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Liliana Ursu

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SECRET JOURNEY

Liliana Ursu

(Translated by the poet, Adam J. Sorkin, and Tess Gallagher)

You live in a white apartment,
its light opaque like milk,
your impeccable white suits,
raincoats like bright sea spume,
all neatly hung in big white wardrobes
with crystal doors.

Between us lie shadows, chalk-white—
our souls' pale ghosts. Poor slaves of oblivion.
On the long white table, a simple bouquet—
lilies-of-the-valley and two lit candlesticks
like twin sunrays.

The tapestry in your room twitters with woven birds.
The books you wrote—small, silent pyramids—
house the soul of your youth.
Unchanged. Good. Tender. At peace.

In the window a birch,
the flat lazy water of the bay,
and a souvenir from the Cișmigiu Park
of my Bucharest girlhood
when its small lake used to freeze
and, so happy to see snow,
I'd go skating with my father—
a white angel held my hand
while I spun pirouettes. My father
waited for me on the shore
holding a thermos of hot tea.

You wait for me in the doorway
of your sitting room. I arrive,
or don't arrive.
And with the most natural gesture in the world,

I embrace you. Then you slowly
take off my gloves, brush the crystalline snowflakes
from my hair and blow over me
words in an unknown language.
You take my hand in yours
and seat me in a white armchair
near the stove covered with glazed white ceramic tiles.

You start telling me about your life,
the thousand years without me,
the gold of the Goths,
the man in that painting—
a warrior, your grandfather
who built his own boats—
and his wife, your grandmother,
who smelled of milk, of babies, of lavender,
her lips stained pink by the strawberries
that perfumed the short summers.

I am listening to their story
when suddenly you stand
and play a recording of Dvořák's "Cypresses."
Then you fall silent
and stare a long time out the window:
somebody's waving at you from another world,
trying to tell you something.
You sit down sadly, complain to me
how much your knees hurt.
And I realize I'm out of place
in your new white apartment with a view of the bay.

But before going I tell you a story:
of the woman in my mountains
who, one hard winter,
sold her amber earrings
for a cartful of wood
or of my grandfather
who, during World War II,
sold his garden in Sibiu

for a bag of potatoes
or of my grandfather in Apold
who used to write home from the front
on birch bark.

Hey hey hey! my Balkans,
the aroma of smoke and basil,
of cabbage and the meat in *sarmale*,
of mutton pastrami
and brash new wine.

Hey hey hey! the first crocus of spring
eaten as communion
by the shepherds on the mountain peaks.

Hey hey hey! a violin made from an orange crate
by Brâncuși at eighteen.

Hey hey hey! Alexander the Great
who at eighteen commanded
the Macedonian cavalry.

Hey hey hey! the Danube's waves,
the joy of knowing that someone you can't forget
always waits for you.