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Litost

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Litost

for Milan Kundera

The woman has no eyebrows:
Her eyes are houses without roofs.
Therefore, she is never shocked
By the incidental brutality of
The drunken soldier, the fearful poet.

She cannot knit her face into
Confusion when her child asks her
If angels are invisible.
The child, accustomed to her blankness,
Walks away without his imagination.

She smiles at the doctor before
He inserts the tube that will suck
Someone's life from her, but the smile
Is a mystery, a picture without a frame:
No irony, no wistfulness, no cynicism.

Even when she cries, her tears reflect
Nothing, because there is not punctuation:
No exclamation point! You bastard!
No comma, I will be all right,
No period. And that's that.

She lives in a nation without eyebrows:
When the Soviets stole them, the nation
Did not raise its eyebrows in disapproval,
Did not shoot its eyebrows up in shock,
Did not gather its eyebrows in pain

Remembering how things were, thinking
Of what could have been; surprised
But wise, so not shocked; grieved but not
Unable to see the irony,
And calling for the angels of revenge
So passionately

That the nation's face
Begins to paint eyebrows on itself,
Visible only to those who understand how pain
And laughter, wisdom and innocence, yearning and
Vengeance can copulate, giving birth to the litost
Of a lost nation, the keening of an ageless orphan.

—Deborah O'Harra