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SCHEHERAZADE

*The thousand and one nights
Of insidious, snake-like delays . . .
The thousand and one nights
Of prisons and fairy tales.—
Talk, Scheherazade . . . The sultan is listening.
Your executioners are close by.
Talk . . . And as you talk let your words
Unlock the incredible heights of the sky.
Talk, Scheherazade . . . The sultan is listening.
The sultan is ravenous. Your fate waits in suspense.
Do not stop! The executioners are quick to obey.
There is bitterness in your throat and your voice is tense.
But you must talk . . . And with each trembling word which you say at night
You pay for each new breath of air and for another hour of life,
You pay for your strength and your helplessness
And for all that which may be lost or possessed.
Talk, Scheherazada . . . The sultan is ravenous.
Your words flow slowly like blood from an open wound.
But, oh, do not yet give up . . . for the thousand and first night is still far
And the last handful of clay is still unpaid.*

IN JAZZ RHYTHMS

*This restlessness with no name
overcomes us and drives us on
And we run away from home
in thoughts or on trains or planes
And we spill into the streets
and fill hotels and cafés
Or set out on a raft alone—
to confront the seas.*

*Our eyes have gone blind
from the clever dazzle of numbers and rocket glares,
Our ears are deaf from loudspeaker words
and flutes in the spheres,—
Stunned and still*

*we taste from a hand
the sharp seed of the hemp.*

*Our spines are soft
but we find it hard to hide behind the walls of concrete and glass
and we slide up and down on the spiral stairs
Until one day we will face our own self.
We wish to be like gods
on the First Day of the World.*

LAMENT

*I asked the rivers—where are you?
I asked the clouds where you are,—*

*And the rivers said you are not on this earth,
And the clouds replied you are not in the skies.*

*Who will now comb my long hair?
Who will break me some yellow honeycomb?*

*The fields in the morning are cold and sore.
My hands are hot and empty at night . . .*

*Tell me the flower into which you will be born!
Tell me the wind in which you will come alive!*

THE PEAR TREE

*In my father's garden
A pear tree breaks into bloom
And turns to a mountain of snow.*

*And against it—small and secure,
Like a sheltered nest,
Leans the grey old house.*

*Under the care-worn roof
Our daily bread is shared
And truth—the bread is warm*

*And the house is filled with light:
Through one window flows the moon,
Through the other the stars look in.*

ANTIGONE

*Farewell, my bridegroom—I have never kissed you.
Farewell, my son—who never was.
Love brought me here and love will show me out . . .
In trembling hands the flutter of a captive morning gust.
But I will come again.*

*A thousand times.
Across the desert sand,
the rain-soaked clay,*

the firesites,—
I will be back.
 To bury brothers in the dead of night.
I will come barefoot.
I will be unarmed, with empty hands.
The law which calls me stands above all laws.
And if—they curse me,
 or ignore me,
Or have their courts condemn me for the thousandth time,—
I shall not be condemned.
And I will come again
 and haunt them
 as I walk the battlefield at night—
This salty crust—
 in which
 I bury brothers—
 black and white.
A tyrant's shadow hovers heavy over land and sea
And names of slaves are scorched on our faces with the mark of shame. —
And thus—I must be back.
 A thousand times.
To breathe the dark in which your body is enshrined.
 To hold your helpless head.
 To place the blade against your side.
Condemned a thousand times.
 Your sister.
 Your Antigone.

The above poems are taken from Janina Degutyte, **Pilnatis** (The Full Moon), Vilnius: Vaga, 1967.