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Eavan Bolan: After Every War

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INTRODUCTION

I

When I was a child two German girls came to help my mother in the house. It was just after the war. The small towns of Germany were in the grip of winter, hunger, and disgrace. These girls, who were sisters, hardly more than teenagers, had left that aftermath behind and come to the shelter of a country which had been neutral. There was rationing in Ireland. But there was also butter and meat. Clothing was plentiful. It was an easier place to be.

I was too young to remember their actual arrival. They came into my consciousness with my first words, my first memories. I remember the kitchen, the damp clothes, the snap of the fire, the smell of peat. I remember one of them opening a door that led into the darkness of a back lane. I can hear their voices as they folded clothes and put away plates. I can hear my own voice as I said back the numbers they tried to teach me: *eins zwei drei vier fünf*. Over and over again. Or the quick phrases I learned because they spoke the reality of their lives. *Ich bin beschäftigt*. I am busy.

Above all, I remember that when my parents left the room, and there was no need to learn or be polite, they spoke to each other in rapid, headlong sentences, shutting out with relief the Irish twilight, the small child, and all the evidence of what was not home.

For many years they were a background memory. Gradually,

that changed. They became at once clearer and more mysterious: intaglios, cut deeper in my consciousness than I had realized. Even their voices began to return. What was it I had heard? Gossip and anecdote? Or was I hearing distant towns, in their harsh moment of reckoning—and wider tragedies of nationhood and inhumanity—creeping through their words like fog under a windowsill?

The truth is I couldn't know: not then, not now. But some of the yearning and curiosity I still feel about them is in this book. It is the outcome of years of retrospection and regret, of knowing I had not asked them the questions I later wanted to ask. When I first saw them they were teenagers, sisters. Both are now dead.

But later it seemed that the door one of them opened was legendary, not real—that it led from our ordinary, teatime kitchen into the very heart of a broken Europe. And the conduit, the path was language. A language I could not understand but which spoke to me all the same.

It still speaks to me—that language I cannot understand but need to hear. And that, I think, covers some of the paradox of translation. Some of the poems in this book were being written, or had been written, at the very moment those sisters were talking. In some of these lines their loneliness, their necessary absence is explained far more clearly than they or I could then have managed.

II

There are nine poets in this book. Their dates of birth range from the mid-nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth. All are German-speaking. Their places of origin are from as far north as Bukowina and as far south as Carinthia. Their places of exile range from Sweden to South America.

All wrote in the presence or aftermath of a war which cut deeply into their lives. Of course, they lived different lives and ex-

perienced the war variously. It also needs to be remembered that the poems here are only a fraction, albeit an important fraction, of the work written by these poets.

These are poems, then, written in the shadow of a war. But there is more to it than that. They are poems written by those whom war injures and excludes in a particular way—in other words, women. Nevertheless, the question may persist: why women, why war? If these look like restrictive categories for translation, there is a reason.

The problem with human catastrophe is that it can be remembered all too well. But it is much harder to re-imagine it. What brings it from the domain of fact to the realm of feeling is often just a detail. A cup, a shoe, an open window, a village roof with missing slates. Once we see it, we recognize it. *That could have been me*, we suddenly think. *I could have been there*. That moment of private truth, simply because it cuts history down to size, has a rare value.

It seems to me there is something compelling and revealing in the way the world of the public poet encounters the hidden life of the woman in these poems. As it does so, both change. The individual experience of the first makes the collective experience of the second available in a new and poignant way. The result is a dark, moving interplay of determinism and elegy.

III

That in itself, however, requires a word of warning. These are not war poems as such. Women are not usually war poets. They are not primary agents of conflict; they do not sign or violate treaties. They are rarely at the front line.

Nevertheless, their perceptions of the aftermath of war may be especially keen. Just as the soldier at the front may write the most engaged war poems, so women, always a less powerful unit of so-

ciety, may document the lurch from great power to its loss—something that Germany suffered in just a few decades—in a particularly acute way.

And so the women poets in this book seem to shift the entire category of war poetry into after-war poetry. That they also seem to write here with remarkably similar tones and themes should be no surprise. As Lisel Mueller says in her superb book of translations of Marie Luise Kaschnitz, “There was no way for these writers and those of the next generation to write except in the context of that catastrophe and the evil which led to it.”

In fact these are rarely poems of public reference. I have deliberately chosen poems that display the broadest vocabulary of loss—a breadth that seems to me in keeping with the richness and surprise of this work. The private vulnerability—the crashing in of a beloved world of almost secret perceptions—is often the deepest truth of historical tragedy.

Therefore I have been drawn to the detail of Nelly Sachs’s amethyst, its old lights a sudden sign for new death. To the wonderful railways in Rose Ausländer’s poem “Strangers,” signaling the endless, stateless displacement of people shuffling those platforms without a destination. To the big gray birds in Bachmann’s poem about leaving England. These fragments, rags, torn pieces of perception are sometimes healed here into wonderful poems, and sometimes not. But their power is unquestionable.

In these poems, also, are some of the most violated domestic interiors I know of in all poetry: Else-Lasker Schüller’s gray flowers and her blue piano, in the shadow of the cellar door. Hilde Domin’s dreamlike waterlogged doors in the city of Cologne. Rose Ausländer’s eerie still life of a table with wine and bread and strawberries in the shadow of the ghetto. Nelly Sachs’s carpet burnt by the fiery feet of a stateless person.

The political poem is an elusive category. The absolute privacy and reticence of some of these poems may not at first seem to fit

that category. Yet in many instances, these poems show how the privacies and sidelinings of a woman's life—the silences of mothers and daughters, the individual life swept away by remote decisions, the shattered existence of families—affect a poetic perspective in a time of catastrophic violence. It is the very powerlessness of these lost entities which becomes, with hindsight, both a retrieval system and a searing critique of power. In that sense, of course, these are defining political poems.

IV

I am profoundly interested in that bleak landscape which follows war or—in the minds of certain writers here—anticipates it. If I understand it rightly, that terrain is an extraordinary and reliable sign of dispossession, sometimes the only reference left of a land which once existed, full of human hope and ordinariness.

My interest is not abstract. During the Troubles in Ireland the political life of the island was endlessly on view—violent, oppressive, and often cruel. Gradually, act by murderous act, a country I had once known, once understood to have existed, disappeared. With that disappearance, a world of familiar signs—of memories and explanations—was displaced.

What's more, as that land disappeared there was little enough to register its previous existence. The delicacy and actuality of a place in its time can quickly be overwritten.

But the political poem in Ireland did register that disappearing country. Visibly, eloquently, that poem became a fever chart of the events around it. As it did so, something striking happened. The more it registered the political upheaval the less it became a public poem. The less it became a public poem, the more available it was to the private world which is the site of the deepest injury in a time of violence.

The truth was, that the violation of our island went so deep, was

so toxic, that the private could no longer find shelter from the public. Everything was touched. Nothing was spared: A buckled shoe in a market street after a bombing. A woman looking out a window at an altered street—they were all emblems, images, perhaps even graffiti of the new reality. Overnight, so it seemed, the division between the public and private imagination ceased to be meaningful. Both were interchangeable ways of grasping and rendering a new reality. The political poem became a map of dissolving boundaries.

I do not mean to compare what happened on one island to the mid-century cataclysm which these poets knew and endured. Nevertheless, I do believe my experience of the first made me more able to read these beautiful poems for what they are—one of the most poignant acoustic systems of all: the vast public event felt as a private tremor.

V

From the Baltic and North seas to the north German plain, from the Harz mountains to the dry, sharp air of the Alps, Germany defines itself through differences. *Deutschland? aber wo liegt es?* (Germany? but where is it?) was the question raised by Goethe and Schiller. Throughout the nineteenth century, Germany was assigned the mainland European virtues of intellectual grandeur, scholarly persistence, and a profoundly Romantic self-perception of its own history and culture.

The real country has its own commanding scholars and historians. I am concerned here with something else. That is, with the country which many of these poems suggest: an invisible terrain which consists in what was lost even more than in what was ruined. A virtual geography unfolds here in the poignant, often heart-broken acts of remembrance and outrage.

It is important to remember the source of that outrage. Many of the women here were exiles; most, although not all, were Jewish.

This fact is central. An overwhelming historic tragedy marks this work and drives these poems toward a unique intersection between public and private expression. It also signals their involvement—as citizens, as artists, as helpless human beings—in a terrible communal event from which no one was privately exempt. These poems seek no shelter; these poets found none. Their authors are witnesses and participants both—a stance which is shared between all the poets in this book.

Some of the poems here come from the late 1930s; a few from as late as the 1980s. The majority are from the years in between. In every case however, the retrospect is of a series of events and losses which occurred around the war. Sometimes these were written up late—Ausländer’s first postwar volume, *Blinder Sommer*, for instance, was not published until 1965.

In any case, there is no attempt here at an official or exact chronology. What matters is that the invisible land, the ghostly terrain which finally falls out of sight of historians and may be forgotten across generations, and yet shapes more of our inward world even now than we may realize, is rendered here with stunning force and consistency.

In this sense, these poets are mapmakers. Their poems reconstruct the elements of a shattered world. Homelessness, exile, and dispossession may well be the chief themes here. This is not just a new Europe, although it is certainly that. It is also a premonitory wasteland.

VI

The years turn into decades. Each generation overwrites the previous one. By and large we have forgotten—it has faded—that iconography of station platforms, monochrome skies, borders, papers, ration books, refugees, broken cities, and skylines defined by rubble which the aftermath of a great war brings. We can still look

at the photographs. We can still access those legends of horror from the histories of the time. Yet the poems in this book allow us to experience the local and its sibling aspect, the universal, in ways no temporal document could ever manage.

It seems to me that this is the angle at which these poems detach from their country, and even from their language. That what they suggest is not simply an outcome of German history, or of the war, or even of European history. It is more than that. These poems re-create that moment when poetry itself is called into question, when language is tested almost beyond its limits, when a vocabulary comes to the edges of the poem which the poem can hardly bear.

There is a progression here. The poems near the start of this book, nearest that is to the chronology of conflict, are steeped in the recoil. As time goes on it is the interior exile, the disaffections of language and memory which become the dominant theme. As I read these poems, what strikes me most is the gradual, radical probing of the actual constructs of where we live, the exploration of whether place, nation, home—*heimat* itself—is a fiction. When that fiction is swept away by cataclysm, then what is left? Often, according to these poems, it is just the words that describe the loss. Ausländer's wonderful lines, *Ich lebe / in meinem Mutterland—/ Wort* (I live / in my Motherland—/the Word), stand for this.

And poem after poem echoes it. Sachs's traveler from far away holds his native land in his arms, an orphan for whom he is trying to find a grave. Else Lasker-Schüler's blue piano, that infinitely poignant emblem of loss and freedom, is out-of-use, lost to music, a neighborhood for rats. Bachmann's beheaded angel is trying to bury hatred. Dagmar Nick's no-man's-land is a place of neither here nor there, a zone where touch and understanding have broken down.

It may seem wayward to argue that an unhistorical reading of

these poems, steeped as they are in what happened and when, may be the deepest reading of all. And yet it may be.

VII

There is always a starting point, a place where a project begins to turn into a passion. For me it was Elisabeth Langgässer's poem *Frühling 1946*. There is just one fractured, unlined prose version of this poem in a single English-language anthology. It does not otherwise—and I have certainly searched far and wide for it—exist in a poetic translation in English. Once again to the best of my knowledge, it never has.

I am baffled by this. The poem is both bittersweet and radically revealing of its moment. It was written for Langgässer's daughter, Cordelia, on her release from Auschwitz-Birkenau after two years there, when she was sixteen. Langgässer had barely escaped deportation herself.

The poem is unrhetorical and obstinately lyrical, determined on renewal but with dark tones of an inconsolable sense of waste. It speaks of the "toad's domain" and of the Gorgon. It addresses the recovered child as "Holde Anemone" (sweet Anemone). It packs into closely structured stanzas, into myth, legend, and music, one aspect of an almost untellable story.

While I was working with it I happened on Cordelia Edvardson's memoir *Burned Child Seeks the Fire*. She is, of course, the daughter of the poem. She was also, as a child, assigned to assist Josef Mengele in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The angle made between the poem and the memoir is compelling and wrenching. The connections go deep. The decorum of the poem is a disguise for the chaos of grief. While conversely the chaotic narrative of the memoir discloses a daughter's decorous love for a mother. I understand that in many ways such suffering remains inscrutable. What I understand far less is why this poem—

this essential song from a circle of the underworld—did not make its way safely from one language to another.

VIII

Most translators have mixed motives and debts of honor, and mine in both cases are more than most. The motives first.

It is now thirty years since a Dutch journalist came to Dublin. She was making a radio program about Irish poets. She interviewed me in the quiet suburb in which I lived, a few miles from the city center. Ireland was just at the start of its ordeal. Reports came in almost daily of neighborhood violence in the North. Meanwhile, Irish poetry looked back to its old roots and heroic influences. No one yet knew how the two would engage in a grim dance of meaning and reference over the next two decades.

It is she who first spoke to me about Ingeborg Bachmann, one of the poets in this book. Bachmann had recently died in a tragic fire in Rome. The journalist spoke with feeling of her power, her reach, her confrontation of the postwar reality of Germany.

Bachmann was still a young woman when peace came to Germany. Her poems are filled with references to a land of uncertainty and shaken truths. Again, to use the Irish example, the peace which follows conflict is essential and welcome. But the aftermath can often put a strange, coarse varnish on events. The winners want to invent; the people want to forget. And that matrix, to the skeptical eye, can often look like the source-waters of history. But there is always a different place. A place where the unfinished business of broken truths and toxic words is carried forward. Art is one of those places. Bachmann practiced that art.

Over the years I came to know Bachmann's poetry. Its bleak strength was one of my reference points, something at the back of my mind. I could say that Bachmann's work is one of the motives for these translations and it would be a partial truth, but only partial.

One of my chief motives here has been simply to arrange this work so that the reader can follow it. Follow it, that is, off the pages of this book into other books. Into the mystery and adventure of how a poet confronts time with language. And also into the details of how the confrontation occurred. For that reason I have included notes at the back of this volume to explain circumstances or locations or events whenever I have felt such explanations would add to the reader's sense of the work. I have also included checklists—less complete than I would like—for further reading.

My sense of a reader discovering some of these wonderful poems for the first time—although there are many who already know them—dictated my practical choices as a translator. Although I have often felt diffident about doing this book, knowing there are other translators, let alone other poets, who can do this better. I have persisted simply because there are poets and poems here that are not well known in English and that deserve to be.

For this and other reasons, I decided early on that I would be as faithful as possible to the original text. While recognizing the difference between what a poem says and what it means—and the effects of this in another language—it seemed most important to represent these poems and poets as faithfully and accurately as possible. Although there is a long, rich and distinguished improvisational tradition in translation, I have not attempted to add anything to it, even if I could. I wanted these translations to be windows, not veils. Where I have departed from this it has been after a lot of thought, and with real reluctance.

IX

My debts are many. I was radically encouraged at every turn by the translations and commentaries by other scholars and poets who worked in this field. Sometimes these poems were hard to find. Sometimes these poets appeared unknown to a great many people.

Slowly, and with difficulty, I found what I needed. Only by searching on-line, by hunting through catalogs, could I get some of the early books.

Often I have waited eagerly for the mail to bring the one paperback—perhaps the small turquoise and coral copy of Ausländer’s selected poems, translated by Ewald Osers—which would open another door into that poet’s work. The wait was always worth it. These fine and essential poets have had some of the most eloquent advocates, and careful translators, any poets could wish for. In some cases it makes it more of a puzzle that many of these poets are not more widely read in English.

Although it may be cumbersome to name them, these books and scholars have been such companions that I should. Lisel Mueller, for her splendid translations of Kaschnitz. *Dark Soliloquy*, with Henry A. Smith’s fine translations of Gertrud Kolmar and the illuminating foreword by Cynthia Ozick. Peter Filkins’s groundbreaking book on Bachmann, *Songs in Flight*, with its foreword by Charles Simic. Jim Barnes’s truly exemplary translations of Dagmar Nick. The immensely valuable English language versions of Else Lasker-Schüler by Janine Canan, Audri Durchslat-Litt, and Jeanette Litman-Demeestre. And, always, the pioneering work of Michael Hamburger and Christopher Middleton which made visible so much German poetry in English, as well as the fine work of Reinhold Grimm and Irmgard Elsner Hunt.

I am grateful to Nick Jenkins, my friend and colleague and the series editor here, and himself a fine scholar of poetry, for the early conversations—and the later ones—which helped me anchor this project in my own mind. To Ellen Foos for her scrupulous copyediting of the text. To Mary Murrell at Princeton, for her courtesy and enthusiasm. To John Felstiner, also a friend and colleague, to whom I spoke of the project, and whose own work on Paul Celan must always be a radiant inspiration to anyone who turns in this direction. To Dr. Regina Casper at Stanford, for her

eloquent conversation one evening which gave me a vivid sense of the stature of Else Lasker-Schüler. To Dagmar Logie, also a friend, in the English Department who, at a very busy moment, cast her keen eye on some lines of poetry for me.

But my most particular thanks are due to Alys Xavier George, a doctoral student at Stanford. She came late into this project, when I had translated the poems and had lived with them enough to have a keen and anxious sense of my limitations. By that time I inhabited a strange translator's realm of shadows: I could feel the poems on the page, could remember the sound of words, could catch the music of the movement. But I knew I could not be certain of idioms—to mention only a few of my misgivings—and could never have an exact sense of the time zones the German language stows away into its verbs.

I hoped therefore Alys might catch my mistakes. She did far, far more than that. While hardly ever suggesting an alternative, she further opened the world of these poems to me by being what any translator can only dimly hope for: the conscience of the original poem. Her extraordinary perception of the meaning of a line or a phrase—itsself her tribute to the integrity of these poems in their time and in their language—allowed me a still deeper involvement with them. There were times when my English simply did not collect and ferry safely over that integrity. That was my fault, not hers. This book has given me many rewards, and my conversations with her, across two languages but with a single view of the power and importance of these poems, is certainly one of them.

I owe special thanks to my husband, Kevin Casey, for his support and enthusiasm. He was my first reader. And to Jody Allen-Randolph, who listened with patience and respect as the project evolved.

In addition, my thanks are due to Elizabeth Bernhardt of the German Department at Stanford who introduced me to Alys.

Finally, the largest debt is to these poets. Reading their work,

and writing their work, has provided me with a privileged view of the resilience of language, music, and resolution in the hardest of times. These are poems about darkness; they are not dark poems. In fact, they are documents of the human spirit. As such, they cannot be spared—in any language.

Eavan Boland
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