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Retreat to the Future

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Yesterday I unwrapped it from newsprint, a simple red *rebozo*, a color of earth good for corn, a solitude of red that sweeps unbroken until near the fringe at one end a white bird soars, one wing unfinished, its feathers raveling into the tassles, and from there into wind as it goes.

I put it on. I put it on and wept.

What is the power of a man and woman? Without opposites that tend towards each other, there's no will to live, no need to heal.

The oppressors have us.

RETREAT TO THE FUTURE

As the Republic's last Cortes disbanded, and the stones of Figueras shook in the echo of bombs, our people, frantic, were shoved from the winter roads by our own troops, disregarded. They only watched as a national treasury—paintings huge in their gold frames—took their places, cradled in the last trucks going out. No one cried,

What have you done? What more can you give?

No theory marshalled the suffering of Spain to right order. I felt its weight as I watched in disgust. I felt love shudder from power and change to an endless debt. Offered a ride, I refused and walked the other way, to the Plaza. There, I sat at a cafe table to wait—for what?

The town was empty. A bit of sun,
soured like the rind in the dirty glass on the dirty
table, was left. It hung limp on an ancient oak,
the city's center.

Through this Plaza men for the Brigades had passed.
Overhead a black bird screamed—the jolted
town its ambulance, stuck in a ditch.
I watched the shadows of the old oak lengthen.
My shadow stretched in the dust to sleep.
I closed my eyes and saw the after-lines of branches
turn blood in the cracks of crooked stones.
I wanted to float in these—I knew
where they went.
But I drifted down
to Udine, a day when Papa nailed wood at right angles.
He built a frame, stood it on end as if to ask
what next? what more? holding that window up to the sky,
squaring off part, the air lens enough,
the frame his telescope.
Then I drifted, years,
and in the darkroom this window of Papa's hovered,
parting known from unknown as a human face,
seen clear enough to honor, washed
mutely into view—
a beggar's gaunt face.
She didn't move her lips, but I heard her say,
"You will hang my sorrow on a wall?" She spat
and turned away. "Don't pray to it."

Startled, I shook
awake. I felt a sudden joy. I stood and felt
the muscles in my thighs—they were strong. I breathed
in, and in. I flung the dirty glass to the roots of the old
oak, watched it flash and shatter. And I followed
the people I loved across the border, a tatter of retreat,
refugees by the thousands crossing from Catalonia

to the French camps, to bitter charges,
counter-charges—to the scourge of our better
natures, defeat.

When Carlos found me,
he had words from Machado ready on his lips—
Y cuando llegue el día del último viaje . . .
When the day of my last journey arrives,
and the ship, never to return, is set to leave,
you will find me on board with few supplies . . .
casi desnudo, almost naked, like the children
of the sea. He smiled, looked mostly ahead,
without reprisal, proud. “It is not our last
battle,” he said.

Was he right?

Was there hope? I hoped. Arms limp at my sides
as he held me, too tired then to say or be anything
more than a bookmark closed in the book of his body,
the future unread. It was a relief
not to be dead—that strengthened me. Regret
is one blindness I’ve refused. Without that,
the least life is good.

I have seen light quicken
across silent faces, *de repente*, sudden as lightning
across a solid sea, then thunder stir deep passion,
and the dead—I mean
those who have lived without history, more silent
than fossils—awaken,
ready to live and die that their children might live
and die in dignity. They fix their eyes on that.

With such men and women I live.
And if it often seems we have the choice of fire
or fire, and the cities burn, the children scream,
and the war, a hired taxi with no driver, stalls
between burning walls and burning trees

in whose roots real serpents crawl—
I can grow still and wait
until Papa's frame floats up, a focus. Then I see
clear

 a simple human face.

I can follow that.