

Nine Hölderlin Variations

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I

*offen die Fenster des Himmels
Und freigelassen der Nachtgeist,
Der himmelstürmende, der hat unser Land
Beschwätzet, mit Sprachen viel, unbändigen, und
Den Schutt gewälzet
Bis diese Stunde.*

Gaping, their panes thick
with dust, one flapping
slowly in the
star-wind. But he is gone.
Shout for him in fifty tongues, he
returns less than mockery, he
answers pure gibberish,
undistorted. Rubble
of stars does not impede
him, who once cast words,
as an old-woman scatters breadcrumbs in the park,
spread them over the flowering turf
so there was much pecking and strutting.
But now: any shout will just explode
the pigeons' picnic, reach
him never - he
has taken his way
past the furthest light-bodies, out of
the background-murmur, into the one and
primal silence.

II

*Auf falbem Laube ruhet
Die Traube, des Weines Hoffnung, also ruhet auf der Wange.
Der Schatten von dem goldenen Schmuck, der hängt
Am Ohre der Jungfrau.*

Every shadow
of autumn gold and scarlet, all
patterns of leaves against
running water, all beauty
of mountains resolving slowly
to a winter I shall not see -
every heart-beat of the road
to the deep north, the narrow
one I ended in Hirosaki: -
this I gather, weave it
to a garland that
encircles you, like ripples spreading
through years, past stars.
And hope, gentle
as autumn's progress, mimics a shadow
where the wind touches
your cheek. There is
no ornament: what seems
a gold pendant is just memory
of sunlight on water.

III

*Indessen laß mich wandeln
Und wilde Beere pflücken
Zu löschen die Liebe zu dir
An deinen Pfaden, o Erd ...*

Fear had to
be learned, and
enmity, landscapes
patterned in threat
and refuge. When love
came, it had to
die and resurrect
so often it was like the faith
the Aztecs had: out
with the pulsing
heart and kick the rest
down the pyramid.

To love the bitter
and the sweet of earth,
to savour wild berries,
pungent with the juices
of your sex, sends me
past learning,
into the hot paths
where shade is liquid.

IV

*Und daß ich ruhen möge, der Toten
zu denken. Viele sind gestorben,
Feldherrn in alter Zeit
Und schöne Frauen und Dichter
Und in neuer
Der Männer viel,
ich aber bin allein.*

One time, my eyes
will stop at the
window, slide down
the pane, too
weak to push through.
Will I then
see them clearly, the
warriors, beauties and
poets, at rest
before me? Is
the last room crowded?
Is my rest single?

You have bound me
in thousand ways
with golden tresses.
Will you be in
the last room
for the unbinding?

V

*Vom Abgrund nämlich haben
Wir angefangen und gegangen
Dem Leuen gleich, in Zweifel und Ärgeris,
Denn sinnlicher sind Menschen
In dem Brand
Der Wüste,
Lichttrunken und der Tiergeist ruhet
Mit ihnen. Bald aber wird, wie ein Hund, umgehn
In der Hitze meine Stimme auf den Gassen der Gärten,
In denen wohnen Menschen ..*

Blood as a beginning, surfeit
of pain – limbs scattered, bones
piercing skin. Yes, we
were drunk on light, and scarcely
noticed. And the abyss? Ignored.
The lions? Pensioned off
from the last circus. The dangling
gardens? Burned.
I know where blood congeals, encrusts: it is
on coldness, on the heart
of a child unloved. He would
have gladly joined the animals – they
shut him out. He tried
to make words into
zoology, made gods
of dead cicadas, crooned
their obsequies, crouched
in sanctuary behind hydrangea bushes.
Sent my voice round like a dog in the lanes,
where people live, to smell out childhood's
gamey bones, but the mutt
dug up my mother.
She owned, advertised and
managed the desert, the one where
blood didn't flower, where heat
killed sensuality: even lions
never got it up.

Oh let me be
the animal that rests,
and let my voice
drift the sweet way to silence
down your lane.

VI

*Aber
Furchtbar ungastlich windet
Sich durch den Garten die Irre,
Die augenlose, da den Ausgang
Mit reinen Händen kaum
Erfindet ein Mensch.*

Through the pain of the unseen,
moving garden she
blunders, her soundless
screams waking not an echo to guide her.

Falls, scrabbles
in the dead azaleas, bruises
herself on tree-trunks
that intercept her.
Blind, mad. Her child
has wished her so,
as payment. He sends her,
blind, mad, falling though his
prisons of invention, his
cold hells carved from
rejection, makes her
stumble, cry out, but never lets her become
audible. If
he heard her voice, the
pay-out might falter. So he
drives her, this
chosen ghost-mother,
blind, mad, soundlessly
screaming, around and around
in the dead garden
of such childhood
she gave him.
Whose hands
are pure? What exit
can hands invent?

VII

*und wenn in heiliger Nacht
Der Zukunft einer gedenkt und Sorge für
Die sorglos schlafenden trägt,
Die frisch aufblühenden Kinder,
Kommst lächelnd du, und fragst, was er, wo du
Die Königin seiest, befürchte.*

To lay charms on the darkness, to dignify
absence into a shape of blessing, to name
the day's other, make her female,
august, fit for adoration: stale magic.

It is better that one
should watch all night,
harvesting, for the bad
times, the stars' impartiality,
gathering up their time
in bundles, the millennia
of light's journey,
pure diffusion.

He collects this time
like washed, teased wool, fills
sacks with it, has no time
to notice a hesitation
of the darkness,
a fault in nothing,
almost a shape
of woman, a presence
needing no shadow.

VIII

*Die Blumen gibt es,
Nicht von der Erde gezeugt, von selber
Aus lockerem Boden sprossen die,
Ein Widerstrahl des Tages, nicht ist
Es ziemend, diese zu pflücken,
Denn golden stehen,
Unzubereitet,
Ja schon die unbelaubten ...*

Your eyes were not
flowers of earth. You
saw me and my like with
hesitation. You,
budding, ruled flowers that came
from no seed, touched
the heavy stalk, coaxed
him to swell. Above your
split, mauve, sharp red
bloom I breathed pollen
from the bush, fuzzed,
dark, where idle bees, not
of the earth, sang
no labour.

We disturbed them.

IX

*Wo aber allzusehr sich
Das Ungebundene zum Tode sehnet,
Himmlisches einschläft, und die Treue Gottes,
Das Verständige fehlt.*

Our life is built
of absence, from the first
expulsion to the last
missing word in the
defective text.
What is not
invisible in the moment
of its only recognition?

The unbound tends
to death, and years
of useless love, that
worse than none, gave me
the bearing: keeping to it
we would hit the
ice sea. We would extinguish
ourselves in cold. But golden
your coming and your white
splendour lets the wheel spin
handless, unsteered.

We drift to climes where
gods, once intelligible,
get testy, slack,
unreliable
as both our hearts.