Less Like a Dove
Agi Mishol

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translated from Hebrew by Joanna Chen

Shearsman Books
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Introduction

I first met Agi Mishol through a slender book of poems entitled *Wax Flowers* that considers Mishol’s relationship with her dead parents. My own mother was dying at the time and I would walk around with the book in my bag like an amulet. Something in the immediacy and down-to-earth quality of Mishol’s poetry spoke directly to my heart, the way she infuses her poems with both humour and jarring realism; the way her poems overflow with the raw countryside around her.

We met several months later at her home in a small village in central Israel. I left after several hours of warm conversation, my arms full of the many books Mishol, a leading poet in Israel today, has published both in Hebrew and other languages; my heart full of a desire to dig deeper into her words. Mishol’s poetry walks a fine line between biting reality and escapism: her words percolate with the pervading political climate.

The Hebrew language is multi-layered. Many of the words have their own biblical, cultural and social connotations waiting to be discovered through translation, waiting to be laid open for others to understand and enjoy. The writer Cynthia Ozick said that “translation can serve as a lens into the underground life of another culture,” and my wish while translating was to create this lens for readers of English.

The poetry of Mishol is evocative, accessible, grounded in the present yet steeped both in Mishol’s personal past and in the public past of Israel. The lyricism of her poems nestles within a language that is colloquial and familiar. Despite the simple diction, the challenge for me was to translate the words without removing them from their larger cultural context and also to preserve the gentle lyrical quality that Mishol’s poetry possesses in the original Hebrew. Most of all, to open her world to others.

JOANNA CHEN
The Sermon at Latrun

You piss on my love as if it were a bonfire, extinguishing it ember by ember with the arrogance of the perfect crime, and afterwards you cry at night in front of an empty robe, a shirt on a barbed wire hanger – What were you thinking?

So your carriages turned into pumpkins, your horses to mice, and rags began peeping through. Both of you, covered in fig leaves, biting into the apple of knowledge, knowing how to enter and exit the norm – Were you not afraid? Did you never hear that God has no God?

You will be wanderers in the cash flow of life, dogs without collars. You will never relax into form, never again hear the heart go boom –

A pig’s head resting on a tray, a green apple stuffed in its mouth – With this you remain – So sayeth the Lord.
Betrayal

All the sorrel stalks I sucked on
revealed nothing.

Words piled up behind my back
until they turned into a green hill.
Phloem coursed through the trunks;
lupine seeds plotted blue in the dark soil.

Even if there is no singular form for grass
and only the plural makes it green,
I could not have known.

Birnam Wood began to move,
afterwards thought darkened
with everything that lay behind the trees.
Night Lamp

It takes time for the body
to grasp what the mind has decided
so the body strokes itself
with an outline of consolation:
here the shoulder, here
the face, here the inner thighs –

This is the bottomless sigh
devoid of a consonant
to lean against.
No Casualties Reported

No one counted him,
the little donkey
in the photograph
below the headlines.

A white donkey,
his life shackled to scrap iron
and watermelons,
who surely stood still
as they strapped the saddle
of dynamite to his body,
until they patted his behind
spurring him on with a yallah itlah
to the enemy lines –

Only then
mid-road
did he notice the pale grass
sprouting between the rocks
and he strayed
from the plot
in order to munch,
belonging only to himself
in the ticking silence.

It was not written who fired:
those who feared he would turn back
or those who refused the approaching gift
But when he rose to heaven
in a blaze
the donkey was promoted
to the rank of explosive messiah
and seventy-two tender virgin donkeys
licked his wounds.
Showing You

Undressing for you down to my handwriting
down to the gutturals
the hard phonetics
the vowels

until you see my O
my suffixes

the trees
pulped into
paper, flutes and the desk
with the chair that swivels
empty

when I come to you
so you will read my ink.
My Father Speaks Again

Let’s see, you probably remember
how you followed my gurney
with a blue plastic cup containing my teeth,
my strength.

Your cries, searching for words,
collapsed into Hungarian stresses
and a doctor called Winker whistled to himself
a morning tune.

As he covered my body with a faded sheet
from Public Health I remembered
how you also got a glimpse when
you were three.

Your little eyes, with only cows
for comparison,
saw teats full of milk
dangling between my legs.
My Mother Adds

In my condition I can’t remember
what I wanted to say to you
but I birthed you all
bones blood and milk.

And it hurts me to see you –
blue hair, golden eyes
still clambering out
of the abyss of my eyes
like a stubborn spider on webs of spittle
that you weave so well
with all the words you need
to invent for yourself
instead of me.