



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 7 | Issue 2

Article 19

Nov-2005

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Recommended Citation

Obradovic, Biljana D. (2005). Three Poems. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 7(2), 215-220.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol7/iss2/19>

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Three Poems

By Biljana D. Obradovic

Update: January Appointment Postponed

My annual visit to that place, so common for all women,
postponed, first by the holiday, the Immaculate
Conception, then by a visit to my lover's mother, struggling
to survive without her husband taken away thirteen years
ago, then by the relief, at last, the death of my mother,

after the ten years of breast cancer that ate her up,
the last two living with open wounds, puss,
bleeding through the non-adhering bandages I sent her which,
when pulled, led to more bleeding, she not able
to wear any clothes without staining them, not

able to walk in public without someone
staring at her missing right breast, her right arm
enlarged, covered with bandages to conceal
the bloody sores, not able to bathe
for a year, only to wash herself partly down beneath

her wounds. (I helped her shower last summer.
Naked, my mother cried with every splash of water
on her body. I cried myself to sleep at night after
cutting her long, gray pubic hair, her long, thick
toe nails on her enormous right arm, after changing

the wet bandages on her arm, after massaging her
hips, after the repeated pain injections caused lumps
making it painful to inject her with more, after cutting
her food into pieces for her to swallow. At the end weighing
less than half her weight. After months and months of

morphine, hallucinating that people had come
to our house telling father to offer them
a copy of my book, she wanted him to feed her
poison, but he told her there was none in the house,
as she knew. She wanted the doctors to administer

an injection to put her to sleep forever. She wanted
the pain to end forever. And her wish came true
as the sun rose up on the first day of the new
year, the last of the century, the millennium.)
Today, I update my doctor today of her death, now to my

own history. He remembers me from last year, but not my ethnicity, Serbian, “Catholic?” he asks. “Eastern Orthodox,” I tell him. He has read Rebecca West’s *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, and wants to know as he prods me down there, as he checks my breasts

for lumps,—will I ever want to have children? It’s never too late, he adds, now that even older women can have them. But, because I still smoke, after forty (only two years away) I cannot use birth control pills, as I can get a stroke. And if I decide to have a child

I have a greater chance of getting breast cancer myself. After forty I must get mammograms every year. He says he has quit smoking. Maybe I can too. Should I risk fate, get pregnant or should I remain without? Have my brother and I killed mother?

I’ve Been Here Before

After the fourth grade winter excursion to Divčibare I peed in my pants in the elevator heading home. Embarrassed, I cried in my mother’s soothing arms. The bus driver hadn’t stopped to let us relieve ourselves. Now, thirty years later, returning from a short trip to Niš on an express bus, with no stops, the a/c is cooling the inside from the heat outside worst in decades. Two old, domestic movies entertain us.

Upon arrival I hop on a city bus, get off at a stop where I’ve never stopped before, to search for my parents’ apartment building in the “Sleeping City,” New Belgrade’s Block 63. I get lost. I can’t find the right building. All the buildings look alike: huge cement staircase-like skyscrapers, with perverse graffiti on their walls. Eventually finding theirs, I squeeze in the tiny elevator. I press the tenth floor button, which is still there, vandals not yet removed it, as they have the lights above.

My bladder wants to explode. Locked inside iron doors I rise floor by floor, missing the fan, stolen long ago. I can’t breathe. With the frequent power outages, I could remain stuck here a long time. Last year I visited the DC Holocaust Museum. Now I remember my fear when I realized the elevator at its entrance was supposed to make us

feel as if we were in a gas chamber, and its entrance our end.
If I survive this, I can take anything that follows, I tell myself.

Their tenth floor, is the same as the one in the Lands-End Building
on Bombay's Malabar Hill when I was fifteen, but there
the lift boys pressed the buttons for us, there where iron bars
were our doors, like a jail. The breathing the bars
at least allowed us fresh air, however warm it was.
In my recurring dream, I try to reach a certain floor,
but keep arriving to the wrong one. I argue with the lift-boys
to take me to my floor. They seem to understand, but
my stop never comes, and I can never get home.

At home now my sick mother greets me. Lying on her side, she says
she wishes she could swallow all her pills at once to end her
miserable existence. "I can't help you," I have to tell her.
I am not Dr. Death. We don't talk about her cancer,
but both know she cannot live much longer. Ten years have taken their toll.
Father wants me to look at cemeteries, have a plot ready
when she dies. Smoking cigarettes on the balcony helps us
breathe, we whisper, and sip the Turkish coffee I'd made.

Mother remains inside in the living-room, away from our smoke,
watching a TV show about suicide. Away from our voices,
she doesn't want to die, doesn't know what we're scheming.
We don't want her to die. At night I sleep on the sofa
in the living room where all day she sits with her legs raised.
I can smell her wound hours after she's fallen asleep in the bedroom.
I can hear her snoring. Maybe tonight she won't have to get up,
I think, to take more pain killers. Why don't the shots the nurses
give her each day suffice? They've poked her in both hips

so many times, big balls have formed inside.
I rub, massage her with alcohol, lotion. A cabbage leaf
the doctor says, will help loosen the balls;
then they may disappear. But as the pain persists,
they will continue to inject her. They don't want to
to begin the morphine, not yet. Every day she asks,
"Why? I have not wronged anyone." Why? Why is she cursed
to suffer this way? "I don't know, mother. I don't know."

Another night in the Balkan theater watching *Great Expectations*,
I yell, "Turn up the volume!" I can't hear the sound,
the English. The translation is awful.
Reality is better, but only on the screen, in Hollywood.
There in the U.S., where I live, not here in the Balkans.

I've yelled the same thing in this theater before
(a tradition of a sort). I have to do it again. My friend frowns.
People in the theater laugh. I only wish I could scream louder, louder.

“Will they bomb us? Will they bomb Belgrade?
If they hadn't done it in '92 they won't now.”
More and more people in new, expensive convertibles speed by.
“Ten percent have everything here, the rest nothing.”
They promenade proudly through the streets, filling up the city.
Everywhere couples kiss openly, laughing at black humor.
Young parents push carriages with newborns. Retirees,
strolling the open-air markets with their grandsons, fill bags
with fresh strawberries, cherries and spring onions. Then suddenly
the old men yell, angry at the whole world for hating them

for being who they are, Serbs. In a few days everyone will watch
the national soccer team compete against Germany
in the World Cup. Our boys are our pride. We have to show the world
we are good at something. But, if we score, bullets will fire into
the air all over the city. If we win (not likely),
as if a battle were won, thousands will gather at Republika Square
by the horse with Knez Mihailo. A celebration for nothing.
Even if it rains young men will climb the horse and unfurl our flag
to show our might at beating the Germans again. What will we have achieved?

Kosovo is also on our minds. We still remember this battle
lost to the Ottomans in 1389. Have we not learned to forget
lost battles? Like the loss of the American South to the Yanks,
Southern Slavs still stand behind Orthodox values, four “S” symbols of Serbs,
“Solidarity solely saves Serbs.” But again disunited, suffering,
we have become dying patients. We have to stop somewhere
but can't find the right floor. We seem to remember
where we have been, but keep heading in the wrong direction.
When we make it home, it's not what we thought it would be.
We should cry out loud for help, but we're stuck.

Safe in the US of A

The Dead Christ by Albrecht Dürer

I.
Strolling around the Cleveland Museum of Art
I didn't see any of Dürer's paintings or etchings,
yet they had postcards of *The Riders of the Apocalypse*
at the gift shop. I asked a volunteer at the front desk
why Dürer's work was not displayed if they owned it?
The catalogue clearly shows some of his work

is here. She in turn told me I could request
to see them, make an appointment with the curator.
But I didn't have much time till I left the city,
fly home the next day. No time for an appointment.
She said I may be able to see them now, to ask.

For once a wish of mine was granted!
In just fifteen minutes I would go to a viewing room
to stare at a Dürer I'd always wanted
to see, had always loved, amazed at his strokes,
his precision, admiring every line, every
shading, his distinct handwriting and dates:
the huge **A**, like a table towering over the **D**.
A show just for me of three works:
The Riders, *The Dead Christ* (I had never seen
until the catalogue) and, a surprise for me—
one of the curator's choices.

The curator, a German named Kleinschmidt,
let me sit down beside the easel displaying the works.
First she placed *The Apocalypse*, then the surprise
with hunters, dogs and castles, and last *The Dead Christ*,
from 1505, a perspective of Christ I'd never
seen before, looking from his feet up. So human-like,
he lay with arms spread, his knees together
covering his manliness, his private parts.
Holes gaped in his feet, and hands from the nails
on the cross. He lay on a piece of cloth, the shroud.
You could barely see his face, barely recognize
the Christ in him, so humiliated in his death.

I looked on in silence, while the curator at a distance
tried not to disturb me, her eyes were flicking from my eyes
to the holes in Christ's feet. She was watching me while
I watched her watch me. There I was with Dürer, so
close to the exposed drawings, not in glass
cases, or frames; nothing was between his pencil strokes
and me. I could almost feel his hand inside mine,
drawing these. In awe I stumbled out onto the street
as if drugged. My friend's boyfriend opened the car door to let me in,
and I told him I couldn't understand my good fortune.
Why would they keep these treasures from the public?

II.

That was January 1998. In April the same year
I learned that these very drawings

were Hitler's favorites, stolen from Jews, from a museum. Never returned, they were sold to this Cleveland museum. Now the Lubomirski Museum in Ukraine wants them. 1941 Nazi loot, safe in the US of A. The article said, "At the end of the war, the allies attempted to safeguard stolen artworks and return them to previous owners. But soldiers on both sides of the war helped themselves to unguarded treasures."

III.

Now history has repeated itself, as always, and American soldiers, as well as Iraqis (but "soldiers being soldiers, and not, for the most part, historians"), have looted unguarded ancient treasures belonging to 26 million citizens of that country far older than the US—millennia apart. One day these may end up at such museums as the Cleveland Art Museum, to be looked upon with affection by yet other leaders of countries. Then someone like me, may stumble upon a gold ring with a ruby stone said to have belonged to a Babylonian king and admire it in peace on the other side of the planet, unaware how close her eyes may lie to those of evildoers.