Preface

Mireille Gansel was born in 1947 in the Savoie region of France where her parents had arrived as refugees at the end of World War II. In her imagination, the river Danube flashed between trees and buildings on its way to the sea and back. Other nearby cities filled up with displaced people from all around Europe where their homes had been shelled to dust. Multiple languages filled the schools and stores. Mireille’s father was a Hungarian Jew. Her parents spoke German, but their neighbors spoke other languages from occupied countries.

This way Gansel began a life of listening to varieties of speech in her youth. She traveled to East Berlin in the 1960s, sat in on Brecht’s rehearsals with The Berliner Ensemble doing Hölderlin’s Antigone. Then, in the 1970s, she went to Vietnam to learn the language and live with the victims of an ongoing, vicious, unjust war. Her sources were Vietnamese people, poets. What she learned from immersion in their town, their domestic lives, language and families was the intimate correspondence between poetry and common speech.

This was her special method: to meet the poet wherever possible on their own turf, in their own town and house before translating their poems. She translated poems by Tô Hǚu and found her vocation.

Much travel followed, political action, an immersion in the world she inhabited through the languages studied up close and open to readers. This life is the source of her poetic thinking and, too, her understanding of populations driven away from home by social catastrophe. In the wake of clamor and sorrow, she read Brecht, Rilke, Hölderlin, Rene Char, Nelly Sachs and translated them for unknown “others.” She rarely
used this deadly term (other) and instead her mission was to reflect upon the many people who have become immigrant, who are the dis-othered world of the twenty-first century.

One moment of insight came when she realized that she—herself, the nomadic reader—was as much an alien as her subject. This moment speaks as if it were mass consciousness awakening, a rock turning over, a voice emerging from the night. It was an insight that has beamed in on philosophy, perhaps occasioned by the arrival of women like Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, and Julia Kristeva. The word “stranger” was soon accompanied by an uncanny and a horrifying awareness of the human condition as unknowable. Translation was an action against alienation.

Gansel begins this book with her own experience of childhood. As she later wrote of poet Nelly Sachs: “The child is the common thread running through all her books.” The child and first words, the child and its acute awareness of sound and sense, and of how things came to be named. Gansel called language “the underground springs of a people’s hinterland.” And she went forth into the world to decipher and interpret the words she heard so that she could understand them. She carried poetry out of the ruins, the way Persephone brought flowers to hell with her.

I suppose poetry enables little languages whispered in kitchens and fields to flourish. It doesn’t care about order and uniformity, only about the ways of the mind. You do feel it whispering its way up the busy words of a brain otherwise occupied. The hiss of lips compressed on a word. Surrealism is a natural outcome, especially when the absurdity of war reverberates in the household. Gansel is the inheritor of a generation of such war-time and war-born thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Beckett, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil, Edith Stein, Ludwig Wittgenstein. To follow her journal is to be led
to see where we stand today—in a future that was already germinating in thought.

The recapitulation of a life experience will necessarily be jagged and punctured. The style Gansel has adopted for her translations sometimes has this fractured quality and her translator, Joan Seliger Sidney, allows some defamiliarization to enter a sentence so that the unperfected present of the new version wobbles. So some return to iambic. (“A word where beats the heart of hospitality.”) Sidney allows an old-fashioned phrase into the otherwise contemporary line as if to remind the reader that the past is not over yet.

Gansel has let us accompany her from childhood to late life during a historical time which included the death of God and animals, epic bombardments of cities and oceans, and uprootedness that continues to this day. With the unsentimental intelligence of an Arendt, she brings us to the brink of a new intuition about our troubles. We are creators of our own disappearance. This double thrust is already scraped into stone and pottery.

Translation has been called “resurrection” in some Hindu cultures. It does, in fact, feel as impossible as that. You carry each word out of its original form and context. Will you ever know if the word you brought can be absorbed into a new common line. Wittgenstein believed the soul lived outside of the body. Such a soul could house a body. And the person wearing the soul could decorate it with radiant senses from the living world. Colors and fragrance, music and touch. Each experience in this book flashes its tiny insight like a peacock feather. And this way it waves the evil off. Here we remember the Greek gods and are glad they may be returning.

It is in that spirit that we come to Soul House. Watch it unfold, as poems do, unnoticed and therefore free. Delight in objects, attention to the meanings of growth and destruction,
a commitment to the childhood of the children. Only the imprisoned know what freedom really means. A spoken word, translated into a written word, and vice versa, reminds me of the wandering poem from Arabia that Gansel includes in her book: *Full of doubts, I stopped in pastures, seeking the trace of his camels... do you remember, my sad soul, where was his tent?*

_Fanny Howe_
_May 2023_
to inhabit beauty

“was it pretty your house, when you were little?”
es your child’s question this spring morning and suddenly
beauty is a house one inhabits perhaps the first one perhaps
the only one—

against all odds—
post-script

I

this morning while I was headed to the docks looking for the last phlox of summer at the florist suddenly the look of this young boy with his mother her head scarf knotted like the Romani women who had offered us hospitality he and she hurrying both of them grasping black bags in a large trash can he’s dragging along an old half-open suitcase upholstered in checkered fabric—

the dignity of this look—

II

it was upon returning from the flower market suddenly at the corner of the dock and the footbridge to île Saint-Louis under the high windows where the shadow of Jankélévitch and Edmond Fleg flits by this Balkan melody on his accordion time just enough time to exchange a few words about this place and his country and when it’s too cold this burning coffee he clasps in both hands he says, he shares a cellar, and also, no, not a place for flowers, and he almost laughs, and takes up the Balkan melody again—
of these beauties that make the world habitable

yes you’re right it was pretty my house when I was little I would like to tell you it is at the end of a long trip down a steep street on the Rose Hill—Rószadomb—and at the very bottom the Danube like a stream of light after an early childhood on the roads of exodus. My true house. I mean where you expect to be welcomed. Always. Haven of beauty the blue hand-sewn tablecloth softness-blue which doesn’t exist anywhere else the aroma of a dill soup fresh flowers in an earthen vase—

of these beauties that make the world habitable—
nomadic house

I

in your memory this first train for Budapest along a torrent
the color of glaciers I did not know yet that it was the Inn
coming down from the Engadine and that many years later I
would find it again at the junction of the Danube and the Ilz. At
Passau. Where, one day, the poet Reiner Kunze will find refuge
a few kilometers downstream. And there at the crossroads
traces of the past where traces to come are already inscribed
I will learn to inhabit the slow passage of words and poems—

nomadic house along the white waters—

II

in the house of Reiner Kunze. This evening in late March 2016.
On the sloping garden, night falls between the gold of forsythias
and traces of the last snow. In our glasses, a Croatian wine.
Fruited and dark. The poet’s best bottle. He prepares himself
for meetings and readings in Ukraine for the publication of
a volume of his poems in the Knyhy editions at Tchernivitsi
(formerly Czernowitz). In the dusky light of the setting sun, I
dream of his poems, of the years of exile in his own country.
Forbidden from readings and publications, excluded from the
writers’ room of the GDR. Yes, these same poems, translated
today into Ukrainian, that he’s going to present at Kiev and
Czernowitz
a house over there

when the little girl left the Budapest family she drew a train and along the train a current of blue water. And flowers. And a deserted platform. And since you’ve known that waiting is a secret country a country of silence and that absence is a manner of hoping. Perhaps from that comes this penchant for finding lost things again. And also for the words that translate. And what if to translate was to look for lost words?

yes, a drawing. Like a letter. Like a lost house. A house over there—
what word could express this childhood home? swept away on a night train from Budapest Keleti. Motherland as we say of our mother tongue. Where to arrive in the world. And in oneself. This word I discovered in London in the house of a man of letters that was filled with books. It is in Passages that Walter Benjamin finished writing during his exile in Paris. It was in 1934. Below the large stained-glass window of the Bibliothèque nationale. He calls a house—Gehäuse: “where one takes shelter. Finds refuge.” Sometimes along the more meandering roads you will discover traces “reorganizing space and through it time.”

they will bring you to this swept away house “where to live leaving no trace”—