

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

WHITE SHEETS

B editions

for
Catherine, François,
Anne, Jon and Lucie

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'Disposable' ('A Crate'), 'The Oyster' and 'Blackberries' appear in Francis Ponge, *Unfinished Ode to Mud* (London, CB editions, 2008, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic). 'The Cigarette' is from Francis Ponge, *Le parti pris des choses (Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999). 'Three Paintings by Poussin' is from Yves Bonnefoy, *La longue chaîne de l'ancre* (Paris, Mercure de France, 2008).

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WHITE SHEETS

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.*

III

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.

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.

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.