

ODOROUS OBJECT

Once home, I thought I should dignify my New Life with a ritual—a sacrifice of some kind, a naked dance in the woods. The best I could come up with was to brew some Philosopher's Tea. The original PT, procured by Ahmad in Azerbaijani, was long gone, but I continued to refill the box with English breakfast. If the philosopher's stone could transmute base metal into gold, so too could PT transmute my oh-so-base thoughts into words; all that was inchoate would be graced with form. Hallelujah!

I drank it whenever I translated, which meant it had been a while. On the box: a reminder of the professional standard to which I aspired: *High-quality tea recalling odor and smack lemon. Store at a dry place away from odorous object.*

I brought my tea to the loveseat in the study. I didn't know when Romei would send his book, but I could prepare for that moment by rereading some of his work.

When I left grad school, I'd wedged my copies of his books under wobbly tables at the Hungarian Pastry Shop, my idea of a joke. I found Ahmad's copies and arranged them in chronological order against my chest, from *Mother Tongue* to *Nonsense Syllables*.

They emitted a mild electric charge: my body was buzzing, my arteries thrumming. I opened *Mother Tongue*, broke the binding, and began to read.

Maybe I fell asleep. There was the matter of the wine I'd drunk the night before and, well, the matter of Romei's poems. I put the books in my mom-bag and went back to Cuppa Joe's, where I ordered a mocha double-half-caff and, all virtue, said no to a chocolate bomb.

I read some more, then put the books away and stared out the window. If they had been my copies rather than Ahmad's, I might have slipped them under Joe's wobbly table and been done with it.

There was a time when I would have translated Romei for a latte and a package of peanuts. I felt close to him then; I could have gotten closer—I could have gotten very, very close. Translation requires, and generates, a rare kind of intimacy. Like sex done right, I've always thought. The translator makes a holy commitment to understand, to listen with all possible intensity, to step backward, ever backward, through the labyrinth of an author's ideas and devices, uncovering his decisions and triumphs, line by line, until she arrives, finally, at the moment of creation—and *before*, when words are merely phonemes and breath, and the author lies naked and drunk with his obsessions, visions, and agonizing aphasia. The translator, like one of Noah's sons, bears witness to this primal scene. It takes a strong stomach. And an attractive host. You had to *want* to get close.

When I translated Dante's *Vita Nuova*, I'd wanted to get close: Like Dante, I was in love, with T.; *Vita Nuova* seemed written just for me. Dante lived for his true love's greeting? So did I! His love was a paragon? So was mine! A glimpse of his love made him stupid? Me too! Beatrice was heaven-sent, Dante's love divinely sanctioned? T. and I were also meant to be. He was my Beatrice, the sum of all virtue, the reason I had been put on this earth.

I found my place comfortably between Dante's lines then, his nakedness didn't bother me.

Until it did. Romantic events shattered the pretty idea I had about God's plan for man, and with it, any interest I had in "getting close." I hated Dante then—Dante and his stupid *Vita Nuova*! The *libello*, his libelous little book, was nothing more than a reminder that I'd been

abandoned not just by the love of my young life, but by every hope I'd had that the world was as Dante described—ordered, designed to manifest a greater Love.

Which was when I turned to Romעי. He wrote about the impossibility of New Life, the groundlessness that lies between the lines. There was no sense in Romעי that language could reach beyond its limitations, or the abuse done to it, to connect one self to another. Where Celan had written, *When only the nothingness stood between us, we found our way, all the way, to each other*, Romעי instead would write, *There was only nothingness*. Not just the impossibility of meeting, but the impossibility of there being an Other there to meet.

There was no Other for Romעי: just Romעי and the failure of language to do its job. His mind was empty—not in a cozy Zen sort of way, but in a barren, all-there-is-is-void, no-point-in-even-trying sort of way.

This had appealed to me in my twenties; not so much now. I had a family, I had my Comfort Zone—what use did I have for the void?

I was staring, I realized, out the window at People of the Book. The bookstore Benny “Jellyroll” Jablonsky ran in addition to editing *Gilgul* and acting as part-time rabbi to his New Age congregation. A year ago, after helping me with German translations for “Rose No One,” my story about Celan, Benny had made a pass at me, a clumsy offering between bookcases labeled *Trash Novels* and *Filthy Lucre*. I avoided the store now. But Benny had given Romעי my number; maybe it was time I bought myself some books.