

Cecilia Woloch

Brasov 1989

— on a photograph by David Turnley

The women are waiting in line to confess —
standing or slumping or leaning on canes
or half-crouched, backs pressed to the wall
of a wooden church in Brasov, Romania.
It's the Year of Our Lord, 1989; six months before
all hell will break loose, and the brute
who's starved them — a nation of starvelings —
will be shot, point-blank, in the head.

The women's faces are calm, or grim
— one might wonder, *Where are the men?* —
but the light is golden, warm, diffuse,
as if all sins, once confessed, or desires
(*who has butter today? has meat? an egg?*)
could be left at the feet of a wooden saint
with a whisper, a kiss, a prayer for forgiveness:
Because we've been broken. Because we've obeyed.

Postcard to X, from Warsaw, Ulica Piękna (“Pretty Street”)

The old woman selling flowers next to the archway on ulica Piękna was wearing orange lipstick today. Shiny orange lipstick, and a smile; her black kerchief knotted under her chin. She was smoking a cigarette, all her tulips arranged in plastic tubs at her feet — gaudy purple and yellow and red. I could tell she felt quite the coquette, and it made her mouth look lovely, in fact. That slick of peach on her lips as she sat with her back to the flat gray wall. The building behind her a relic, too. My friend says the Communists built these apartments *to show the workers how they might live*. Though only the highest officials — the most brutal, most damned — were given such balconies, of course. Everyone else in the dreary blocks built on the ash of the murdered, the crushed, stinking forever of cabbage and piss. But today there was rain here, in Warsaw, then sun. The wind had shifted, then shifted again. The clouds moved like swans across the sky. And the old woman — I passed her twice — made a few zlotys on flowers, I'd guess. She sat there for hours on Pretty Street, her mouth like a pearl in her wrinkled face. And you — you know who you are; you tried to be human once but you failed — could not have touched this woman. Ever. She, with her tulips. Not bitter. Nor I.

Postcard from Warsaw, in Summer, to Whomever Is Listening

Thin moon over Warsaw tonight. A haggardly golden half-moon, in a milky veil, slipping behind a cloud. *This tree saw the last Polish king*, said my friend of the giant oak in Łazienki Park. It was still early evening, then: the deepening blue of summer dusk. We'd been walking toward the mirage of the palace shimmering over the lake, its bright double shimmering up from the water below. *Look how beautiful it is*, he said, and he walked right up to that tree, as if to kiss it, then closed his eyes. And so, as if to kiss him back, I went and stood next to him, face near the bark. Rough, but not too rough. *It doesn't speak Polish or English*, he said, *but listen* —. His breath or my breath through the wood. Later, by candlelight, on the terrace of a café between gleaming towers, we talked about war and despair, all the old robberies of power. I slipped off one silver shoe and sipped my wine and touched the air between us, cool, with the back of my hand. Once, this city was gray with ghosts; the dead lay unburied everywhere. Now, little flowers bloom in their beds; the trees toss their leaf-shadows into my hair; the street where the trams run past I call *The Street of No Longer Slaves*. Still, it's best not to want too much, I said to my friend in the moonlit dark. And when we kissed goodnight, at last — the lightest of kisses on the mouth — my lips were sticky, as if with sap.

Return

In the year of the poppy year of the cornflower
year of the meadow of yarrow and buttercup
year of the thistle and ox-eyed daisy
in the spring of the year of our lord
of the train the engine the ticket the map
of the landscape of leaf shadow willow white birch
blurring past in the smoke of the burning fields
in the blue mist of evening the ringing of bells
ringing out for the living the living the dead
of the last great war which is one long war
of the ancient soldier come in his uniform
to stand hopefully at the door
of the house of no mirrors swept of ash
(in which I was a guest of the dark bread and rain)
to ask, *Have the Germans already left?*
sixty years after the forests were flushed
of the last of our enemies last of the partisans
of the holy republic of mud
of the blood mixed with earth of the bones of itself
of which no one knows but the trees anymore
of which no one speaks but the child made of grass.

Unabashed

I wanted to write a love poem, unabashed.
I wanted, stepping into the meadow,
to bend down and kiss the tips of grass

and then I wanted to take it with me,
the meadow, everywhere I went.
So I plucked a buttercup, a sprig of what

I thought was yarrow, once, and then
some blue and purple flowers,
and made of my plunder a small bouquet.

I wanted my foot on the stones in the river
where my grandmother's foot had stepped,
then to lie on my back in the sun

and let the butterflies swarm my hair.
I wanted to piss in the dirt, and did —
crouching behind a willow, next to the river

in waist-deep green — to put my body
into the body of that earth, as fluid, gold.
And then I wanted the storm that came

with its blue-black wind and sheets of rain
to tear me back into the sky.