

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 38, No.4 - Winter 1992

Editor of this issue: Violeta Kelertas, Univ. of Illinois at Chicago

ISSN 0024-5089

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IN MEMORIAM JANINA DEGUTYTĖ (1928-1990)

Poems of Janina Degutytė

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Lithuania

I walked into the snowy midnight
to bow to the earth and to the sky.

And in that silvery point in space
where winds and ages meet,
the snowflakes fall and the seconds fall
on my hair, on my palms,
and they burn like salt
and fetter my feet
with white enduring ropes.
But I will not leave.

In this silvery point in space
where behind my shoulder
breathe houses and trees,
where snowflakes and seconds sink
into my palms
and into my heart, —
there, in red letters,
silently, I shall write
in the snow
one name, that one name:

Lietuva

I walked into the snowy midnight
to bow to the earth and to the sky.

1966

History

History. History is not papyrus rolls,
dried yellow parchments,
not marble on pedestals.

History is etched in the human heart,
in hope, in memory,
in revolutions, revolts,
the stakes of heretics,
the truth of lunatics,
betrayals,
triumphs, scaffolds, crowns,
concentration camps,
the henchman's mark.
All this can be found
in the small and infinite human heart,—
scrawled, hidden, locked,—
in the heart which
beats under your palm,
the heart
which at this very moment
passes by unrecognized.
History. History
is like music,
like the live bell
in the chapel of Vilnius.

THE YELLOW STARS

1.

The yellow leaves are falling,
the yellow maple stars...
Red ivy on the walls
like screaming patches of blood.
Hark, wails the wall,
Hark, sobs the road...
The rustling leaves whisper about
the horrors of the past.

The narrow streets of the ghetto
are filled with fear.
Penultimate footsteps
And the ultimate silence.
Many crossing streets
But only one —
Only one destination.
Many crossing words
And only one thought.

The narrow streets of the ghetto
are filled with sighs of the wind.
Penultimate glances
And the ultimate darkness.
The sky is starless and black. —
The yellow stars are on earth
With their scream of despair,
With their glow of hate.

The narrow streets of the ghetto
are filled with mute sobs.
Black hollowed eyes.
A child's aborted smile.
The cobblestones burn.
The cobblestones cry.
The hard granite melts
Under the weight of deathbound feet.

2.

The graying dusk is paling between the streets.
The yellow maple stars tumble down...
Be still and let me tell you the truth,
The sacred truth which cannot be bought or suppressed.

The footsteps scorching the cobbled road have grown cold.
The yellow stars on the chest no longer cover the graves.
Through the greenish glassy haze of the rain
Tall cranes can be seen rising above the streets.

They carry high the bright flame of the hearth.
Blossoming asters blaze in the windy squares.
Never again shall you follow into a grave,
You stars of sorrow, of hate, of shame.—
Not the maple stars — the other, the dead yellow stars...

1961

LITHUANIAN MOTHER

You came to the burned village and
kneeling poured a handful
of burning ashes into
a linen scarf which you hid
by your heart.
A black falcon clawed at your heart.
Then you went home.
Your feet touched the rocks, the river, the grass.
A wild apple tree invited you into its shade.
White ears of rye caressed your hands.
And under your heart fluttered
a stranger to this earth still to be born,—
as you reached your home, on a high hill.

On a high hill,
you bowed to the East and to the West,
to the South and to the North,
you untied your linen scarf,—
a red lark soared into the sky.
While you went on with
the pulling of flax,
the baking of bread,
with putting your son to sleep.

1966

UNMAILED LETTERS

TO FATHER

I keep writing you letters
and I keep talking to you.
We hardly ever talked...
We just hid from each other our pain

and avoided each other's tears.

How you loved your poplars and birches
a plowed field, the proud rising rye...
Will you let me slip into my letters
the tremor of leaves,
the warm smell of bread,
or, in the palm of your hand,
the small yellow sun?
You'd be happy with only that.

.....
When the wind knocks at my blue window pane,
When silence grows like a lump in my throat,
I will write you letters.
You can read them
from your distance
with the eyes of the stars
or the glass fingers of
silvery rain.

THE HOMERS

He will not return, your Odysseus, this time he will not return.
No Penelopes with their spindles are waiting for him
by the steady hum of the spinning wheels.
The Cassandras are silent, the voiceless Cassandras are silent.
And Achylles without his armor is frail like a child
and falls like grass.

The gods will play and punish and avenge and die.
But Ithaca and Troy will rise again — from the night,
from smoke, from flames.
And the Homers — blind and all-seeing —
shall walk through a thousand years,
from South to North, and call
each country by its name.

1971

INTERMEZZO

I am opened bare to the farthest nerve...
To the farthest hidden thought.
Not a wound — —
More like Ups stretching for the sun
Between love and death.
I am opened bare to the farthest nerve...
At the source, at the very source are live streams.
Through my body trickles air like birch sap.
And the buzz of bees, the midsummer sun
Ripple inside me and ripple above.

At the source — living streams...
I won't ask where they flow.
Only blend into the floating shadow of a tree,
wrap myself in a bird's tremulous melody.

At the very source is a glow.
I don't ask whither flows the stream.
At the deepest source is a glow.
Through me ripple grasses and the sky,
Birch trees and the midsummer sun.
What am I in this eternal flow?

I am bare to the farthest finest nerve.
To the deepest hidden thought

Two swans on a dying lake
mournful and sad
Autumn falls on the fields
The sun is dead

Take flight white swans
Storm and lightning will strike tonight
Two swans on a dying lake,—
Immortal, white.

1989.09.06

LITHUANIA

Rain waiting happiness a lily
sweet linden scent —
all this fits in your name.
It is easy
to walk against the wind
for the spark
from those ancient fires
of a hundred years ago
is still alive
in us.
Springs throb
when your palm touches the earth.
A bird soars
in your sky.
Happiness is
to leave
with your name
on the lips.

1978