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Four Poems

ARTUR LUNDKVIST

Temples

Temples. I have seen so many temples. The world is full of temples (would it have been better or worse without them?)

Temples like cobblers' shops with shoes taken off and kicked about. Temples with beggars and pilgrims in the droppings from pigeons and bats. Temples filled with painted eyes, with flames among fluttering ribbons.

Temples where cows are milked in swarms of flies. Temples with butchery of goats and enchanted drinking of blood. Temples with pocket mirrors hung on threads, razor blades and light bulbs (worn-out gloves, rusty blades, burnt-out bulbs).

Temples which ants pass through like black lines in different directions. Temples with delicately ringing wind-chimes against a blue sky. Temples with thundering bronze gongs. Temples with horns resting like verdigrised cannons, waking echoes which roll between the mountains.

Temples with gods as tall as trees, cut into mighty tree trunks and painted in angry red and blue. Temples with gods coiled together, gods splashed by running water, gods made of porcelain and horsehair, gods with faces of white or black stone, gods sticking out their tongue or exposing their fangs.

Temples in the form of thinker's brows, of wasp nests, of women's breasts, of half-open vaginas. Temples in the form of tents made of wood or of tree groves made of stone. Temples with prayers written on living leaves, temples with electrically lit paintings, temples where sinners struggle among the walls' waves of fire.

Temples, temples, temples! So many gods and such an absence of God!

Gods made visible who are like people, giants or animals, gods who eat and drink, procreate and fight, full of greed and fury, running with greasy ointment. Good and bad gods, attractive and frightening, giving and taking, crowned with gold halos or poisonous snakes.

Gods with power over life and death, vain, blood-thirsty, intoxicated with power, formed of all the currents of the human ocean, thrown up like driftwood, polished like stones under waterfalls, all of them the creation or the abortion of desire and self-denial.

Temples and gods! But the principal temple and the sole God are disregarded, unknown: space all too open and dizzying for mankind and the endless absence of God as the only possible God.

—translated by Diana Wormuth from the Swedish

The Baker

See this baker now: almost angelic, such a symbol of innocence and good work! It is however the innocence of flour he disguises himself in, a whiteness which leaves him again like smoke when he moves quickly or when someone claps him on the shoulder,

but this false whiteness cannot hide the black hair on his arms, almost like a gorilla's, and the muscles which protrude almost as on a wrestler, brutal and swelling, like snakes which swallowed rats still alive.

He also wrestles with leavened dough every day, abuses it like too-soft women's bodies, kneads it, draws it out to the breaking point and pushes it together again with a sound as if he had hit a woman on the thigh,

in his way he is scarcely less brutal than a butcher, though the dough made of the murdered and finely ground grain does not bleed, it contents itself with sighing,

he stands there without a spot on his white baker's clothes and he takes the loaves of bread from the oven, steaming like the living dead before they chill and grow hard.

He must however atone for his executioner's act in secret with the sweat pressed out of his body, as out of a sponge before the heat of the oven, and with a sickly pallor that nothing can overcome.

—translated by Diana Wormuth from the Swedish

Mill Memory

The miller of the windmill reefed the sail for the last time: the grist was finished and the grain was gone, the winds could go to rest where they had come sauntering up the incline and shaken the broom plants long after they had finished blooming,

it was the end of nights sitting up with a swinging lantern in the flour haze, the end of the creaking of wood as from an ox-cart on an endless road and the shaking as from a waking giant when the wind suddenly came up,

it was also the end of rest in the mill during quiet summer evenings when the swallows flew past and light straw hats were seen wandering beyond the wheat field.

There stood the mill like a stumpy tower with stone walls, beheaded and built up with a revolving upper part, with steep ladders where wooden shoes had tramped up and down and with the trapdoor in the loft where the grain sacks were hoisted up:

now the old windmill could be made into a residence for summer guests and give work-free income in rental fees, but in his dreams the miller would still for a time hear the mill turn and feel it vibrate.

—translated by Diana Wormuth from the Swedish

Furioso

I loved a cat. That was my misfortune. I found him abandoned in a hedge, a poor starving and frightened kitten. He sat huddled in my hand like a little cactus, with his fur on end and clinging fast with his little claws. Then I loved him at once, helplessly. I called him Furioso and took him to my house.

For weeks he did not walk, just sat huddled up, such a little cactus. He was ashamed of his pitiful body, so starved and shrunken, didn't want to show how miserable he was. Little but proud. And he could not digest food, it came out again, right away, from one end or the other. Ruined stomach, poor little fellow.

Then he learned to go out when the kitchen door was ajar, rushed back in when he heard dogs coming, or he could be frightened when a bird flew past. A hissing clump in a corner, thorny with claws, and his heart beat so fast, so terribly fast. He sat in the window and waited for me until I came back, cried so heartbreakingly with anguish and relief, he believed I wouldn't be back.

He became larger, short but long-legged, proud. He never stopped being a cactus, I couldn't pet him without his immediately beginning to claw and bite, only half in play, but soon exciting himself into a full rage which culminated in frightening himself, so that he fled, hid himself, came back repentant and tractable. But a little petting, security, and he took to claws and teeth again. He was so hurt, so filled with mistrust and fear, a bitterness which he took out on everything, on me too. Oh, I understood that this was his way of loving me. His only way, poor Furioso.

Then I was obliged to travel and leave him. He felt that I had let him down and was deeply hurt, didn't want to look at me, just sat stiff and huddled, precisely as he had at first. They promised to take care of him, but when I came back the following year he was lost, didn't

recognize me, was afraid of people, wild, he looked at me with burning, hate-filled eyes. Oh, Furioso, Furioso!

I could not forgive myself for leaving him, I mourned him like a child. And now I dare never again to love a cat, I look at all cats with hungry glances, but deny myself, renounce. If I walk by the sea I hear cats whimper and wail under the cliffs, wild cats who live by the sea and flee into their grottoes, or cats that rise out of the sea, are born and die in the breakers. I hear them the whole night, how they cry and wail like small children.

—translated by Diana Wormuth from the Swedish