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EGLE JUODVALKĖ: POEMS*

BLEAK MOMENTS

I

having sent the madwoman into the other room
to play with age danger hatred
I serve my guest the last of the almonds and hope
as I take down my neatly pinned hair
search the mirror for a smile
to deny the anticipation and the fear

having drunk the first glass
of proffered wine
I pry loose my white-clenched fingers
and not lowering my eyes
extend the trembling goblet
brimming with dangerous expectations
to you —

why don't you drink?

II

in my pocket I hide
the crumbs of biscuits
(brought for the madwoman and rejected)
and of ingratitude

I count the disappointments

I add the nuts to the minutes of waiting
divide by two sisters and the tramp with the guitar
multiply by the squeal of steel strings
 innumerable sounds
 the madwoman's elated cries

I subtract myself

my hands swell with
fear they don't want to
touch loose hair
they don't want
anything

and in the sudden emptiness
the wine goblet
and the dangerous
silence

full of expectations
expand

I part my lips
bow my head
and drink

but I won't return
no

III

two sisters
the first awareness of insanity
recurrent contact with loneliness

mornings ringing with cold
after glacial nights
I don loneliness
like a shirt
and it warms me

in the uneasy silence the guitar sings
uniting two sisters me
two lonelinesses and a madness
or some other combination

the madwoman's smiles sail on the
notes and her fingers revel in the sounds

I know loneliness
it's madness that attracts me
if I stayed...
but I can't
stay

IV

two women share the mad one's life

my sister's voice cleanses me
exudes the sweet smell of soap
envelops in thick suds
scours with coarse bristles:
she is good to me
though she doesn't always love me

the second one's voice oozes with thickening honey
sticks to my face my hair
sticks doesn't dry

I draw away from her
lest a drop touch me

her tears are syrup
and her fingers sugarcane
I bite into one
and out of pain anger hatred pity
she
smiles and smiles and smiles

her house rustles with maples
and sap seeps through the walls
all afternoon I set out bowls to keep the floors from
flooding
and ponder the goblet rigid in my sister's palms
the fear dawning in the guest's eyes

and the glass of water with false teeth clutched by the old woman

her daughter does not smile
obstinately prying loose the old woman's fingers
and I laugh and laugh and laugh
secure in my madness

in this game
even though my hands are empty
I alone know who has the button

if they knew how to ask me
I would know how to tell them

LABYRINTH

I

a dream
a barred window
space without walls without ceilings
a cracked round floor
a chair assigned to me
the maid's reluctant jaundiced smile
and Glousnis' face reflected
in her green nail polish

green hope
why have we wandered here?
to find ourselves
to find ourselves

II

yesterday
you suddenly embraced me
encircled my shoulders
my leather coat
and said:
for the longest time I've wanted to get close

I shuddered
— get close to what —
the coat
or me?

III

Medusa
come
dine with me

I promise:
no mirror
no apple
no kiss
not even at midnight
as equals

I'm not afraid of your adornments
I plucked their stingers and rue in paradise

IV

we crack nuts
the shell splits

eyes closed I bite into the kernel:
sweet?
bitter?

I wet my finger with saliva
and gather the crumbs

with the coarsened finger
I slowly brush my lips
your lips

you hunger?
so do I
and I thirst

WOMAN

Feathers enter
 into burnished leaden heels:
she will fly.

I would have preferred a pelt
like a cat's or a rabbit's —
long hair,
thick,
fine down.

The one
I have
is so small —
barely enough
to keep my fingers warm . . .

the salty planks of the pier smell of the sea
and of the sea smells the coarse hair of fishermen
their bristly beards
the fabric of their shirts
the closely woven yellow nets
the shells
the clouds
the sky

the sea — the burning rays of the sun
the honey and the sweat
the sand
the white cliffs
the crickets' chirping

the sea and your lips
your lips your lips
between the maze and the light
 I do not forget you
the unkept promise the crossroads

still waiting beyond the bend
I do not forget

THE SWING

I

Sitting in the swing I watch the house:
a fine-boned, scrawny cat
rubs against your legs.

With a rough hand
you stroke and stroke its head . . .

The cat's sharp claws
rake the stroking hand.

I lean against the swing's wooden brace
and smile bitterly.

II

The sun flashed.
I said nothing.

Not a word.
Just, swinging in the sunlight,
I picked at the peeling dark
green paint.
Chips drifted with leaves
to the ground
in a narrowing spiral.

III

We will part.
Your hands grow cold,
but hurriedly
you polish
the swing's rusted chain
one final time.
You do not look at me,
you do not say —
We will part.

Crying, I follow you.
I think about the tears, the rust, the chain:
what bitter symbols
life feeds us ...
We will part.

After a time
I dip my fingers in the salty water
and break into laughter.

I search for shelter:
I search for the rough palm of the Pensive Christ.

everyone is laughing
and so are you

like a circus girl
partially bared
and blindfolded
smiling
at the brilliant pain
hidden in the maestro's knives

eyes closed
happily you tread
the sharp blades of love
towards scorn and disappointment

the dancer has summoned you on stage
no longer young
not graceful
painfully naive
you rush clumsily
to learn the steps of the immortal dance

everyone is laughing
and so are you
a person
whose Achilles' heel
is his heart

*These poems are taken from Juodvalké's latest book: *Pas ką žiedas žydi*, Chicago, 1983. They were translated by the Spring, 1984, students of *Lithuanian 106* at the University of Illinois at Chicago: Andrius Gerulis, Algis Grabauskas, V.J.-R., Tomas Leipus, Prancičkus Straukas, and Liana Vaičiulis. Edited by Algis and Marija Stankus-Saulaitis, with the poet.