

TWO LATVIAN WOMEN AND THEIR POETRY

ASTRID STAHNKE

Notes written after a meeting with Vizma Belševica, in Riga, October 23, 1983.

Oh, the afternoon with **Vizma Belševica!** What rich hours! We talked about poetry, specifically her poetry—her search for the rare; the presentment of an image and the necessity to express it. She said she writes seldom, rarely; therefore, she may not even be a writer but the genuine poet she assures me she is . . . We talk about translation. She is critical and knows English very well. She finds some of my words too heavy. "Use a simpler word," she says. "It will be better." And it is.

I ask her about the symbolism in her poetry, and she tells me there isn't any. "When I say oak, I mean oak, not a youth," she says. "And when I say that a flower is pain, I mean just that. Flowers and trees hurt, you know, like people; only they can live without people, but people cannot live without anything in nature ..." I look around, and I see what she means. All right. No symbols, only sympathy: *litzjutiba* (along-feeling? How do I translate that word?).

I look at her, and see that she is plain and heavy, like the earth, like Kurzeme, where she and I come from. Her eyes are hollow, set in a care-lined face, a heavy face. She wears a brown barrette and a gray dress. She is like the fog. She says she does not want her picture taken; she would not want any picture in a book—if I will ever write the book. "You are used to beauty," she says. "Marilyn Monroe. ..."

"She's long gone," I say and add, "I think you are beautiful." And we talk about beauty and Latvia and poetry. All the while the panorama of Riga is like a painting or like a backdrop to our conversation, our dialogue of separate worlds. (I'm staying at "Daugava" this time.)

She pulls a pack of cigarettes from her purse and, admitting to being a heavy smoker, she lights up. Strong! She opens the window and smokes leaning out, holding the cigarette so that no smoke hits me. "No I don't smoke," I say, but I can take it . . . She talks small talk, the smoke screening her face as she turns towards me.—

Two women, I think, on the sixth floor of an old hotel. Two worlds, meeting by the River Daugava, meeting, touching with metaphors, touching with heart and soul strings; both pregnant with poetry and wanting fresh air. She tells me her son is waiting on the curb. Would I like to go for a ride? Would I!

We drive out of Riga, out around the outskirts, careful not to go too far. We sit in the back seat, while Klavs drives like a chauffeur. Only once in a while they exchange some words, words that are warm and intimate. She tells me he is a poet, but not like her. There they separate. She has her ideas, he—his. "You know how young people are."

"Yes." And we chat about children. We come out of a wooded area and skirt a lake. *Kišezers*.

"I saw the swans over there," she says. I recognize the reference. A poem on divorce. "Swans don't separate," she says; it's a line of poetry. I cried when I translated it, because I found it so absolutely true: you cannot divide things in half evenly and fairly. You cannot separate the swan from his song.

Klavs drives on, faster. It's getting dark. We pass the home of Ojars Vaciētis. "He writes all the time. He is a real writer," Vizma says. "Not like I." (Note: Vaciētis died only weeks later, and all Latvia mourned.)

"Women writers are different," I say, and we talk about that difference. The night draws around us. We stop talking. "I am woman; I am silence, and silence must not say I love you," I remember—the original and my translation. And I thought how

different we are, we the women born in Kurzeme . . . We are only tangled at the roots. All else is somewhere in our abstractions, in symbols, poetry, and the way they translate, reach across. How, I wonder, how will I not disappoint her? How do I dare translate?

We are at the hotel, and I leave the poets, mother and son, on the curb in darkness . . . From the lobby window I watch them drive away. (Note: It was the only time I saw Klavs Elzbergs. He died cruelly on February 5, 1987.)

I take the elevator up and go to my room. I pick up the notes and the poems. They smell of smoke, like incense, and I inhale them like her spirit . . . Out and down below, the white-foamed Daugava flows towards the sea . . .

POEMS BY VIZMA BELŠEVICA

Translated by
ASTRID STAHNKE

A Moment (Mirklis), 58

With a red willow
With a green copper aspen
After white swan notes
There, far into the lake,
With loons' children chorus
So dawning and gentle
Behind the director—the director—the skylark
There, high in the sky!

With a cattail brown
Over wind's drumming drums
Over sun's bright clouds
With willow bows.
Up to the highest ends of the air
A mute spring is ringing.

And just then the director will fall,
And the notes will away.

Thaw in Ludza

The people, not believing anymore in the power of heaven,
Did not put the roof on the church.

Trees have walked into the church
And pray for our sins.
They pray to the sun and the air
And the waters' holy spirit:
—Blueness, forgive them, for they
Know not what they do!—
The gnarled arms reach toward heaven,
With humped backs the trees are begging,
And perhaps already their prayer has been heard;
For so peacefully sunlit is Ludza
That the reflection of the lakes stately
Walks through the quiet streets
And the crow looks with his blue eye
Into the face of the bypasser
And with a tilted head listens
Whether the aspen's catkins begin to break open . . .
And maybe others don't know it,
But Ludza knows what she does.

* * *

I carry my love
As a child—a one year old—
Carries a chestnut leaf:
So seriously holds the outstretched hand,—
It's so difficult to balance the tiny step
With giant autumn all around.—
From the trees
Fall and fall
Rustling golden secrets
And confuse his steps.
But the little one doesn't slip.
He carries his leaf.
He holds on to his leaf
And elegantly walks into the blizzard of leaves.

Eye to eye with a Cat

Such a narrow back—
Iron and air,
And all around sharp silence.
A white cat sits on the edge of an abyss.
I am very afraid for the cat,
But the cat is not at all.

Alone to the end,
Alone at the window.
Does anything still belong to me?
The cat is very afraid for me.
I am not at all.

One dumb move.
In a second
The earth's axis could shake . . .
I am very afraid for the cat.
The cat is very afraid for me.

But for ourselves—not at all.

The Funeral of a Clown

Clown Antonio has died. It would be time
For you, too, child's pain, the one
That did not laugh along with others,
When the brightly made-up face wept
And across the rust-colored wig re-verberated a slap.,

The successful people roared about how the clumsy one stumbles.
The director of laughs, the white clown wielding the ship, sneered.

At what point in a child's life does a cake crumble between his fingers?
It's all a joke, all in fun—the pain, the fall, and the shame.
It's all a joke. Eat your cake! Go on and laugh—
it's the circus!

See, how Antonio struggles on the tightrope for one laugh.
He doesn't make it.

Like a stroke across everything gallops a white garlanded horse.

What irritates the eyes so much?—Tears or sawdust?

Clown Antonio is dead.
My childhood days are carried away
Across green fir clippings. The trumpet whimpers.
A touch of fragrance.
When all will be taken away, then me too.
Then take me.
Only the days of childhood really count; the others do not.

An Argument between a Blossom and an Ax

Don't scream at the linden.
She will bloom in her time.
If you like it—look at her blossoms;
If you don't—don't look.
That is all you can do.

And, of course,
At any moment you can cut the tree down:
In an argument between a blossom and an ax
The winner will always be the ax.

But after that, don't forget
To wipe your boots in the blossoms.
No silk in the whole world
Is gentler than linden blossoms.

And do not be afraid of those bees
That your boots crush into the ground.
For her stinging your boot
The bee pays with her life.

Relatives in Samarkanda

Brother jackass, if in the gall of your stagnant cry,
Out of your deeply bitter chest
If you would permit it, let's cry together, brother,

Hard.

I see that slanting load
Insensibly high over your ears,
But, brother, you're not the only one
Who is fed stingily and whipped lavishly.
Generally speaking, it won't help.
How did you put it?

Ars longa vita brevis?

Cry or don't—it's all the same.
There won't be another to pull your load,
But, instead and for sure, someone will add to it
Even while I cry and wallow in my bitterness.

Better let's take up the yoke together
And then plod on
Straight into the traffic's deluge of sin,
And, whether or not we'll get through
Is besides the point.
In this world everyone has his load
And his place, brother jackass.

POEMS BY IRÉNA AUZINA

Translated from the Latvian by
ASTRID IVASK

A Dream about Life All of a Piece

A dream about life all of a piece an old piece for myself I make seams on borders for the whole wide world mending I tear
apart from my own laughter and tears the pieces fall to earth ringing about real life
about life all of a piece
where each creature has its lair
where a border is a silver edging
where there is no more mending
where all mending has its end

I must seize you and
take you farther along toward the light

not stopping and interfering
with the run of the express train
I must take you along
cost what it may

the house full of real sorrow
and false tears

I age day by day
it does not scare me any more

as soon as I wish
you will say to me: beloved

nothing else will exist:
beloved

I want you, my solitude,
I cannot give you away to anyone.
You are much too huge and heavy,
there is no way to pack you up

and give as a precious gift to a friend
who decorates his solitude with paper roses,
but it wriggles through the tissue paper,
so used to living by itself, alone.

Eternal Peace

Railroad tracks run through me
neatly in iron rows
I expand and contract
with the pulse of the universe

A trolley runs back and forth on the tracks
roaring the music of the universe
mist lies gentle on my hair
the sunset's firebrand

The station's loudspeakers fall silent
wind drives the trolley Mnemosyne
waves break over my face
requiem aeternam dona eis

Irēna Auzina (born 1958) was trained in philosophy, and a certain intellectualism informs her first book, "every-thing; nothing." She not only writes poetry, she has lived it all her life: her father is the poet (and present head of the Latvian Writers' Union) Imants Auzinš. She was married to the poet Klavs Elsbergs, who in turn was the son of the doyenne of Latvian women poets, Vizma Belševica (1931). The tragic death of Elsbergs in 1987 can be felt throughout Auzina's collection. Having been a leading figure of his generation, he died under politically suspicious and never fully investigated circumstances, apparently by defenestration. An emotional reticence and inner strength gives her poetry resilience and resonance. She also bridges two cultural worlds, her mother being Russian.

Translator's Note