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FROM LANDWEHRKANAL TO SPREE

To Mural Khadzhu

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An outcast, God knows how long ago,
I drank the viscous honey and the gall
of exile here, as I was playing tarot
or, on occasion, chess with providence.
Impersonating Ovid, I looked on
the ranks of half-abandoned houses, run
and guarded by a Stasi garrison
that billeted across the lethal fence.

The old canal, where Rosa had been found,
reflected ruins. It is no longer bound
to do so. Railway stations come around.
Has anything at all escaped the flux?
A flame extends the alleyway, or rather,
spouts out of it, like egg-white, toward ether.
The flags of yeasty year's colossi wither
above the embassies. *Pariser Platz*.

I watch the desolate postmodern era
that dwells between the bar and parking area
near the bank, whose atrium is more sterile
than, say, Sahara or the dried-up Nile.
My gaze pursues the shimmering rails
to where they intersect, theadlike and frail,
upon the spot where *Siegessaule* nails
the sky as surely as if in denial.

The Wall that once epitomized the Styx
has vanished, disassembled into bricks.
The principedom of consumerism and sex
won't solve the riddles of the tourist
who may be on the lookout for the past.
The Politburo's seat has been recast
to house the work of an avant-gardist
who'd fled the country that ceased to exist.

Inebriate of freedom, he and I
are out-of-place, anachronistic like
the Huguenots. But I am still alive,
for good or bad, and holding forth onstage.
Having experienced both heat and cold,

I stand beneath the bridge's faceless vault,
surrounded by granite and basalt,
in a bewildering new-fangled age

to which I don't belong, like Hercules
upon the pediment, his chariot, his cuirass,
which were baptized by fire and en masse
thrown up into the present by the tide
of the deluge. So long as they resist
the onrush of the chilly April breeze,
Athena, patroness of cities, is
my only goddess and my only guide.

One, I would say, is always a newcomer
in her domain, where empires come and
go, and epochs, ridiculed, flash by like comets,
inconstant like the lure and charm of triumph.
Robbed of his name, his native land, his hearth,
a man adapts to solitude and dearth
and is (an emigre once said) immersed
in time like the salamander is in fire.

This is, perhaps, the only gift of grace
in a terrain where the word "ohm" reigns.
Hang on until your journey ends, embrace
the flame. No one will help you with advice.
Dust-heaps are brimming with ideas and lies.
Though you were frail and paltry, you despised
untruth and bondage, fearing danger less
than chains, and were prepared to pay the price.

An angel hovers overhead. It may
bring good or evil. Be it either way,
I'm late for our rendezvous today,
but, all the same, I wish to thank my fate.
The constellation hasn't yet set in.
I wend my way to where the Wall had been
and disappear, having erased my twin
from the storefront to set my record straight.

Translated by Constantine Rusanov