White Sheets

Beverley Bie Brahic is a poet and translator. A Canadian, she lives in Paris and Stanford, California. Her translation of selected poems by Francis Ponge, *Unfinished Ode to Mud* (CBe, 2008) was shortlisted for the 2009 Popescu Prize for European poetry in translation. In early 2012 CBe published her translations of poems by Apollinaire under the title *The Little Auto*.

Of Beverley Bie Brahic’s previous collection, *Against Gravity* (2005), George Szirtes wrote: ‘I doubt whether we will see a more sensuous book, with as much control as this, for a good while, nor one written as lightly, with as little apparent effort. But that, of course, is the secret.’
also by Beverley Bie Brahic

POETRY
Against Gravity

TRANSLATIONS
Guillaume Apollinaire, The Little Auto
Francis Ponge, Unfinished Ode to Mud
Hélène Cixous, Hemlock
Hélène Cixous, Hyperdream
Hélène Cixous, Manhattan
Hélène Cixous, Dream I Tell You
Hélène Cixous and Roni Horn, Agua Viva (Rings of Lispector)
Hélène Cixous, The Day I Wasn’t There
Hélène Cixous, Reveries of The Wild Woman
Hélène Cixous, Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint
Jacques Derrida, Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius
Julia Kristeva, This Incredible Need to Believe

OTHER
the eye goes after
(limited edition artist’s book of digital images by Susan Cantrick
accompanying poems by Beverley Bie Brahic)

Beverley Bie Brahic

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C editions
Acknowledgements


Immense gratitude to the Canada Council for the Arts for its grant, the Corporation of Yaddo for its gift of time at Saratoga Springs, and the generous friends who read these poems in draft.

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White Sheets

Airstrike hits wedding party – breaking news

The empty laundry basket
fills with molecules of light.
She stands beside it, arms falling
into the aftermath of the task.
Gesture is a proto-language
researchers say: the same circuits
light the brain when a chimp
signals help me please (hand
outstretched, palm up) as when
human beings process speech.
In the cave the hunter figure
mirrors his spear’s trajectory
towards the deer it will never,
of course, attain. The woman
sees nothing untoward. Her body
bars the spattered something
in the middle distance, though all
of this is right up close: the shed
they’ll use to dress the meat, the plane
geometry of white sheets
on a line. The world is beautiful,
she thinks, or feels, as deer
sense something coming
and move out of range. Beautiful,
the woman thinks, and lifts
the laundry basket to her arms –
beautiful, and orderly.
Ancient History

I

Sixty years after D-Day, in a week of sunshine and occasional rain, my quiet father died: a small civilian hospital, Canada’s west coast. The staff deployed their arsenal – ice chips, morphine. He’d have felt fortunate, though he rarely spoke of it, he returned from that war, much of it spent, the citation says, ‘well forward . . . evacuating casualties’ (from Latin casus – meaning chance, meaning the less fortunate ones). Mother and daughter, we watched the body’s last fight to survive, scanned columns of heartbreak dropped on our doorstep at dawn, or stared out a dusty window past some fruit from the garden – food for the rest of the journey, offering to whoever the gods.

II

Waging war is safer now leaner faster surgical teams accompany the troops, vehicles fitted with sterile instruments, operating tables, anaesthesia and the Deployable Rapid Assembly Shelters – acronym DRASH –

nowadays, this surgeon reports in a prominent medical journal, just one wounded soldier in 10 will die.

Open to the centrefold: spine crushed by a roadside device – nails, bolts and the bones of his assailant – with injuries unsurvivable in previous wars this soldier won’t be numbered among the fallen

(wince at the consecrated words, and a fallen woman, what’s that, and a boy, cannon fodder or house slave?):

taped together like old script, medevacked to mother, to spouse
maybe what Pericles meant
when he told the Athenians

heroes don’t need monuments
heroes have the whole earth for their tombs.

I rest my book on its spine;
stir the apricots I purchased for jam,
a crateful at the market this morning.
The last of them, the stall-holder said.

After the first season of the Peloponnesian War
wheat threshed, grain stored in silos,
grapes pressed to dark wine

the Athenians bury their dead.

Thucydides records their rituals

The bones of the dead laid in chests
of cypress wood
still smelling of trees

are borne to a monument in the finest part
of the city. A citizen – that first winter
they asked Pericles – delivers an oration

mourners bring offerings
the women come to lament . . .

How solid the world of the Athenians – I think –
watching fruit bubble
in the hand-me-down preserving kettle –

you’d think this had all happened yesterday.
Disposable

Halfway from cage to dungeon, the French language has crate, a simple slatted box for carrying such fruits as at the least lack of air are sure to wilt.

Knocked together so that when it’s no longer needed it can be easily crushed, it’s not used twice. Which makes it even less durable than the juicy or cloudlike produce it contains.

Then, at the corner of every street leading to the marketplace, it gleams with the modest sparkle of deal. Still brand new and a little dazed to find itself in the street in such an awkward pose, cast off once and for all, this object is on the whole one of the most appealing – on whose destiny however there’s little point to dwell.

*after Francis Ponge*

Goya: ‘The Fight with Cudgels’

They face off in the mud. Neither brother will survive. In fact they’re already dead. Knee deep in mud, in that welter like the dog – Goya’s hapless pup – wedded to whatever the matter is: sky aglow as over Crete that evening, Easter weekend, Straw Man roped to his scaffold, vine shoots heaped, kids fondle Bic lighters; Processions, Ejaculations, Carnations, the Matrons lined up to kiss the icons. In every household, lamb offal simmers. But these two clubbing each other? Cadmus sowed the dragon’s teeth. Armed they rose and killed their brother. No one won.
End of March. Maybe April. Street trees try to bloom. The irretrievable sits on the table, white as a plate. He holds her her coat.

Reunion: J-School, Class of 19—

Cutlery clatters into the sink. But always the characters, uniquely themselves, only some decades older. They search for their coats. You were, she reminds him, our resident nomad, come to pitch your tent here, sidewalks for sand, unaccustomed taboos: Morningside Heights, one of your lives. Thirty years since the awkward goodbye? Before he goes — East Africa his beat, Germany hers — he’ll visit the nephew, the namesake in Boston who drives a cab, sends a pittance each month to a wellhead in — we’ll call it Sudan. He explains how it works, this drip feed of cash to Sudan from the United States: cheap, fast. She’s not clear about this — he jots her a website: it’s a place she can go. So they won’t meet again . . . suddenly Can you forgive me? he blurts — a classmate’s apartment, Upper West Side, the grown child’s room, bears in tidy shrines, scrum of sloughed coats. In the kitchen friends wash up. Sound of laughter. Sound of water flowing out of a tap. Yes, she replies, shocked by the twinge, then ache, of remorse. She ‘forgot’? And him — thirty years — the place still hurts? It’s myself I can’t forgive, she knows later. Right now, vague shame.