

Releasing the Porcelain Birds

Also by Carmen Bugan

Poetry

Crossing the Carpathians (Carcamet/OxfordPoets, 2004)

The House of Straw (Shearsman Books, 2014)

Prose

Burying the Typewriter: Childhood Under the Eye of the Secret Police
(Picador, UK / Graywolf, USA, 2012)

*Seamus Heaney and East European Poetry in Translation:
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Carmen Bugan

*Releasing the
Porcelain Birds*

poems after surveillance

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For my father, on his eightieth birthday

I.

FOUND IN SECRET POLICE RECORDS

We are museums

We have now become museums. The inside of our souls
Was turned out like the lining of coats hung to dry,
And our souls have dried. Out of us came the warm breath
That you see when you blow on a window or in winter air.

Out of our footprints through the town, from the sound
Of us walking around the house they have made maps.
When we stopped at a shop window, the minutes were noted,
The address and what we looked at were kept on record:

The red dress on a mannequin, empty shelves in a bakery
On Hope, Victory, or People Street. Because we have become
'Objects of observation,' 'targets,' since nothing more has remained
Of the people we were, we are now museums.

On the ground level where we are closest to the earth, you will find
Our house with garden and fruit trees with sparrows, nightingales
And monarch butterflies. Then came the time of upheaval when birds
Were shooed from branches where microphones were installed.

The dog was poisoned by informers and the child was recorded
On a tape, when the electricity was on. The end of the girl's first love,
Her angry letters have rooms of their own, furnished with her mother's
Sympathy: maybe they were kept to indict us for having had feelings?

There are records of us eating sour soup and polenta, drinking linden tea,
Mother knitting sweaters at two in the morning to exchange for eggs
And flour; you will find her sitting on the bed 'alone by herself
Talking to no one for many hours,' framed forever in the state archives.

On the top floor, where we are further up from the earth, you will see us
Trying to escape: the girl asks her father to 'please talk about Kant,'
And he says, 'plan to live without me if I am assassinated.' We are
Museums. I am writing this down so you can come inside us to see.

There are no secrets anyway, everything about us has been recorded:
Night dreams and rage, irony and double-meaning, shopping we did
At the pharmacy, tears on our cheeks, even the illusion that
There might have been *something* we could have kept for ourselves.

February-April 2013

Found in secret police records

In memory of Seamus Heaney who believed that poetry can assuage pain

The dictator released the news of amnesty on his birthday
'To remain in history for his clemency,' Mother said
Not knowing it was her irony that remained preserved:
In our country people starved and friend informed on friend.

In his prison cell my father's jubilation was recorded:
'If I come out at the same time as any of you,
I'll buy a bottle of wine and some ham, that'll last us till home!'
The jailer warned him not to talk about what had happened there.

When Father came out of the train, the state archives say
He knocked on the door of old friends asking to make a call,
And I was the one who answered.
I sent him to Mother at work—she'd wanted to see him first.

(How she spent all the month's salary on stocking the fridge,
And worried about him traveling in the dead of winter
Wearing only his black suit, how she spat on the face of police
The morning of his release, when they asked her to inform on him.)

They walked in the door holding hands, his wrists raw from chains,
He caressed my brother, wanted to know what I have learned at school,
Then went around the house visiting each room; he asked for his shaver
And his radio, the night wore on. The antennae at the top of our house

Transmitted our feelings, the microphones must have blushed
At our words after long silence, the informer outside the window stood
At his post recording 'the atmosphere of joy on the part of children,'
Witnessing those first slow moments when I 'sobbed out loud
uncontrollably'

Before returning to my senses. My father said to me, 'You answer
As if you are speaking on the radio,' and it was true. Records say

On February 5, 1988 we 'went to sleep at 3:45 in the morning,' Father
'feeling
Tired, with a pain in his heart.' Snow fell, an angel dragging light.

*

Twenty-five years have passed. This morning snow arrives like butterflies.
I see us in our small kitchen that first night standing around each other
Not knowing what to say. The image disappears into these thousands of
pages.
I no longer remember the pain in my father's heart. It was long ago.

Geneva, February 28, 2013

Releasing the porcelain birds

I found her porcelain birds today: three in one room
eight in the other, and those brought back to my mind
the one with the broken wing my sister and I once fixed

with Mother's nail polish and a matchstick.
The one bird with a broken neck Loredana and I hid
in the dog's cage outside, not to make her angry.

This is only a house inventory by meticulous
investigators: 'porcelain figurines,' they say,
'an elephant, a lion, a little girl with two puppies,'

and the birds, still around the ballerina,
among the 'crystal glasses and champagne flutes,'
the 'bottle of Slivovitz' (my parents' glamorous marriage),

their prized vacuum cleaner and Bulgarian rose perfume,
my father's 'seven shirts,' 'two colorful ties,' their
'tape recorder MK235 automatic Grundig made by Unitra Poland.'

'A black table with intertwined vine design,' and again
'three porcelain figurines (birds),'
'a wall library with two drawers and display case,'

'2 (two) hats made of light fabric and one leather hat,'
'3 (three) man suits,' 'a thick short coat,'
'4 (woman) summer dresses,' 'a violin and a guitar.'

My mother loved porcelain birds;
they must have made her think of flying
when such thoughts were banished

by men with keys to our house,
who chained her husband to the walls of prisons,
because his mind escaped to freedom.

'He represents a danger to our state,' a file says:
'Use all methods to monitor her, including special methods.'
'A radio Selena, a radio Gloria', 'display case with books for reading.'

*

How far you traveled my still swans, my white sparrows
archived for thirty years all over the country, shelved and cleared;
I see you now, when I am too old to take you in my hands

and run with you around the rooms of the house, or
place you on tree branches to see what the singing birds
make of you, to mend you when you shatter: as I did long ago.

A list of confiscated goods and things destroyed by burning

We must have been hungry, since
my parents hoarded oil, corn flour, beans.

I was a 'minor' when they took the audiotapes
(with Christmas shows my sister and I put on

for Santa who joined us beside the tree,
Grandmother's frail voice telling us about her life

the summer before she died, our family songs).
I typed poetry. Parents drank whiskey;

they must have been unhappy: they recorded
Radio Free Europe transmissions, and typed

'We no longer need life and liberty':
they were ironical, cynical.

My father went to change the world with
wood, words, flags and a portrait.

The wood, words, flags and portrait were burned
(I imagine the fire at the secret police headquarters

in the center of their courtyard, soldiers
cleaning ashes, sweeping them under branches

of their chestnut tree: evidence seeping into
roots, dissent that must have grown into leaves

which even now continue to clap in the wind...)
The food was never returned to us. I still write poems,

about everything that was not planned to exist
once our photos were taken away with the food.