

LULJETA LLESHANAKU

**FOUR WORDS
COMMIT TO MEMORY
A PERFECT DAY**

TRANSLATED BY ANI GJIKA

FOUR WORDS

The Eskimos have at least four different words for “snow”:
the freshly fallen, the stepped on, the aged,
and the piled up in heaps.

As if nearsighted,
they’re able to distinguish different shades of white:
the nothingness, the emptiness, the present of an eternity,
and the eternity of the present.

Where I come from,
we have four different words for “evening.”
Funny, but the one that fits best
is borrowed from a foreign language
and rhymes with “lilacs,”
the one brought by invaders
not by spice merchants.

Where I come from,
there’s only one word for “grief” and for “water”
and both take the form of the containers that hold them:
each to their own fate, each to their own grief.

The Greeks have four different words for “love,”
like the four stakes of a tent
that assure you a spot in this world
if not today, maybe tomorrow.

According to historians,
until a century ago, my people
had no word for “love,”
only a clever, naive doubt:
“Some very powerful emotion must exist, right?”
A doubt performed with the rhetorical gesture of a King
who asks questions and expects
answers to arrive only in his dreams.

COMMIT TO MEMORY

These words are carved on the gravestone
of a Roman woman from 135 B.C:
“Her parents named her Claudia.
She loved her husband dearly.
She bore two sons.
Was charming in conversation, and patient.
Kept a good house. Spun wool.”

The women I've known
can be described just as plainly with a single line:
M. who shined her copper pots and pans with sand.
L. who dreamed so much about her sons she was punished with a short life.
S. who made the best pickles.
H. who wouldn't shut up about her brother's mysterious death.
K. who used to peel fuzz off of faces with an egg-and-sugar mask.
F. the first to discover that a white dress goes best with yellow roses.
D. who ironed a perfect line on her husband's sleeves,
even when she knew he was going out with another woman.
P. who got along well with her mother-in-law.
S. who had an abortion every six months.
T. with a sweet laugh and always a run on her stockings.
N. who roasted good coffee when she had any.
R. who secretly used to sell her own blood.
Z. who picked up her son's guts with her own hands
the day he was hit by a freight train.

With a brief single line
like an old telegram, twenty cents a word,
and full of typing errors made by the post office staff.
As if that were the only way to remember them.

With a single, uninterrupted line
like Don Quixote in Picasso's hands.

You think it's that easy?

A PERFECT DAY

This probably happens somewhere in Provence, doesn't it?
You wake up late, not in a hurry,
you open your window, and the heavy smell of earth
sprinkled with red poppy seeds floods in.
It could be May, and the cherries are in bloom.
The phone rings. It's your father,
letting you know that he's well and misses you.
(What's wrong? You've never heard those words from his mouth?
Weren't they so much like fruit without a pit?)
Then a warm bath to admire your body
as if in a Renaissance oil painting by François Clouet.
You go back to work in the studio—write nothing
or simply jot down some words. A single word would be ideal.
A single word, a need,
that puts your whole body into action, hands and feet,
like an old Singer sewing machine.
Buzz, buzz. A bumblebee's nest in the garden. Nothing to worry about.
For lunch coq au vin accompanied by a glass of Minervois,
just before the uproar of children released from school.
In the evening, the love of your life takes you out to a terrace cafe
to show you how the sun sets,
its delicate exit, never turning its back,
like a baritone at the end of the show.
You happily talk to each other.
You wonder how much of the present is still unexploited:
"Such good wine!" "You look so lovely in that dress!"
"How many years do you think that old couple has been together?"
Then you get a little carried away with the wine...
You've got only twenty four hours; no reason to feel guilty.
Then what? What happens next? I don't even know
and God damn it, the days are so long in May.

Perfect, yes.

But something makes you uneasy,
embarrassed, predictable,
like a winner's speech in your pocket:
what everyone knows you have
even though you may never use it.