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CITY POETRY FOR BRUGES

1

OLD MEN

Cities are mad as a hatter old men.
In autumn they drag their feet
as if the weight of the whole world

sticks to their heels. They slide tired
deadly into winter, under snowy
blankets. Ready for total sleep.

How they breathe slow and heavy. How they
keep quieter than the quietest cemetery.
Yet spring sees them wake up red cheeked,

crocus in the buttonhole, daffodils
in grass green fingers. They straighten their back,
iron out the folds of the old body

and walk unfaltering towards the prettiest
through jubilant shopping streets.
'There, the Minnewater', they murmur,

as if spouting life's wisdom.
They ride in stately carriages
with always groomed horses.

After Office hours they smoke cigars. Their evening
filled with restaurant and swan song.
Way after midnight the last bar shakes

them out. Then they climb chimneys and all
towards the towers. How they love the sun
reborn as Ursula rising from the waters.

TREE IDIOT

Five maple trees and a plum tree.
Too many for a small yard in Bruges.
Trunk fighting of the tree idiot.

‘Trees are living creatures’, he says.
He calls them by name. Alludes
to individuals. People think him crazy.

‘They take away my sun. Chop down
that mess. Down with the branch bloke.
The law is the law. The Napoleonic code!

Not that he hugs them. They bring rest.
Not that he kisses them goodnight. They give breath.
They root him. Mother and father.

‘Too close to the boundary’ (the judge).
‘What then about the rainforest’ (the radio)
‘Hippie, go back in your tree’ (the internet).

‘Plant other children somewhere else’ (the neighbours).
‘Nowhere more dust lung than here,’ he says,
‘Cancer has the time of its life.’

For him the line has already been drawn.
Who chops off the branch on which he sits?
Who swings on the rope he has braided himself?

DAFFODILS IN THE BÉGUINAGE

The daffodils had come.
Their laborious trip through
the inside of the earth had been
completed. So there they stood

blowing on their golden
trumpets on the inner square
of the béguinage: here we are.
It was their Vivaldi of joy.

So much to sing the praises of. By day
their song shone so bright and white
like the swans. By night it sounded
deep and dark like Minnewater.

In about a month the retreat was
sounded. In a month their
jubilation would shrivel
to nothing. Prey for the scythe.

Now it was Easter and peace.
Now there was just enough wind
for a swaying choral dance.
Now was as good as ever.

SUMMER IN BRUGE

Every house receives with open arms.
Every glass curtain wants to be a summer's dress.
Among all that John Dowland flies out
on the shoulders of Andreas Scholl.

Slowly the sky pours melting lead.
All the streets sweat with people.
All walk on endless legs.
All suddenly hungers for beer and shade.

Let Salvatore then lay a marble hand
on your neck. Let the skippers on the canals
embrace you with their water. Enter Groeninge
go with Christ into the Jordan of Gerard David.

Evening falling, dive with the sparrows
in the hedges of the ramparts, or with the long-eared owl
in the foliage of the Lappersfort. With the swans
of the Minnewater awaking will be feather soft.

ENGLISH MONASTERY

You who enter, know you walk here
through rooms of perfectly pruned devoutness.
Jan Alexander Arrazola de Oñate, chamberlain
to Albrecht and Isabella funded this place.

Among the hedges it whispers of Jesus brides
shrunk here tot a handful of soil.
The nightingale mentions Mary Augustina More,
who in her carriage fled the revolution

to Suffolk. Later she returned to her god's people,
with in her suitcase the likeness
Holbein had fashioned of Sir Thomas.
The wooden frame proved to be a full reliquary.

Confessing and kneeling over sea's girls turned
more catholic than the pope. They slept themselves
tight in their habit far away of their father's land.
Their chaplain threw off his earthly shackles here.

With the orchard finches he whistled far away
from his last bed. Come into the garden and listen
to the songs of sorrow and longing.
They hang in the branches, yet you don't see them.

Cover your head with coolness in the domed church.
Hold in high regard the pendentives. Admire
how naked and old as Atlas they bear heaven's
roof on their slender shoulders.

You who enter, know you walk here
through rooms of perfectly pruned devoutness.
Jan Alexander Arrazola de Oñate, chamberlain
to Albrecht and Isabella funded this place.

6.

DEMONS

For Jotie, Marcus, Paul and the others

In Bruges poets fight their demons.
They hide away on the bottoms of bottles,
in the dregs of Burgundy wines. They drag you
to your mines of oblivion deep within you,
where you wake up in the straightjacket
of your thoughts, miles away from any sea breeze.

In Bruges poets fight their demons.
They were born even before their fathers.
They grew in mothers into misfits born
with ugly loudmouth heads and claws
discrediting even the most tender caress.
They make the blood flow. Upside down.

In Bruges poets fight their demons.
Will-o'-the-wisps lure to resounding halls
in Saint John's hospitals of salves and ulcers
full of plaintive patients turned inwards
unable to see the light in the eyes of that
one night nurse. Star of solace.

In Bruges poets fight their demons.
They hang around the neck as gargoyles.
They lay siege in front of their shabby shop.
Then curses rain down, revenge and reproaches.
And those monsters making faces
till deep in your darkest alleys.

In Bruges poets fight their demons.
Not in vain. The day nears that armies
of snow white words steam up
over the pitch black water. They plant
their beak in the neck of that dark brood.
They whisper light in the ear of the poet.

7.

PENONE IN BRUGES

Jupiter turned a human pair into trees.
Sometimes gods should rather do the opposite.

Like Penone, god of small things,
from dead branches conjures up living forms.

They dance in the gardens of Versailles, climb
the hills of Kassel, breathe fresh air at the Westersingel.

Right in the stone plains of Saint-John's
he planted a small tree in a bronze coat.

Maybe because he heard axes singing nearby.
Maybe because he knew about 1302.

Out of bronze arms drips life water.
Harness of love. That draws people.

8.

WHEN YOU LEAVE

You were to tame the beast in me with soft whips.
Strew my trajectory with pitfalls and with tricks.
I loved you anyhow. And you? Do you still love me now?

When you leave, will you come back?
When I return, will you still be there?

All too often I retired on my own jungle ridge
Then you fluttered away, burned bridge after bridge.
But forget you? No, not that. That you can't see that.

When I return, will you still be there?
When you leave, will you come back?

The chaos in my wake you wouldn't bear.
Your litanies about it I didn't want to hear.
Thus I ran to the boozier and you called me a loser.

When you leave, will you come back?
When I return, will you still be there?

Regularly you had your own strange way.
If only I knew exactly what you craved each day.
Honestly I didn't see. That you thought phoney of me.

When I return, will you still be there?
When you leave, will you come back?

You kissed him just to spite me.
But I am really not that trite.
Then you were in a haze, wanted me in your maze.

When you leave, will you come back?
When I return, will you still be there?

I really want to try again with you.
And I admit: for you I'll have a lot to do.
But maybe not just me. Ah well, we shall see.

When I return, will you still be there?
When you leave, will you come back?

9.

WINOK

It seemed so beautiful.
Work was tamed.
Life could begin again.

It writhed like a snake
around your legs. It whispered
like an viper its poison in your neck.

It fell head over heels with you
into the water. Everything suddenly
much too heavy and you sank.

So crystal-clear you became
inside, so filled with song
of the canal so you kept your tongue.

Now we stand rooted to the ground
on the quay. Our mumble
doesn't inspire life into you.

What kept us when you went
floating? Where were we when
the night took off with you?

10.

EMIEL PAUWELS (1918 – 2014)

While we grumble and gripe that it can't go on,
he sprints for gold in San Sebastian. While we,
stumbling over an uneven tile, break our bones,
he singing jumped to victory in Porto Alegre.

While we draw curtains, douse the lights,
berry us in our village, he crisscrossed the continents.
While our last penny is spend on refectory food
and medication, he collected over thousand medals.

While we consult specialists, undergo operation after
operation, while we vegetate in chilly clinics,
he prepared his papers, gathered his friends
for a farewell meal and went over smiling.

11.

BRUGES IN WINTER

Swans are ice floes, congealed in oil thick water.
Frozen fishermen the trees. They stand so bend,
but don't no longer throw out their lines, see no float
bobbing anymore. Even the loudest fish keep dead silent.

In erased streets every voice sounds louder,
because no motor grinds anymore, no hoofs
clang on the cobblestones. People harrow over sidewalk
after sidewalk. For a while they have the say so.

The city is filled with faded out sound: echoes
of steps, sizzling sleds, mature cantatas.
An alt swirls form the sky. A soprano melts
like snow for the sun in a choir of violins.

At the edge of the city sleeps in a bridal gown
in lace the Chartreuse. After thaw set in he will come,
her lover. A metal noose he lays tightly
around her neck, in concrete he'll pour her soul.

12.

ASTRA

Hello Astra. Hello procession horse.
Hello Rocinante of Anton of Burgundy.
Brabants - so you bloomed

in the Golden Tree Parade. You fell
not on the battlefield, but unfortunately
in your cleaned out stable. You slipped and got

stuck between floor and wall.
You who had carried heroes, gasped
like a beached wale for air.

Like a war horse behoves,
you straightened once more your back.
Walked into the night to die.

Farewell procession horse.
Through your grey manes
no sun will shine anymore.

Just sleep standing, dear Astra.
Trot around in horse heaven. No death
weight that can drag you down.