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The Shoe Cobbler · *Colin Hamilton*

Pausing once beneath an awning in the rain, I saw amidst the contours of wet and dry which marked the sidewalk like Chinese calligraphy something I thought I might understand, and I knew the rare, disconcerting excitement Borges must have felt finding the Tlönese cone in Cuchilla Negra.

Within the unfixed lines of a damp shoe print lay letters, some still decipherable as the water which shaped them leaked away through the labyrinthine concrete pores:

No eve ay s win r
Onc he ky gr w o thi
y tho ts ros pon
bel roked inds to lace
ere th flig of bir
t re t ugh the
bu ey did ot ble d
t re I gl m ed he se et
at mak s sto e h rd
loos ed i an watch
liq d fi the stre
hole ity wal d on wa

I copied what I could then hurried on, stooping under further awnings for further traces of this mystery, which must have slipped into the rainy street and were gone.

★

Some years before I had visited Umbria and met there a woman. She told me of her father, a shoe cobbler, who lived in a Polish village and carved poems in the soles he mended. The village could always be found by following the trail of poems left in the dirt streets which led away from it. This was her way, I supposed, of telling me I was a child, still to be told fairy tales. And maybe I proved her right, insisting to hear it all over again, challenging her when the details changed.

★

After the shock of finding something I'd waited for so long, never quite believing it existed, certain questions arose. I was surprised the poem/print itself—as I reconstructed it—wasn't better. The cobbler, I knew, was a master, the Slavic answer to a Taoist sage. Odd as well if he suddenly took up English verse. Clearly, this was not the man for whom I had waited.

Then who? Could she have only imagined herself telling a fairy tale? Or maybe she had told the story to someone else as well, and this someone else—among how many others?—being more devoted than I, had taken it upon himself to make it real?

I, in a lazier way, had also sought to emulate the old man by writing poems about stone and fixity:

Piles of bricks
tend to spell threats:
“Grasp your heart, hold it,
and don't let it spill.
It spills, like
your thoughts, desires, like
that love which was once
the sky. It rained.
It soaked the earth.
It rose on leaves.
Deer licked it.
But it was no longer love.”

Seeking their conviction,
we stand naked before mirrors,
twisting our heads
and crossing our eyes,
trying to comprehend
the destiny written
by the moles of our backs.

If we both were apprentices and not poets, I must concede that he—a rival and sympathizer—had at least learned, and maybe to perfection, the cobbler's other art.

★

She sent me from Umbria with a poem she said she'd translated from her father's collection.

I read it many times in a Florentine square. In a square of renaissance perfection. Feeling the line and stone, the taunt.

The wind has rustled by, like
the last push of breath in some long
exhale. Tired birds fill the trees.
No startled squawk announces
his late passing. He searches
the familiar night, fingering
the note he found rolled in a pocket;
he mouths its scribbled denunciation
of a star "like a girl's last tear."
By looking long at the sky, he burns
the stars to his eyes where they flame;
cooling, they return one by one
to the night, until he holds only
the star he sought. Pressing his fingers
to his eyes, he imagines that woman
struggling to name this new sky.

★

I imagined an old man sitting in the smell of leather, on a leather stool in a half darkened room open to a square. The square is greyed stone crossed in lines that never betray perspective. He follows them to a point in the distance where they meet, in a place of dirt. He holds an overturned shoe in his lap and thumbs the soft sole, the ridge of stitch just sewn. Thumbs lines just carved.

With stone, he thinks, you work slowly, years and generations. How many shoes have worn against this square? And how many more must thin to bring us back to dirt?

To bring this world to dirt, like a tilled field. A world where feet leave prints, whispering to the earth, and whisper again, rather than wear to the bone on ancient monuments.

★

In the years that followed, I succumbed to the repetitious patterns of aging—education, work, a little success, proper romance—but the old man lingered in my mind as a distant hope. Like a surreptitious leafletier, he struggled against this order.

He would erase all the traces of history under which our movements sag. He would stamp out the past under his poems, which in themselves leave no claim upon the future.

★

Re-reading her poem, it occurs to me now that maybe I am one of the scraps she'd leave rolled in a pocket. Not the artist, but a suggestion. She filled me with this dream—me, the second cobbler, who else?—then sent me back into the world knowing I must, as surely as a shoe steps, keep telling it.

And it pleases me to know that despite the ocean and hours between us, some night we'll both see that the sky has changed, and we'll think of each other when we wonder what has only just begun.