Coming home | Poems and translations

Elizabeth Weber

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COMING HOME:
POEMS AND TRANSLATIONS

by
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B.A., University of Minnesota, 1973
Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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COMING HOME POEMS

"Und Kinder wachsen auf mit tiefen Augen,
Die von nichts wissen, wachsen auf und sterben,
Und alle Menschen gehen ihre Wege."

Hugo von Hofmannsthal
"Ballade des äusseren Leben"
The Farm

Your photograph hangs
cracked and bent, but still you,
young and twenty-five, down on the farm,
all the boys mad after you.
In the background the sun blazes,
the photograph grows dark.

Young girls don't change,
grandmother, as I stand here
the catalpa blooms
and I match you, hair for hair.
The hollyhocks are singing
and the bees still hum.

In the yard grass yellows
like the photograph,
the peach tree hangs the same sad way.
By the well I chased grasshoppers,
fell, scraped my knee,
and watched the sun turn and die.
I had no shame. Here the chickens
went crazy. They only knew
that Polish tongue you clucked to them.

Up in the barn, meal you ground
lies molding. Your house, clean
and straight, echoes your silence.
What walls did your mind escape to
when it went dumb, when your world
turned over and I was anyone to you?
That day you would have cursed
us all back to the cradle, grandmother,
what did you mean when you turned to me
and whispered, "Verna?"
The do-whit, do-whit of a rock thrush falls on deaf ears. What is a bird in the face of destiny? But you pick it up and it echoes softly in you, an omen, a look into what might come. The landscape rolls: granite hills and mud-slapped huts. No green peeks through, no lilies to gladden the heart of a young girl.

In the moon-viewing pavilion a girl waits for you whose heart is no color but its own, whose eyes follow the moon in and out of clouds. She has no voice. She smells orchids swelling in the heat and hears the drip, dripping of water from a fountain where the gentle buddha sits.

This is what she longs for: a buddha spirit, water dripping slowly from the mouth of a cave, all things warm inside. She longs for a thick-coated pony to take her away from the moon-hazed sky.

In the walled garden you watch her sigh and tear her heart. You stir the pool, nothing surfaces but a few frogs and mud-caked leaves, and as you hit the water making a sound like a clapping hand, you fall into yourself and begin the long march home.
St. Mary's Lookout

We climb nine thousand
feet in sterile air,
hunchbacked trees give way
to rock and wind.
We are on the moon.

A pilgrimage,
we offer what we can.
Indians came here for visions
and remain. On a rock point
an altar holds the virgin
cemented in stone.
The wind offers itself.

From the lookout
smoke fills the valley,
rivers, towns and roads blend.
We can be sure of nothing.
I trace initials carved deep
in the wood of the cabin.
If thunder or snow brought
strange sights to the men
who lived here they don't speak.

When we look over the edge
the mountain sways,
constant as the sky,
it would kill us
given the chance.
Bone breaks on crags,
the heart tearing
at the strain.
There is no peace like death.

When I yell nothing answers.
The wind and cold numb.
If I stay long enough
I will forget to come down,
forget my name, to breathe.

(next page, new stanza)
Come evening the sun
will bleed red over these mountains.
I stretch out on the ground
and listen to the hum
of rock, wind and mountain,
clouds revolving in the sky.
Saint Paul Poem for my Mother

This is no place to be balanced.  
The river runs crooked  
and I can't tell what direction  
my bed points. Besides you lied.  
There aren't any stars, and no amount  
of amending will help. This city hates us. 
People hiss as they pass. Summers  
are too hot to breathe. Winters turn  
hands into strangers. I don't want  
to grow old here, face the prairie and sigh.
The Fence

You ask if the fence
is still there and worry
about other children hating
their faces. You think
suppose it never happened
that long slide home? The faces,
the screams of family and friends
melt in the air.

Your scream never comes
and never leaves. It lives locked
in your heart. That Easter
barbed wire crossed your face.
You remember looking diagonally
over your shoulder at Jamie
who shouted and threw the ball.
You remember the ball flying past,
the slide, the waking into another world.
And when that teacher, her face
a scar, asked what happened,
did you run into a barbed wire fence?
She never knew this is what
you had lived for.
Sometime is No Time

"Say in a long time; that will be nearer. Sometime is no time."
Emily Dickinson

Oranges swell in a bowl.
Women in kerchiefs hurry
past my window. Company is coming
and the walls speak in tongues.
Why has that weather vane fallen off?
The teakettle squeals.

People fill the house.
There is nothing to be done.
Outside snow blazes, inside
the furnace hums. Chairs dance
around me. Everyone is staring
and I can't breathe.
What does stagnant mean?
The oranges explode.

I tell them:
my plant is a tuba;
my dog, Wallace Stevens.
I don't care who hates who.
My stomach hates my brain;
my brain, my mouth.
Why do birds fly south in flocks?
The room rises like snow
in wind. My hands try to flap away
but I hold them down.
Everyone leaves saying
we'll have to do this again sometime.
Deception Falls in Winter

In the photograph you took
of this place, I see a girl
in red. She squats on rock
above the falls. She is young
and dark. Her hair is long
and for the life of me
I can't remember who she is.
Only her red sweater
and then water sprays up
blurring everything.

Winter hangs icicles where the moon
appeared that day.
Your mouth and hers are gone,
red blurs to some heaven
I can't name.

Where is the moon over the Skykomish
tonight? The one that makes your heart
throb where the chest curves in
and whispers: Wherever you go,
I'll go.
Letter from the North Cape

Dear sister, it is like
the land we were born in,
scrub pines and so cold,
nothing lives except by steady persistence.
There is time for little
to grow, snowberries pop and crack
with frost, blueberries
and reindeer moss scattered
here or there.
Everyone has left and I am alone,
perhaps ten miles from Russia
traveling Finland.
Rivers are the color of blood
and taste of iron. The people
speak no language and lock
their pumps at night. The sun,
you should see, it burns all night
like a huge eye. I can't sleep
in the ever present dusk
but lie listening to reindeer
breathe and rivers winding
to some invisible ocean beyond
the tundra. Everything is so pure
this is the clearest I will ever see.
Sand is everywhere. I can touch
nothing without picking up
the small grains and itch all over.
I will return when I am able.
My camera has rusted. I will have
no pictures. Finland will live
only in my heart.
Some Sunny Day, Olaf

Your life has fallen apart,
no job, no kids, your wife
pushing you to rise like an archangel.
Spider plants clutch at you.
From a picture Marilyn Monroe beckons
and combs her hair blond.
When you turn and look
the road stops at your front door.

So when you finally decide
to kill yourself, do it right.
Make the people who should,
suffer. Don't go half way.
Write a note telling the world
you are a failure, a burden
to wife and friends.
And then some sunny day
when the white walls especially sing,
hang yourself from a rafter
in the basement, by degrees.
Your toes touching
and then let up, bit by bit,
feel the bite of the rope,
breath choking, the full effect.
Make sure the maid is out,
your wife when she comes
upon you, alone.

You hear her footsteps pause,
she calls your name:
Olaf. Now.
Rogers Pass

Up where the river divides
two men separated themselves
and killed a third.
The coldest spot in the lower forty-eight,
grandfather tells me.
Here is where they parked the car,
here the posse searched all day in fresh snow,
Collier ate candy bars to keep warm.

He shows me the tree,
how they found Charlie Thompson tied,
hunched like a fetus,
his lids thin and blue,
a fine layer of snow covered him.
All for thirty-seven dollars
grandfather says and wind cracks the trees.
They told him they had his daughter.

The police found Collier hiding
in a cut out hole
in his wife's mattress,
Hillis buying cigarettes
at a gas station. Each says
the other did it. Grandfather says
they should turn those two
over to the townspeople.
They would take care of them,
one for Charlie, once for his widow
and once for themselves.
Muggers are Afraid of the Dark

There is no place
I can go anymore
without them
jumping out at me.
Skinny little men
hide under my bed
and claw their way to me
with four inch nails.
On my way to the bathroom
I meet one trembling in the hall.
He can't bear to be left
alone in the dark.

From my window I can hear them
grind their teeth and sob
out in the dark. They dream
witches dance about them naked
while they are tied to stakes,
fire licking them all over.
They cry mother, and blackness
closes over them like a tomb.
The Monastery of San Sebastian

You walk the steps
thin as a beggar. Your heart
beating in your palms,
thinking how we give so much,
our body, children, our need.
Off the rock ledge, gulls cry.
This is the last place for you to go
and not even the Mediterranean startles you.
Someone tells about a monk
who prayed so hard he rose six feet.
If we only have faith he says.

In the eighth century
Moors overran the place
killing the monks. If we
only had faith you say
and the hills settle.
The walls smell of dust
and something more.
What did it mean to live here
and die? Out in the noon sun
worn and stained, St. Sebastian
rolls his blind eyes toward heaven.
He is younger than you.
For Tom on his Seventeenth Birthday

Survivor, youngest of us all
for me this age is a bad picture, stuck:
one brother gone and you
young beyond belief. What did it leave,
what did that death do to you?

Now the wind kicks, snow falls
from the roof of the barn and drifts
in slow motion. A thousand miles
away, what can I give?
My hollow body turned stone
and locked away. You are
too young and we are strangers
with ten years between us.

I give you the room
I lived in those ten years,
its white walls. All that's
left of the tie that binds
I throw off. This room
where light slants in.
Nothing sang to me like its sun,
the solitude of morning windows.

Cover the walls stripped of paint and paper.
Throw away my books, my clothes. Polish
the floors and then settle in,
listen and wait. The elms,
the oaks will wait,
hardwood floors creak ghosts,
walls whisper to you and when the same
craziness comes, leave, throw them off.

In the spring robins will come
at dusk and sing sadness home. I heard
mothers call their children those long
Midwest nights. I heard you
called. I sang myself away
and watched all change.
Brother I give you my dreams, I give the best
I have, this room, the final
breaking. The next ten years are yours.
In the Village of Chakala

Sun comes off the roof in waves like the hair of a young girl.
We roast plantains in their husks turning them over and over. Smoke swirls into trees. Here the people speak the language of angels. Santos comes with coffee, and the sea flashes and grows. In the heat we hear the steady footsteps of ants building hill after hill.

We eat the pink flesh of the plantains, Marguerita shows me the purple bud, only the heart is eaten. Cocks hiss at each other, and the sun grows with the sea until I think I will fade.

Santos comes with tequila, Marguerita pulls her hair across the sky. From banana trees birds I know nothing about call. The sun collapses into the sea, going dark. Santos lights pots full of sand. I tell them, Where I come from water falls in crystals, the sea freeze, turning the earth white. They say I have been dreaming.

Like never before, the moon and stars come. Santos tells me I am beautiful, poems are for fools. He tells how worms come out of the sea, nothing is pure. How fish don't bite and Chakala is dying. The pots burn, the village matches the sky.

In my hammock I turn and try to breathe the heat away. The air sticks like flies. Cocks tuck their heads beneath wings and sigh. I hear angels, guitars, the sea coming home and nothing more.
The Wedding
for Chris and Jim

This is the ranch you have always known, the soft sighs of cattle.
A cactus blooms a last sad flower,
and the sun burns every hill as it goes down. The old arrive last and the preacher drones "Dearly Beloved." We are gathered here to join names,
to watch the sun sink, to love and to die. Over on a butte
General Fremont fights Indians and signals for reinforcements, Fort Morgan forty miles away. Everybody is crying. The wind has stopped and the hill sinks with the sun. I can hear no more.

Glad to be gone, a hundred miles ice and fog screw down,
every curve a kind of death.
We pass Laramie and Cheyenne, cowgirls, cowboys locked in secret embrace.
Truck after truck knocks us off the road. Dogs drop under our wheels. We can't go back and we can't go on. Friends and ranch chatter behind us.
Germany
 for Cornelia Rabitz

I am never at home here,
peacocks cry and castles crumble
slowly back. We find
a man lying half in, half out
of the Lahn. Small children, we pull
and pull, and think him dead.
Ice forms thin as crystal.

Sun stirs the frozen fountains
and our mothers call us,
they don't want us to know.
They call over garden walls,
past the playground where Inge
spits up blood.

But we have heard
the church bells bonging
through hollow-eyed buildings,
pock-marked houses. We know
about the tin accents of American
soldiers, about Bahnhofstrasse,
the way Sunday shows
Saturday night. Our fathers,
different. We do not need them
or the milky waters of the Lahn.

Plum trees burst white and a band plays
one last waltz. The man gets up
and walks away. We do not need.
Hartmund tells us fairy tales
and we play cowboys and indians
by the garden wall that holds
roses young, and forget about our fathers.
Butterflies in Outfield

for my brother

1
Across the street
one light is left
in a restaurant. A girl
rubs the counter so mold
won't grow. I watch her
like a sniper. She cleans
everything once
and her heart is like mine.
One shot and she would fall
like the cloth she holds.
The light goes out, no light
no girl, no heart.

2
I don't know how
it was that day.
Perhaps the sniper sat
while the world
throbbed into place.
Perhaps, brother,
butterflies swarmed in your eyes.
The sniper went to the heart:
he pulled the trigger.
It was all he could do.
The thin beat you heard
in your ears was just that,
blood that stops in a second
and turns black in the air.

3
Dear Bill, the monarchs swarmed
without you this September.
Goldenrods blazed.
All I could do was stand
in the outfield watching them
explode in the sky.
Sometimes you come to me nights,
plead for me to take you
in my arms. You cry,
you are twenty and can never grow up.
You crumple like dust.
If I could hold you
the spell would break.
Coming Home
   for my father

This is the house the wind blows in.
Nobody returns. Here is the window
they passed you through
the time you almost died.
They had even given your shoes away.
This is the father
who thought the earth flat.
The Polish mother
who pushed you through school.

Birds call to each other
from broken apple trees
and I see you young
and dark in cornfields,
your father up on the roof
with both knees out of joint
too proud to call for help.
The cows call to you,
the fields rotten.

The old school house whitens,
I could never match
the ten miles you walked to it.
The teacher you gave the pig's tail
for Christmas walks in
your sleep and mumbles Lady Macbeth.
You carved whistles and planes
in her class and flunked.
Years later when your son did the same
you wouldn't look at him.

This is the house I return to,
the room filled with flowers and light,
all the people dead. Outside
the weeping birch my brother
and I played under
stands forbidden. Your father
curses and the grass folds
where we disappeared.

(next page, stanza break)
Here where the Rum River meets the Rock
you and I sat waiting for fish
while grasshoppers and kildeer
ruled the fields.
The rows of corn lengthen,
I call to you,
the house and barn disappear.

This is the house your hands honed
and painted gray.
The doors blaze and the walls
stare me down.
That day you walked it end to end
muttering you were fifty,
that life was over,
I should have said
you didn't kill him, father,
I want to come home.
Letter to a Sad Poet

Perhaps this land is too bright, fields, grass, towns and people washed to nothing. The ancient light turns all to dust, and we come back to where we started, not caring if little Arturio's father gets drunk and beats him, or Sabriana has syphilis because after all, this is what the world is.

And what does it matter if that fountain has stood five hundred years. That they took nine thousand men, even babies and shot them before the eyes of village women, saying don't do anything, don't try anything. Their blood is gone and now children run shrieking their joy.

And this sadness you drag along like a cat is no sadness. It is perhaps that your blood craves something sweet, a Sachertorte, a kind word, here or there. We strain towards something we can name, the light that springs from the fountain, until fields waving madly to us disappear with wives and lovers.

In your land there are no smiling children, and I am tired of all the dark dead who leave me breathless. I stand here on a street where women pass and men think them beautiful, smiles flash like the sea. Because here it never snows and it is nothing, no nothing like the home I know. Until the light is undone in the fountain, and I can look without wanting to name the thin sorrow that keeps me, here I will remain.
Early Noon

Silently the linden turns green in the opening summer,
far from the city, flickers
the dull-glazed day moon. Now it is noon,
now light stirs in the fountain,
now it rises under the clay fragments
of the enchanted bird's mistreated wings,
and deformed by stones thrown, the hand
sinks in the awakening grain.

Where Germany's sky blackens the earth,
it's beheaded angel seeks a grave for hate
and gives you the key to your heart.

A handful of pain disappears over the hill.

Seven years later
it happens to you once more,
at the fountain before the gate,
don't look too deeply
your eyes overflow.

Seven years later
in the house of the dead
yesterday's executioners drink
the golden cup empty.
Your eyes sank.

Now it is noon, in the ashes
iron bends, on the thorn
the flag is hoisted, and on the cliffs
of ancient dreams
the eagle stays forged.

Only hope cowers blinded in the light.

Loosen its chains, lead it
down from the hill, lay your hand
over its eyes, that no shadow
will scorch it!

(next page, new stanza)
Where Germany's earth blackens the sky,
a cloud searches for words and fills the crater with silence,
before summer perceives it in the pouring rain.

The unspeakable spreads, softly said, over the land:
Now it is noon.

Note: Line 15 is the first line from a well known German folk song, "Der Lindenbaum," by Schubert. Lines 17 and 22 are from Goethe's "Der König in Thule."
My First Born Land

To my first born land, in the south
I went and found, naked and poor
and up to the waist in ocean,
city and castle.

Visited by the dust of sleep,
I lay in light,
and a tree skeleton hung over me
covered with Ionian salt.

No dream fell.

No rosemary bloomed.
No bird renewed
its song at the spring.

In my first born land, in the south
a viper leaped out at me
and the light held terror.

O shut
eyes, O shut.
Press your mouth to the wound.

And when I drank myself
and an earthquake rocked
my first born land to sleep
I awakened to sight.

Then my life fell to me.

Then stone is not dead.
The wick flares up
when ignited by a glance.
Songs from an Island

Shade fruits fall from the walls,  
moonlight whitewashes the house and the sea wind  
brings in the ashes of cooled craters.

The shores sleep in the embrace  
of young boys,  
your flesh reflects mine,  
it was already joined to mine  
when the ships  
grew out from the land and crosses  
bearing our mortal burdens  
served as masts.

Now, the executioners blocks are empty,  
they search and do not find us.

When you rise from the dead,  
when I rise from the dead,  
no stone will be before the gate,  
and no boat lie on the sea.

Tomorrow the vessels roll  
against Sunday waves,  
we come on anointed  
soles to the beach, wash  
the grapes and stamp  
the harvest to wine,  
tomorrow on the beach.

When you rise from the dead,  
when I rise from the dead,  
the hangman will hang at the gate,  
the hammer sink in the sea.

Certainly one day the feast must come!  
St. Anthony, you who have suffered,  
St. Leonard, you who have suffered,  
St. Vitus, you who have suffered.

(next page, new stanza)
Make room for our prayers, our pleas,
room for music and joy!
We have learned simplicity,
we sing in the choir of cicadas,
we eat and drink,
thin cats rub around our table,
until evening mass begins,
I hold your hand
with my eyes,
and a quiet, brave heart
offers you its desires.

Honey and nuts to the children,
full nets to the fishermen,
fertility to the gardens,
moon to the volcano, moon to the volcano!

Our sparks crossed over the boundaries,
through the night rockets
turned cartwheels, on dark rafts
the procession withdraws and the present
yields to the prehistoric,
to crawling lizards,
succulent plants,
frantic fish,
to orgies of wind and the passion
of the mountain where an innocent
star goes astray, runs
into its breast and turns to dust.

Now be constant foolish saints,
tell the mainland, that craters don't sleep!
St. Roch, you who have suffered,
O you who have suffered, St. Francis.

When one leaves, he must throw
his hat with the shells he collected
through the summer in the sea
and sail away with the wind in his hair,
he must hurl the table that he set
for his love in the sea,
he must dump the last wine
from his glass in the sea,
he must give the fish his bread
and mix a drop of his blood with the sea,
he must drive his knife deep into the waves,
and scuttle his shoe,
heart, anchor and cross,
and sail away with the wind in his hair!
Then he will return.
When?
    Don't ask.

There is fire under the earth
and the fire is pure.

There is fire under the earth
and molten rock.

There is a flood under the earth
that flows into us.

There is a flood under the earth
that scorches our bones.

There comes a great fire,
there comes a flood over the earth.

We will be witness.
Land of Fog

In winter my love
is one with the beasts of the wood.
The vixen knows I must return
before morning and laughs.
How the clouds shiver! And on
my winter coat falls
a layer of brittle ice.

In winter my love
is a tree among trees and invites
the unlucky crows to rest
in her lovely branches. She knows
that as the sun fades, the wind
lifts her motionless, frost-embroidered
gown and chases me home.

In winter my love
is silent among fish.
Slave to the waters that move inside
from the stroke of her fins,
I stay on shore and watch
how she dives and turns
until the ice floes drive me away.

And struck again by the hunt cry
of a bird whose wings brush
over me, I fall
on the open field: she plucks
the feathers from hens and throws me
a white collarbone. I put it around my neck
and go forth through the bitter down.

I know my love
is unfaithful. Sometimes she floats
on high-heeled shoes to the city.
In bars she kisses glasses deep
on the mouth with straws
and she has a word for everyone.
But this language I don't know.

Land of fog I have seen.
Heart of fog I have eaten.