

Amit Majmudar

The Sleep-Deprived Seraph

If no sleep ups your blood alcohol level,
she's five shots deep into God's vodka.
She's been driving cross country, serenely
restless, driving salvation like a semi
to a warehouse burning in the next state.
Come dusk, the interface where trees meet sky
looks like a continent bordering a sea,
a map of the world above the world.
God, too, has his microsleeps, the ellipses
where hell slips in. The constellations blare
their headlights in the oncoming lane.
She's driving south, driving south, south, south
to souls deprived of more than shuteye,
this loss of hers a light cross to bear
compared to the losses there, the desert
wanderings, the stranger's thirst. With miles
and miles of suffering still to deliver,
she rolls down the window and dangles a wing.
At some point, sleep stops being an option.
There's no undoing this awakening.

Amit Majmudar
Tragic Opera

Though they're singing
tonight at the tops
of their lungs,

the world outside's
not quite
the *Gotterdammerung*

they'd have you believe.
It's just how they've
been trained—

mouth in a woeful
O, forehead
glistening in the spotlight,

sheets of tin
atremble
for stage thunder.

How bottomless-pasta-bowl
the destitute bohemian
always looks!

A rosy, busty
Tuscan matriarch's
supposed to

be a nineteen-
year-old hooker
with advanced tuberculosis.

Never rely
on a diva
to give you the news—

the five-day forecast
announces only
twilight after twilight

of the Gods,
an apocalypse

with her at its center

singing her grief
the only aria
worth airing,

the only proper
leitmotif.
The world outside,

meanwhile, doesn't
follow that libretto
in a foreign tongue.

No deathbed duet
is catchy enough
for the living to hum.

We prefer to die
accompanied
by our children

instead of an orchestra.
Even when a young hero
dies by violence,

nothing crescendoes
but sirens.
In his final scene,

his mouth becomes a woeful
O, though all
that fountains out of it

is silence.

Jane Zwart
Cricket

Little creaker, he wrings a wing
shaped like a grapefruit spoon.
Self-strummer, summer-stutterer,
I want to sit up in the night
unrequited, echoing his torch song

but I can't tune my limbs in kind
while this genius plucks Zydeco.
Accompanist of absent laughter,
Jiminy, fiddler, this ladder of ribs
makes such a poor vest frotoir.

Amit Majmudar
Second Language

I just couldn't love him, she said, as fluently
as I wanted to. I wanted my tongue to take to him
and say *I love you* like I was a native of his body,
but nothing ever flowed the way it should, every sentence
needing a redo, even something as simple as *I do*
flanked with hesitations. Hesitations
that didn't mean reluctance to love so much as a yearning
to stop and never start again, speaking
or loving. Loving someone else after widowhood
felt like learning French after my tongue had settled
in its ways—this language, supposedly, of love
I'd only ever speak as a foreigner, mastering at best
some key phrases. Phrases like *Bonjour* and *je m'appelle...*
and *Ca va bien?*, forever introducing myself to a stranger
I'd gone and married just to repopulate
my desolation, my desert island
with someone to talk to. To learn a language,
they say, move there, immerse yourself,
but in that second love, immersion
made me feel like I was underwater, holding my breath
until I took him to that little bakery we loved—
by we, I mean us, my *first* us—and there
let it all out after sweetening my tongue
with a madeleine that helped me remember
what I was there to say, the three words I could say
like a native speaker: *au revoir* and *désolé*.

Jane Zwart
Second Language

This is our second language,
verse

 and what we know
of any hardwon tongue--
that living in its house
we pay a mortgage down

but never quite undo the debt--
it's true of poems, too.

Each stanza is a rented room
in this *pied-à-terre*.

We wrest the foot
from where it rests,
cram dormers
with slant rhymes.

This is our second language,
verse, raised from
the words that we razed first.

Amit Majmudar
Cricket

Call it a song
if you want,
but it's more like

a nervous whistle
against the garage's
outer dark.

Wing rubs wing
the way two
hands wring

here in the offblue
shadow of
the Subaru.

The prescience
of a second
presence

spooks me
into a silence
too anxious

to continue
even anxiety's
cello solo.

If there's a foot-
fall, it shall
fall on me:

A muted terror
tases the wings
that could lift me

swiftly to safety.
I make it through,
though, cricket-lucky

as the trash bag
oomphs into the bin,

the door shuts,

the slippers
pad back in;
and my wings, at last

shivering loose,
give voice
to my worries again.

Jane Zwart
Tragic Opera

The art of sorrow:
to keen on key, to flex
each foreign syllable
with double-jointed grief.

The tenor bleeds out
but the aria's elastic,
a tourniquet, and it prolongs
the hero's dying breath.

Of course hired mourners
stretch the cords
that lash their elegies.
They plot the transport

we plebeians pay for:
sadness familiar
under sadness flamboyant,
lament's funambulist.

Amit Majmudar

Forgetfulness Will Suffice

I know I have written this line before
the way sleeplessness knows the sparrows
from one bleach-in-the-eyes dawn to the next
although I have never written this line before.

Sleeplessness knows the way sparrows
die on their sides with their eyes pinched shut,
and though I have never written that line before
I witness my memory turn the color of dust

and die on its side with its eyes crunched shut.
Like an insomniac willing himself asleep,
I witness my dust turn the color of memory
while eternity rhymes with the hours I keep—

but an insomniac can't will himself to sleep
without writing the lines he's written before,
the ones that keep rhyming eternity with now.
I forget that forgetfulness will suffice

to unwrite all the lines I've written before,
unwitness my memory, and silence these sparrows.
I forget sometimes just how forgetful I am.
But I knew that well before I wrote this line.

Jane Zwart

The Sleep-Deprived Seraph

I have wronged the angel
whose chore, whose charge
I am. Can one blaspheme
the seraphim? I have

since childhood imagined
a night watchman in gauze
guarding my sleep, useless
at swatting evil dreams

but I knew he'd coax
my soul into a conch shell
should it come to that.
It has not come to that.

Even so we're each in our way
mortally oblivious. He wakes me
and wakes me and does not make
any accommodation for day.

He patrols in sunlight, flashlight lit.
I live and he cannot sleep.
Nothing I say and *Noone* I say
is godforsaken except for God.