but the way time runs down between the tracks,
the old branch lines of hell and back
where the ghosts ride without a nickel to their names
and you step off, however long the light lasts,
shaking out Styx's sand from your shoes.

I

Follow Me Home

You dream the wire where your hanging flesh
tatters to bloody flags in the sun,
the battlefield stink like a butcher's sewer
and the shop-display of no man's land
garlands the mud with boots, cloth, corpses
pared to a clench-jawed grin; a knife-blade
speckles troutlike with rust, a china head
rattles like a dice-cup with the glass eyes within,
dainties discarded in a drawer at home
where letters tied with red ribbon leaf-drift
now. A clock-tick, a ratsfoot whisper,
and I dream the night before the last came
stained with earth like a sexton and another
man's hand: the shell-casings, the shrapnel
I picked from a flooded ditch, a watch-face
splintered to half past ten and in the sunset
soaked to Mars; the beheaded, the detonated,
the flayed, the impaled, gathered in my wake
like a murder to the gallows, pilgrims to the cross,
a cluster of bullets like bruises in my hand.
The mortar-flares. The silence. The wasted land.
The same dream kicks and sways with the wind
each night by graveside or candlelight: I plant
red poppies and dog roses and the children play
with blind dolls and pocketknives, crying rhymes
at crows; for the dead I could not harrow,
for the words I never wrote, for the last letter
I unfolded with your smile on my face—
blasted, blown open, unsurprised.

Cold Spring Calling-On

for Francesca Forrest

Do you know me? The sage-haired child
from the crumbling furrow, the shy lookout
of the apple orchards—whose dreams
did you imagine contemplated yours
to khamsin and heat lightning, the Perseids
falling like koans through wild grapevine?
This my augury tells you: at the waning
of the year and its fruiting, I will come.
Already you can hear the cart-wheels
creaking, the shafts and cogs of the cardinal sky.
The crows are rising from the corn to be read.

Anon

Call him the sexton in his grave-doffed coat,
ringing the changes with lichen under his nails,
between the first and the last another man
as his breath by midnight ghosts him like a hard frost,
the strains of grey and the frail limning of dry veins
russeting in the beeches, the black ash starkened
over pilgrim stones. No colder than the moon's rising
hunter, saints in shadow point aimlessly to heaven:
the river slow inkstone, the compass needle pine,
his face a guess bent to his work. Cross the bridge.
The last chime is still sounding, one lantern left unblown.
The wind shakes down the whippoorwill's cry.

Phersu

They teased us when we married,
 the stonemason and the daughter of auguries—
 Charun and Vanth. The hammer I swung
 into skulls of tufa and travertine,
 her huntress' step, suddenly turning
 as if she beckoned back a soul to Phersipnai,
 we wore the names lightly, the lines of our days
 already in the hand of other gods.
 The laws of Tarchies, swan-winged Turan,
 Thesan cradling slain Memnun in her arms
 was not more piercing than her eyes
 like laurel leaves, the plaited coronal of her hair
 black as bucchero in the reflected sun.
 No cast of Tinia's, no liver or levinbolt
 could split us. We held to one another
 like pole-star and ploughman, mundus and map—
 the crossing of our shadows. The years
 nailed home. In the tomb where she rests
 among garlands and funeral games,
 panthers guard her, twin lionesses pace
 a rack of red-dashed ivy, dappled like fawns,
 an aulos in a boy's fixed fingers plays
 melodies only the dead can hear.
 As in life, she lifts a hand to me,
 terra-cotta in the dark of my closed eyes,
 the solid compass of the heavens overhead.
 Out of reach, one of my guides is waiting.
 The death I will greet gladly wears her face.

The Road to Volodny (Partisan Song)

The road to Volodny is lined with light.
The houses are burning, but I have my rifle.
The houses are burning, but in my shirt pocket
I carry a picture of you.

In Volodny, I'm going to call on the bellringer.
He knows his way around potatoes and lead.
I'll drink with the bellringer, and he'll point out to me
the street where you hung garlands over the rails.

The snow is hanging there now in Volodny,
whiter and purer than a dead man's face.
The only one to crown me a marksman
will be the moon. Like you, it won't weep.

If he dies in Volodny, I'll walk to Szkanoy.
I have some cousins to stay with there.
But if I miss, then I won't need that picture.
I'll have you, better than paper or ink.

This I swore under the stars and the cherries.
This I swore by the blood on your lips.
This is my promise I'm singing, marching.
The road to Volodny is lined with light.

Domovoi, I Came Back!

I left the night, the jazz, the paper circus
with its sawdust of madly loved lines, its ringleader
that boy who wore his suicide like a rose
stuck in his lapel, winking from the bottom of every glass.
We were so cold together, eating fire,
waiting for the world's wrists to run with ink.
Domovoi, all my poems are fatherless.
The mouth he kissed was a drowned infanticide's.

What do you write with in a stranger's bed?
I know these empty sheets, this backward-falling light,
this stove where my shaking fingers slowly warm.
And the poet who translates these words
to a city where the streetlights pulse with gin
instead of vodka, instead of brandy, wine,
will mistake you, domovoi, for a metaphor,
will mistake me for someone who could stay.

Radio Banquo

All night the static pops and rumors to itself,
a half-pronounced, acclamatory babble,
commerce, conscience, eavesdropping on fate
or furious nothing, the wires of nations crossed.
Turn the dial, the stations spin like cooling stars,
the moon gone down. The mind
uncloses stickily from the hilts of dream,
the signal ghosting, jamming
a bloodied clutch of crowns, leaf-clashed,
coin-profiles chinking a child's singsong,
the one pure silence staring
like a hacked man's throat into the blade.

Ovid's Two Nightmares

Not like Odysseus to his wife's ever-olive arms
 nor Agamemnon to the unapologetic knife
 I return, the patron of exiles repatriated
 windburned, ink-stained, grey-haired as the sea
 tossing chips of rime on a black shore,
 old Daedalus disbelieving the labyrinth's fall.
 So many spilt words, so many missteps
 lie across my hands like shadows in the afternoon,
 ripening lemon and bay, the grape's bitter leaves.
 So many ghosts sent begging for salt and violets
 hang back shivering in the August sun.

Before they were marble, I molded these streets
 from late nights and stubborn wax, like a diviner
 surveying the map of stars and mime of love:
 like a slave, I walk them from the Capitoline
 to the Forum, the ridge and trudge of travertine
 like frost heaves underfoot, the stallside crowds
 tight as reeds at the Danube's salt-ragged mouth,
 sweat and spikenard and a kitchen's frying smoke
 the desolate smell of wet timbers and grey rain.
 An emigré with the staring face of winter,
 a citizen's ring over a mourner's dirt and dark—
 Fortune ties her blindfold like a garrote.
 Calchas saw it all from Troy, all but his laughable end.

And from this dream that leaves me lost as windwrack
 each time it visits, a fetch from the fading year,
 I turn away, covering my face
 with your shoulder warm as twilight in Sulmo,
 your hair silvering as the southern stars at dawn.

Lyric Fragment

for Lila Garrott

Under the olives, I unbraid your hair
dark as violets in the sea-shifting light,
the sea who shrugs and turns a shoulder
as black and white sails come and go.
Scene-stealing Anakreon leans over the page,
his sunflower head reflecting, reminding me
of Eros who rattles our hearts with riot and ecstasy,
wins the throw against us every time.
I let these stars of bone fall where the words may,
but only you can tell me whether they spell
Eresos or Texas, fire-banked maple or summer melilot,
Alexander, Aphrodite, the Dog.

Lucan in Averno

Halfway off the path nobody keeps to,
the poet meets himself in Hades
like a creditor on the stairs, a started ghost
with a face of wet ashes and wrists hollow as wax
the stylus dug too deeply, emptying of words.
Scared, with a cynic's grin, he holds out
a half-corrected scroll, laurels frozen in his hair
like hemlock. Is he whispering his name?
Am I whispering it for him?
So casually we practice this blasphemy,
raking up the dead, their rings and calcined bones.
My tongue between his teeth will speak
of Cato, Caesar, and a nameless soldier's corpse,
my fingers follow Nero's razor cuts.
The past will lead on, saying nothing more
than what it has already ceased to say.

Graffiti

I made my bed between Sappho and Catullus
watching the moon set, the sparrows fly up at dawn,
a poem burn itself out at the bottom of a yahrzeit glass.
A couple at Vulci dreamed out the underworld
on a lid of nenfro, carved to their marriage-sheets.
At Pompeii, crushed in the hollows of boiling ash.
In a thousand years, not even the walls remember
who loved, who fucked, for how much, so long ago,
not even the coins I dropped to pay for your memory,
a candle into the last of the wine.

Drowning Like You Mean It

On the cold sill of the Atlantic
there is still time to forget,
to shrug back the sea's indifference
like a postcard in the lighthousekeeper's store
and settle for being innocent.
A tourist can skip the waves with a silver dollar,
a blue-eyed boat dreaming of Carthage or Syracuse
that carries no one under the sun,
a poète maudit wavering on the rim of the Seine
in an anise-flare of futile revelation,
a siren rocking the deep sea-swell of bones.
You sank once like Ophelia, with skirts full of riverweed,
rose with a broken language of flowers in your hair.
Leave the stones from your pocket, this time,
the sea-glass, the spyglass, the sugar for Poseidon's team.
All you need is the shingle, the sandy waves swirling,
the open-eyed breath and knowing no going back.

Anakatabasis

At least among the dead
I was of a kind, no more
adjudged than a breath let go,
the loosened earth subsiding
under a rainy slouch of stone.
Here sun-demented, railed
by time, the living
tear clamorous as echoes,
their faces memorial wax
overstamped, a cloud of bats
clinging like smoke to the day:
a cup replaced on its shelf,
but I cannot be unspilled.
Hades is where I open my eyes,
the white river flashing
in empty windowpanes,
a coin in each mouthful
to close my throat,
the birdless mist hangs
over the garden's weeds.
Up from the asphalt, the asphodel
gleams like the bones
my fingers were, holding the turn
before one last look
leads the way back down.

The Hero's Journey

I saw you from the wood of suicides,
the Sibyl's link-boy,
warm in your armor as a lamp of bronze,
leaves and trembling berries of Etruscan gold
chiming the dark in your salt-cracked hand.
You reached for mine, under the myrtle boughs,
callused as shield-hide, tophet-stained,
stiffening with my own blood
like the shock of your face—
what surprised you, when I wrenched away
into Styx's silence,
the shade of my husband's arms?
You said once my hair was burning pitch,
my breast Qart-ḥadašt harbor
and your heart the ship in flames.
Only the dead have learned
to comfort the despairing,
who know what it is to have run out of time.

Di Vayse Pave

Lyu-lyu, it sings, its feathers a shiver of light
when it rises on your path like a daymoon,
white as annealing glass,
as the salt of a look over your shoulder,
searching for the world that slept beneath its wing.
*You closed my eyes to dream of your longing,
blind as limelights on a bare stage.
My eyes were the white heat of pages
in a summer of honey and almonds,
the white nights in a winter of sorrel and empty shirts.
My eyes were the lines between your letters,
the ones you left inside the ink.
You can write with your fingers stained from eating cherries
of mending windows, old snapshots and new bread
until my eyes open,
black as the dip of a quill;
there is no way back over so much sea.
My eyes will be white as sails or a wall at morning
when you write from a city of lighthouses,
each verse a wing, watching the harbor
where ships still come in.*