

Monika Herceg

The Time Before the Tongue

(Vrijeme prije jezika)

Poetry

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AWARDS

Zvonko Milković award

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Theorem of Birds

Birds sense how to decrease the density of the cold
and be as bold as they ought to be
Chiefly they trust time when it comes to seeking answers
The most silent of souls inhabit the birds
whose feathers autumn settles
to soften the old age
From the outside, the raging pressure
of the industry of the word,
dismissing breadth and reason,
smites us with a rigid tongue sure
we'd never retaliate just like a bird
won't utter its muffled everyday world
Deep within yourself you arise asking love to slow down
Had the weeds reached up to the head,
the crofters more sound must come

Statement on Birds

Before us that forsaken field:
the twilight idly letting us take
its daily route of return, and that'd be the end
had the stubborn road not steered the steps
bickering over the belief that the rock
only must be what rolls down it

Yet our shoes keep us steadily above the fight,
reaching out for witty stolons we're greeting the trees
in our presence the air pressure tends not to vary,
and to the silence of birds we seem
a benevolent solitude
composed of two falls

Soon the evening will ambush us from the back of the first oak
Up till then, we repeat what we've come to know: allergies,
the long-lasting scenes of the suns' loudness up above the cove
we're doubled in, two summers later,
under our bed, the papers are curling up in place of the cat
next to all the years crammed in our mothers

No one speaks of birds in whom the people settle;
ahead lays nothing but that farm foresting into a grove,
lessons of keeping the tongue duly off the furrows
Concealment of the composure beneath the beets
of an inscribed heart

Theorem of Time

In the beginning, love shut its eyes and said:
A long day shall dawn upon the hollow bones,
and soon they shall blossom
A long night shall fall upon the soft ankles,
and no more shall they be loose
The young time shall speak to the backbone:
though I've no starting point, your whole life
we'll pretend I'm running

as the years are opening the wounds
as the years are closing them

In the end, love will shut its eyes and say:
Your father, your mother, your son, your daughter,
the sky you borrowed, and all the clumps of darkness
strung into a long bone filled with air,
the stubborn silver-tongued birds

It's now been decades since you and time first pretended
one stood in place, while another advanced
A country had died, two, three, one poured out
their heart over the flag, and so began the war
still, the years had kept tapping against the forehead
until thoughts ripped open,
the years went on stitching up the mind
until it'd healed

Hypotheses on the Surface of the Conception

My parents sensed I conducted heat,
so they insulated me with space
I was the shrieks, I was the bitemarks,
I was the vacation and relocation,
hoarding the kilograms, the rising decibels
One day, the children will sprout upon the horizon of the fist,
eating swearwords and at least half a bus
picking up and dropping off the people of great importance
who ought to silently stare at me like fish
to observe whereof came my rage,
but mostly I'm a heavy downpour:
I retort

My parents knew nothing of love,
except life happened to empty into them,
and one was to uprise, pluck out a thought
like a strand of gray hair and repeat
the same sequence of events
I was watching and learning
the mimicry off the thin walls
kicking and biting until
I'd accepted the skin as a surface
of what's beyond our reach

When you'd knocked
the hearth of the spacious house burned
I called out for your solitude

so that together we'd bring out the big table and set it
as set the feast
by those knowing all about the wait

Hypotheses on the Shapes of the Fall

I part with the body
to conceal my vanishing
once the clothes desert me

Father's hand would take off like a plane, leaving the ground
in a couple of seconds, always making me sick
once I'd wound up in mid-air

The god's plan lay arranged in the suitcase above my scalp,
so my father also used to say: I'll bite my tongue
as long as I'm under his roof, now I am

a bird, discerning no cloud among others,
only the god that's condensing in between,
the one directly responsible
for the aching in my ears, the heart unfit of rearing up,
for you whom my departure had scattered,
for my bitsy fists that cannot
push off a chunk of the sky down
on my father's head

Statement on the Tenets of Pain

I'll never confess to you
I was a lousy brother,
tripped up my siblings,
tore their toys apart, pulled their hair,
hid stuff from my brother, hid stuff from my sister,
made up stories
only to watch their punishment

Everything was my fault either way:
When they would cry, I'd get a switch lash
When they wouldn't eat, I'd get a nettle whip
When they would fight, on the corn
I'd kneel by their side

So I've learned to worship the minutes
as they seep into pain

So I've learned one pain
may lessen another

So we've spoken first time to the bruises
that ought to be dressed as stones,
tangible only to love

I was a good husband:
knees down on the hard corn
biting my arms
biting yours
to lessen our pain

Statement on Caution

I leave so much unspoken
Stooped and scared, invisible, indivisible,
naming stones after first people,
telling the silences apart,
for years I've addressed
every pain by the same name

Since my conception I'd been a silent body of subsistence


In the summer, you poured a river to pull me by the foot
In autumn, I already spoke to the surface of our flat
Thus we've become the bread rising in the oven,
the dust under the kitchen cabinet,
after hurtful words, a shrewd place of silence

Here, we force not one thing open
not a jar, not a letter, not an eye

Wrapped in wistfulness, we smear SPF fifty over our skin
to keep this abrupt enchantment from scorching,
observing the salty stillness resting on our hairs

Here, we force not one thing open
not the doors, not the windows, not the mouth

You'll keep quiet for long
Dressed up as me
Collecting photons in the uncombed hair



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MONIKA HERCEG, born in 1990 in Sisak. She studies physics at the University of Rijeka. She won the second prize at the International Poetry Competition Castello di Duino in 2016, and in 2017, her then unpublished volume *Početne koordinate* (*Initial Coordinates*) won the Croatian poetry debut prize Goran for Young Poets. The book was published in 2018 to the critical acclaim, and has recently won the Kvirin Award, Fran Galović award, Slavić award for the literary debut and the international award Mostovi Struge.

Her second book *Lovostaj* (*The Closure*) took off with a prize too: the manuscript won the “Na vrh jezika” award for best unpublished poetry volume in 2018 and was published in 2019. Her poems were published in various magazines and translated into several languages. Her drama script *Gdje se kupuju nježnosti* (*Where to Buy Tenderness*) was awarded by the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb, and her stories were awarded with several regional and national awards, such as Biber award and Lapis Histriae.