

SAMPLER

Lilies from America

Also by Carmen Bugan

Poetry

Crossing the Carpathians (Carcanet/OxfordPoets, 2004)

The House of Straw (Shearsman Books, 2014)

Releasing the Porcelain Birds (Shearsman Books, 2016)

In translation

Sulla soglia della dimenticanza (Edizioni Kolibris, 2015)

Prose

Burying the Typewriter: Childhood Under the Eye of the Secret Police
(Picador, UK / Graywolf, USA, 2012)

Seamus Heaney and East European Poetry in Translation: Poetics of Exile
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Carmen Bugar

Lilies from America

New & Selected Poems

2004-2019

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For my children, Alisa and Stefano

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Lilies from America

In memory of Tanti Saffica

You shall have white lilies
Like the ones you grew all your life
In your front garden.

Over three nights of wake,
On your final walk through the village,
And at the last church service,

When you will leave your space
In the choir, and your living candle
Will be blown out, moved to the candelabra

At the altar, where the candles for the dead
Weep in sand, you shall have
Madonna lilies next to you

I ordered them from America.
They didn't put the phone to your ear
So I could say I love you once more.

They said there was little breath left in you
And the drops of water they squeezed
On your rigid lips, spilled over.

You shall have white lilies that grow
In glass houses this bitter January,
For the scent of spring that will no longer

Return to you, but will arrive to me
Without you in it. You are with the angels now,
Oh, you are with the angels,

And your body is laid out in the front room
With your hands holding the cross,
Wearing the black winter coat.

We are so far away, we who left
Thirty years ago this year, and visited
Twice, when you touched us

As if we were dreams about to vanish.
Your last words to me were, "I know
I will not see you again, I know."

I knew you did not believe me, but
I am learning we must sometimes
Make promises we cannot keep.

This morning I sent you white lilies
And a wreath of white roses, for the time
When stars will blink above your grave.

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from

Crossing the Carpathians

(2004)

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In the silent country

When the hens climbed the tree to sleep and the dog was let loose in
the yard,
When their children went to bed, she covered the windows
In the doors with towels, and hung the yellow blanket over the curtain rod.

He went outside, around the farthest corner of the house, dug the typewriter
From its hole, then from the garage brought a stack of papers hidden
Behind tools in a box. They locked the room.

Both sat at the large oak table and put on gloves to hide fingerprints.
Each night, one by one, hundreds of pages darkened with communal
demands:
Hot water, electricity, freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom
to assemble.

Their arms smelled of fresh ink. The room was the sound of struck keys
Between two breaths. Not one star looked inside, but the wind joined
the hush
Of shuffled paper. Before the rooster broke the news of dawn, he put
the typewriter

In its white crate and buried it in the ground at the back of the house.
She stacked the leaflets in boxes with beans on top –same beans for months,
Wrinkled and dry like old thumbs. With the towels back in the closet

And the blanket down, the room returned to order, quiet and dark like
the street.

They kissed the children in their sleep. Posing as farmers, they left for
distant towns
Where he filled mailboxes while she watched for informers and police.

Hues of mornings changed with seasons, but the early sun
Spilled light over his face, over her hands holding the map.
At times, when they stopped to wash out the sleep with cold water, he
could see

The dark of her eyes. Fists met at the market and in the store,
Churches were demolished, and no one said a word:
Those waiting in eternal lines, or those who saw the crosses kneel

In the rubble of saints and chalices. When they slept, words
Rose from the stacks and they breathed them as they were on paper:
Hot water, electricity, freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom
to assemble.

They retraced in dreams each step: typewriter in the ground,
Papers behind the tools, gloves in the cupboard, the dark entryways
Where the words went, someone looking at them through a crack in
the door.

Every night the words replaced them – *her pale skin, her long brown hair.*
They whispered into the sleep of others, in the silent country.

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Portrait of a family

When the strangers walked into the house,
Took the paintings off the walls, and
Sealed off the rooms with red wax,

Part of this poem listened in a hospital. A woman's milk
Fed the words she couldn't say into her child's mouth.
For seven months the strangers stayed in the house.

Someone tied the hands of the man
Who inflamed the centre of the capital with protest,
While they took the paintings off the walls.

A few lines covered in the grass, outside the windows,
With the neighbors who watched the girl answering questions
To the strangers who settled into the house.

And yet someone followed her sister on the streets
And photographed her pure black eyes,
Unsuspecting in the paintings on the walls.

Now that the strangers have left the house,
The poem would like to know:
Can it place once more the paintings on the walls,

Will the son tell the secrets of his mother's milk,
Will the handcuffs come off the man's hands,
Will the girl stop answering questions,
Will her sister burn the photographs?

The demonstration

I remember the night my father left
Filling a bag with leaflets and tying the placards
On top of the car: 'We Demand the Trial of the Ceașescu Family
For Crimes Against Humanity, Usury and Economic Downfall.'

I complained about the boiled cabbage.
Please come and lock the gates. Tell them nothing.
I fell asleep on the kitchen sofa listening to Radio Free Europe.

In Bucharest he placed the placards on the front and back of the car.
He drove through traffic on the main street.
People came out of the stores shouting.
Buses and trams stopped, emptied, let him pass.

He threw leaflets with the left hand, drove with the right hand.
Ah, it was glorious! The flag of his country draped round his chest.
The portrait of the dictator decorated with black ribbons.

In a hospital, Dad's only son was born –
Mother held his bluish body wrapped in white cloth
At the window.

Thousands saw him being pulled from the car,
Watched him between armed soldiers.
None of his countrymen said a word.

Fertile ground

I was pruning tomato plants when they came to search
For weapons in our garden;
They dug the earth under the chickens, bell peppers,
Tiny melons, dill, and horseradishes.

I cried over sliced eggplants
Made one with the dirt,
Over fresh-dug earth and morning glories.

Their shovels uncovered bottles
With rusted metal caps – sunflower cooking oil
My father kept for ‘dark days,’ purchased in days equally dark.
Their eyes lit – everyone got a bottle or two –
A promise for their families’ meals.

And when the oil spilled on the ground, shiny over crushed tomatoes
They asked me about weapons we might have kept.
‘Oil,’ I said: ‘You eat and live.
This alone makes one dangerous.’

The first visit

The family went inside cement walls
In the centre of the town,
Stood inside metal gates
In the centre of the prison,
And waited.

Hours swelled
Like the shadows of passing black trucks
Loaded with criminals.

When they finished shaving him,
After they covered the wounds on his head with a cap,
There was a rumble of chains and keys.
His wife and children were taken to the visiting room:
'Twenty minutes,' the guard said.

Twenty minutes in August each year
Twenty minutes –
A mouth full of suffering,
Words swollen by microphones
Sank into the thick wall of glass
Between us.

Through two rooms, through two square holes in the walls
The little boy said:
'Daddy, I thought I'd bring you some apples.'

The divorce

Before they brought him to the courtroom, they gave
him three apples: 'Your wife sent you these.'
He cradled each apple in the cup of his hands,
The smoothness of their skin became the cheeks of each child.

Inside the courthouse there was a quiet opening and closing of doors.
A crowd of people was chanting his name under the windows.
When the door opened, I saw his bare feet in brown shoes.

His children held each other tight against the wall.
Their breaths, white with cold, were rising towards the ceiling.
They listened for the voices of their parents.

When the divorce was over, he was allowed to see them:
They kissed his chained hands, promised to be good, let their tears fall
On his prison uniform with his own, all three of them burying him.
How I wished we could hide him with our bodies and take him home!

The Securitate peeled us off him.
But we were the apple seeds left to grow
In the sound of his chains on the cement floor.