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Volker Braun

Rubble Flora

Over the rubble heaps the wild trees stand.
From the blackened stones the green leaps up like flame.
Extinguished cities. Fiery lupins and
Widows in the ruins set up house and home.

Translated by David Constantine

An Account of Despair

When she entered
And set down her empty bags on my tabletops
I felt caught out in my
Missed deeds.

The evening news dripped bloodily from the screen
And the bed stood encircled
Aside in the uninhabited zone.

She approached and embraced me
At once as though she could not be wrong

And fastened shut the door
With a black twine that had no end
And took the pictures from the wall, but there was worse:
She took the pictures out of the windows

And stopped dead in their tracks
My other friends
With her voice on the breeze
Of birds torn all to pieces.

I saw there was no arguing with this woman
She is right
Like a ruling
ONCE AND FOR ALL

I saw all the things she held in her hands
And rose quietly like a planet that does not belong
And vanishes from the screen.

Unfinished

Translated by David Constantine

The Muddy Levels

The matchstick-men of planning
Randomly inscribed
Year after year
On the tough black damned and stinking immeasurably long
Long-suffering.

Translated by David Constantine

The Turningpoint

The astonishing land breeze
In the corridors. Smashed
Desks. The blood the newspapers
AND FAME? AND HUNGER
Spew up. History
Turns on its heels and is
For one moment
Determined.

Translated by David Constantine

New Wallpaper

The management informs me
The alterations were completed very quietly long ago.
But the premises are no more spacious
The stairs inconvenient
And are the little rooms any lighter?
And why are people moving out not in?

Translated by David Constantine

The Builder on Stalin Avenue

Among the massive blocks
I come across a builder. He belongs
To the sunken classes
Who made walls that were true
And insurrections. Dreaming
I lead him back to the sweat-drenched
Scaffolding
Of a beginning.

Translated by David Constantine

My Brother

The beggar on the greasy steps of the BANCO DI ROMA
On a piece of corrugated cardboard BROTHER, curled
In his cap at noon. How am I better off than him?
Nothing but my verses feeds me and gets me a bed.
My lines, my sores, cover the paper, filthy
And exposed. Shameless words
That live on the streets, begging for sympathy.
A skinny boy with his hand out
Staggers from human being to human being

For some humanity. The gypsies in the exhaust fumes.
Not even by a hope am I better off than you.

Translated by David Constantine

Marlboro is Red. Red is Marlboro

Sleep now, rest ... But you like awake, smiling.
Only my body is still underway
On one road or another and alas where to?
You wanted to encompass the unknown.
I know all that now. All that is the desert.
Desert, you say. Or I say affluence.
Enjoy, breathe, eat. Offer your hands open.
I'll never live towards a turningpoint again.

Translated by David Constantine

Pliny sends greetings to Tacitus

(For Heiner Müller)

Why did Pliny make for the centre of the catastrophe
When the cloud rose up in the shape of a pine
White and filthy as the elements it had dragged aloft
As a man of science he thought the matter
Worth a closer look. He called for his sandals
Launched the quadriremes and with a favourable wind
Bore towards Vesuvius *dirt and red-hot pumice*
Why did he not remain at a safe distance
At his card-table in Misenum
He knew the *true nature* of the upheaval
Harmlessly verdant to the summit, the peasants
Settle in the ashes of their hopes
When the memory cools and is able to calculate
As you know, land prices have risen again
Pliny the Younger writes to Maecilius Nepos
Because the Princeps has obliged the candidates
To purchase land before their election

A dwelling place in the Empire country houses under the volcano
The risks of the political cinder-track, why
Did he want to know exactly *He hurried*
Where others were fleeing from, directly into the danger
Dictating to a scribe all the images of the disaster
While the sea withdrew and chunks of stone were falling
In his complete *Natural History* (37 volumes)
He had foretold the event and the end of the world
Which now was reduced to his own
A man of my age with an insatiable curiosity *He*
Had himself carried to the bath, dined quietly and lay down
In the horror, his breathing, because of
His corpulence, audible
Why did I remain in the midst of the catastrophe
Of my century *The Betrayed Revolution*
With all the traitors who wished to know it betrayed
I thought the matter worthy etc. *They fastened cushions*
On their heads for protection against the falling stones
I knew the true nature of the upheaval
Planted with red flags to the summit, the workers
And peasants scrabbling in the mud of promises
I have described (in volume after volume) the downfall
Only now and then a mouthful of cold water
And the end will only be my own
Meanwhile I bathe and eat
Of the dross of another catastrophe
The Triumph of the West by J.M.Roberts
Observed close up a natural phenomenon
Till the debris reaches the doorstep crushingly
Why do I not abide
At my desk in my certain hope
Only now and then it was necessary
To shake off the ash so as not to be buried
The steamrollers of progress *breathhtaking*
They stopped his throat The ash of Auschwitz
The dark cloud in the shape of a mushroom
Leaping from the ground, why do I go on with the exercise
In the cold lava of the revolution
In the Nile mud of civilization
In a four-door wreck of an automobile
In the exhaust fumes of Naples

Translated by David Constantine