

The House of Straw

Also by Carmen Bugar

Poetry

Crossing the Carpathians (Carcamet/Oxford*Poets*, 2004)

Prose

Burying the Typewriter (Picador, 2012)

Seamus Heaney and East European Poetry in Translation:
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The House of Straw

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for Alessandro

Song of the Creatures

after St. Francis of Assisi

My good, most High, all powerful Lord,
You hold all glory, praises,
Honour, and every benediction.
Only to You these things belong,
And no man is worthy
To mention You by name.

I thank You for all of Your creation, my Lord,
Especially for brother Sun
For he is radiant, beautiful, splendid,
He gives us daylight and warmth
Bringing Your love to us.

I thank You for sister Moon and the stars,
For they are clear, precious, and beautiful
There in the sky where You placed them.

I thank You for brother Wind,
For the air and clouds, for clear weather,
For the snow and the rain
Through whom You sustain us.

I thank You for sister Water
Who is useful and humble,
Chaste and cherished.

I thank You for brother Fire
Through whom You light my road at night
For he is beautiful, playful, robust, and strong.

I thank You for mother Earth
Who governs us and nourishes us
With her fruit, herbs, flowers
And every living being.

I thank You for those who forgive
In the name of Your love,

For those who bear illnesses,
Infirmities, and suffer through hardship.
Blessed are those who endure suffering patiently
For You, my Lord, will bestow Your grace upon them.

Glory be to You, my Lord, for sister Death corporeal
From whom no living man escapes;
Forsaken are those who die in mortal sin;
Blessed are those who give themselves to You
Living by your Holy will
For them the second death will be painless.

Let us glorify, honour, and thank our Lord
Let us serve Him and His creation
With humility.

Part 1

Twenty Years

The horizon was the blue spine of a book,
its pages frozen sand, iced-over waves
and I, still unwashed of airplane fumes
day's sweat, bitterness of instant coffee,
went knee-deep in water, where I first wrote
out of my life the tangled algae of the Black Sea.

Who can see ahead on that first day when
you awake without a country, a house,
in a well-meaning stranger's bed, your
host speaking to you in an alien language?
I ate the food she served with trembling hands,
it was snowing outside, warm inside.

The following year I erased the birds: woodpecker,
sparrow, grandfather's pigeons, and the faithful stork.
In their place I wrote the hawks that scanned
the dunes of Sleeping Bear, crows, hummingbirds,
red cardinals singing
in the too-large garden of our new house.

But on this page I am leaning against lighthouses
while cherry orchards grow to the tip of Leelanau,
tree roots in water. They swish over whitened-out
cornfields of my childhood. All things I wanted to forget
crowd in-between the lines I spent years writing:
four languages, ambitions, homesickness, dispersed friends.

*

Today it is twenty years since that evening at the airport
when in blinding snow people we had not seen

were waiting for us. They said I kissed the ground.
Did I kiss the ground? Who can remember this?
We search ourselves through memories,
Or autumn leaves that fall, breaking into something else.

The House of Straw

In memory of my grandparents

“In this world the house will be yours
But in the afterlife it shall be mine.”
So, when they were old, they joined
In the ritual of caring for the band
Of gypsies coming through the village,
Looking after parents left by children
At empty hearths. What you give away
Stays with you in eternity,
For heaven or hell will be received
In a familiar bed, at a table you know.

Each built a separate room in the garden;
Walls and floor of new straw rugs,
A bed with a hay mattress draped in cotton,
White pillows, change of clothes,
Soft slippers to walk around the sky,
A table with chairs, a flower tapestry,
A pail filled with water from our well.
For work, each gave away bags of rice
Which needed separating grain by grain,
Beans, a sack of unsifted wheat,
Corn in a wicker basket, and two hens
To lay eggs around the house.
All other time in heaven is leisurely, they said.

*

And then, the afterlife meal:
Onions, rice, fresh tomatoes were sweated
In sunflower oil, then added to minced meat,

Flavoured with parsley and dill, some salt,
Ground pepper, an egg for binding up the mixture,
All wrapped in vine leaves stung in brine
And put to simmer all day long.
Grandmother hovered over polenta
With the wooden spoon, while buttermilk,
Aged in earthen jugs, was ready to be poured.

*

When the poor in this life were called
To receive the roofless houses of straw
Candles were lit to link living day
To other world with the cord of light;
I watched all those hands uniting
On stems of wax held at thresholds,
I saw love eternal, burning at open doors.
Then in his room, my grandfather brought
A flask of wine, set it on the table, and cried.

A Dream

You were waiting for me
To play with you as when I was a child,
Your hair, the colour of rook feathers,
Silky, almost glittery, was braided
Into two thick tails I used to envy.

I came, took off your headscarf,
And at the nape of your neck saw
Two thinning white braids
Coiled like snake-flaked skin.

I almost said “best not to return”
But did not speak a word, for you were
Studying the signs around my eyes,
That etched the sixteen years.

You remained young in my mind,
I thought the only flesh counting time
Was mine, until this dream, where
You were suddenly old.

We poured water, yeast, sugar and salt
Into flour, kneaded together the dough,
Palms and fingers focused on our ritual
Of baking bread: we were again close.