Uljana Wolf

kochanie, today i bought bread

Translated from German by Greg Nissan
With an introduction by Valzhyna Mort
“WHAT’S YOUR NAME WHEN you’re at home?” reads the epigraph, from Tom Stoppard, to Uljana Wolf’s 2005 debut. The book’s title has already answered the question, hasn’t it? “Kochanie”—Polish for my baby, my sweet. Home is defined by the language of the other. There it is, Uljana Wolf enters German literature with a Polish word.

A poet’s home is their language: words grouped in such an evocative, memorable way that they can preserve what they name. This evocation is mnemonic, it chants against oblivion. Some poets, however—and East German poets for sure—inherit an intergenerational, post-war and post-reunification reckoning with language as silence. Theirs is not the homogenous Nazi discourse but the ever-shifting encounter, erasure, and recognition of the East German and Polish borderland. The poet comes to this borderland to listen and record after forty years of infiltration and surveillance by the Stasi: forty years of informers listening and recording. A poet never informs; she creates a space where the neighbor, the other, and the self exchange names, where each language contributes a word for the shared bread of poetic speech. Only poetry can heal a language after what has been done to it and with it; only poetry can help a language turn a page without plunging into oblivion.

Perhaps Tom Stoppard, born in what was then Czechoslovakia, in 1937, two years before the occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, channels something more personal than a confusion between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Perhaps the real question is written not by Tom, but by who Tom was at home—Tomáš, Tomík, Tomášek—a Czech child refugee fleeing Nazi occupation: What is home? To where am I taking my names of love and the bread of my language? Neither Stoppard nor Wolf can answer these questions definitively. Wolf opens her poems to the infinitive play of naming. She
is willing to sacrifice her mouth in order to buy bread in the language of the other.

“Displacement of the mouth” is the title of the first chapter of kochanie, today i bought bread. Displacement of the mouth is what German readers of Uljana Wolf experience when, reading the book’s title, they pronounce the word of love in Polish. It’s not enough to understand the cause of this displacement as merely phonetic. The Polish word inside a German mouth is a site of mutual history, mutual silence.

Now, the bread of the German tongue tastes of train tracks running along the wheat fields of borderlands, fire and ash, gas ovens, starved corpses stored in unsealed mass graves, the bread of division, a failure of communication—a mouth displaced by the unspeakable. Compare this refusal, resistance, and recreation of language with M. NourbeSe Philip’s “Discourse on the Logic of Language”:

English

is my mother tongue.
A mother tongue is not
cannot lan lan lang
language
l/anguish
anguish
—a foreign anguish.

For Uljana Wolf, the German language is a native anguish, a mother anguish, a father anguish, a silent anguish.

The title poem of the section is full of mouth imagery, a mouthful: “the house shuts / its lips thin,” “the sky cracks / back its jaw,” “taut / tongue-arch of the forest // from a misted mouth / a rain a long held / breath unravels.” House, forest, sky, rain, fog—everything is a mouth, everything speaks. “The house shuts / its lips thin as lids”: here, speech is identified as sight. To speak is to open one’s eyes.
Kochanie, to name you intimately is to see you. Your death is only “a held / breath” that “unravels” into a pouring rain. In Zbigniew Herbert’s well-known poem “Rain,” the rain metaphor is used similarly, to express the presence of a war veteran whose mind is “displaced”:

and he recited to me
improbable tales
touching my face
with blind fingers of rain.

While Herbert’s poem is built around a clear narrative and an extended metaphor, Wolf’s rain-speech struggles to “unravel.” What does this mean? The improbable death tale that has been held at the expense of breathing can unravel the fabric of history made probable and speakable for the health of the living.

Uljana Wolf is forever in the speech therapy of history. Her “recovery room I” echoes—unintentionally—Sylvia Plath’s “Tulips” but, again, refuses the clear metaphorical narrative of the American poet whose anti-Hitler, German father was cast by his poet-daughter as a notorious fascist every woman “adores”: “Daddy, I have to kill you.” While Plath’s nurses pass like gulls, Wolf’s are “giant furry” shepherds who “bent velvety over our heads,” in our “postnarcotic sniffle.” “recovery room II” establishes a pattern of false starts and repetitions, Wolf’s signature devices. In this new dream of a recovery room, the landscape is coastal, with bed-boats and “murky nurses who line / the shore as judges” outside the “clammy sleepcanal.” The metaphor is of a birth into the chill of historical judgement, an inherited, inborn crime. The birth canal leads into the hands of nurse-judges. Metaphors burdened with history, gendered and personal, continue to emerge in striking ellipses from poem to poem. The poet wishes to lock herself inside a prayer of the loved one, “to wall myself in voice.” Out of her speech, she builds herself a guest room inside her native tongue: “where women lock themselves in / where women speak.”
One such woman is the German-language poet Ingeborg Bachmann, whose father embraced the arrival of Hitler. Bachmann wanted to find a new language for German readers. She spent her whole life in the recovery room/guest room of her father tongue, a space that Wolf describes in the poem “deutsches literaturarchiv marbach” as “boxes” that “hold women / who could not be processed // hibernating in documents / contradiction sans diction.” Marbach, hometown of Friedrich Schiller, is also home to the Museum of Modern Literature. On its German Wikipedia page, of 28 famous manuscripts housed by the museum—including works by Kafka, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Hesse, Bernhard, Walser, etc.—there are only two by women: the manuscript of Helen Hessel’s Lolita translation and, the only original work by a woman, Ingeborg Bachmann’s manuscript of Malina, a masterpiece of the despair and loneliness of a female literary voice. “My defiance is my instrument / my plunging silent,” writes Wolf, equipping herself with her impeding tongue.

“Subplots” is a father-daughter nightmare, a tour de force of sonic meaning-making in the dark fairy woods of patriarchy. Short, numbered poems fueled by patterns of repetition are the spells meant to break the patriarchal curse. They are attempts to break the same lock. This lock is a mouth. Wolf wishes to break the patterns of speaking and thinking. She tries different keys—different short poems—twisting their patterns this way and that. What is the spell for breaking into the home of love? What is a spell of return? What is a spell of change? What is a spell of full understanding? These poems do not so much communicate as much as exclaim at the unyielding lock: hrrrrr, agghhhh, nnnnh! The poetic instrument is the sharp estrangement of the most intimate: familiar fairy tales, family bonds. These poems are built around the narratives passed from generation to generation: fairy tales—Grimm, Andersen—and myth and literature, inaugurated by a Germanic queen Tamora who becomes a slave-wife of a Roman emperor, her children driven by vengeance in Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, a play full of spectacular and grotesque violence.
The main sites of this book are hospital rooms, ovens, forests, signal towers, warehouses, train stations, wagons. The main actions are scattering out, traveling, sparkling through landscape. Time: “night halfnight” and “light halflight.” The third part of the book lays out maps. “What is the name of your home?” to mis-repeat Tomáš Stoppard. In her poem “how the little murmur came into poetry,” Wolf responds:

my name is little murmur
I’ve grown up

with this border trade
on my tongue.

This “trade” is Wolf’s trademark use of repetition, words changing hands and mouths. The shifting of borders manifests itself in the sonic shifting, making meaning out of the noise of time: recognition, echo, usurping, slipping, haunting, forgetting. The urge for speech in this book is the urge to speak in murmurs and sniffles. Once speech is successfully unsnarled, it can speak only in murmurs and sniffles.

“Legnica your direction is sounded: night halfnight,” Wolf writes in the poem “legnica północna.” The title misdirects between languages. The Polish “północ” means both midnight and the north. Today, Legnica, Poland, is an hour’s drive from the German border; it has served as a place where cold and dark come together, blurring borders and populations, slicing flesh, land, and time. This is the borderland perpetually recovering from anesthesia. What is your name, home? How do I know I’m home, love? There, at the end of language, like at the end of a rainbow.

Mother tongue, father narrative, fairy tales, bread, names of endearment, inheritance, familial bonds, in sickness and in health (in this book, mostly in sickness). Poetry remembers that, ultimately, history is a family matter. Generation after generation, a human soul seeks
its way out of shame and guilt, and for a poet, this way is the way of language. In her last-grasp pursuit of the connection between sound and meaning, Wolf broadens the borders of what can be understood by broadening the borders of what can be said. Her trembling repetitions and reconfigurations erase the contours of meaning in hope of producing a meaningful spark to illuminate the unspeakable and the never-understood.

Uljana Wolf’s debut meisterpiece/mouthpiece is set in places of homelessness and is sounded in the direction of home obliviated by borderland, a self obliviated by history, a language obliviated by “halflanguage,” “murmur,” “sniffle.” Like a non-verbal kochanie-babe, a poet conjures a possibility of speech in a room that is at once a hospital and a courtroom. What does this kochanie bring into the world in the crook of her arm? She brings the bread of speech. Bite into it, and a sniffle will turn into a language, history will turn into a self, and a borderland will turn into a home.

— Valzhyna Mort
displacement of the mouth

around four in the morning
i watch the mouth's dis
placement

with the last
yawning gust
the house shuts
its lips thin as lids

in contrast the sky cracks
back its jaw : lightblue
close to uvula
over the dark taut
tongue-arch of the forest

from a misted mouth
a rain a long held
breath unravels: as if
speaking through
the sleeper's lashes
shoes danced to shreds

as a fable
1 soldier danced
12 maidens to shreds

i am beautiful
at heart a ballroom
woman chamber woman
for a lifetime

if my father
ach father
weren’t world
above ground
world of 1 soldier

who in the dreams
of 12 maidens
broke their branches

(still no talk
of legs)
translate

my friend: this is
our pothole love
our little border traffic
clumsy under tongues

our dimmer-time blessing
and now caress me
on this stamp pad
until customs comes

my friend: maybe we’ll
smuggle fully-fledged
taste buds, gums
gazeta wyborcza and

coin some coins
in a fleeting
mouth stuffed
to the brim
at rush hour
strictly speaking you november clutched
me to your white breast dense with fog

or did i say chest a ramschackle box
a cage with garden and misty kitsch

in which an old bird on the pole sits
half winter half lace-shaped valance

how did you take me how in this valley
how do you shoo me between oaks

your wheezing breath in alleys braids
nets thru branches into damper labyrinths

till i’m left half-blind in your rib-light
and spinning beloved as if you had

woven the fogfence forever around
the bird your floating particle heart
postscript to the dogs of kreisau

whoever says poems are like these dogs
encircled by their echo at the village core
by waiting and pawing at the half-moon
by stubborn marking of tongue territories
then he knows you not, you frantic barkers
cassandras in wallachia’s sonic rush
because you join what’s word and what’s calf
together with a foolish bite from behind
as if a leg were but a page
the order of things a trade:
my boots still bear the imprint
of your teeth—four stapler craters
that’s my reward for chasing you with verse
that’s how the world follows poetry at heel