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Repartee translated by David Keller and Donald Sheehan

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REPARTEE

I 'Arsenio' (she writes me), 'I here "taking the air" among my somber cypresses think that it's time to suspend the so much by-you-for-me desired suspension of all worldly illusions; that it's time to set sail and hang up the *epochè*.

Don't tell me the weather's foul, that even turtle-doves have flown south with a flicker of wings. I cannot live on memories any more. Better the bite of ice than your torpor of sleepwalking, O late awakened.'

II Scarcely out of adolescence I was thrown for half my life into the Augean stables.

I didn't find the two thousand oxen,
I didn't even see a single animal;
yet in the runways forever thickening
with manure I stumbled on
gasping for breath. But day by day
crescendoed lowings that were wholly human.
He wasn't seen, even once,
though the hinds still waited
for the call to arms: overjammed funnels,
pitchforks, kitchen-spits, and a rotting row
of saltimbocca. And not
once did He show
a royal robe's hem or diadem's tip
above the ebony bastions, excremental.

Then year by year—and who kept count of that dark night's seasons?—some hand that probed for invisible fissures finally insinuated its memento: a curl of Gerti's, a cricket in a cage, final trace of Liuba's trek, the microfilm of a too-too-elaborate sonnet slipped from the fingers of Clizia numb with sleep, a click-clack of wooden shoes (the crippled maid from Monghidoro)

until from the cracks the machineguns' cross-fire cut us down—exhausted workmen caught in the act by magistrates of the mud.

And finally it fell with a thud: the inconceivable.

To free us, to stop up the tangle of tunnels in a lake, was a moment's work for the churning Alpheus. Who awaited Him now? What deep meaning had that new quagmire? and the breathing of other, yet equal stenches? and the turning and turning on rafts of dung? and was that obscene slug from the sewers sunshine of the chimneys, were they men perhaps, actual living men, those giant ants on the docks?

(I think that you've probably stopped reading this. But now you know everything about me, about my imprisonment and afterwards; now you know the eagle cannot be born from the rat.)

translated by David Keller and Donald Sheehan