

Two poems by Mordechai Geldman translated from the Hebrew

by tsipi keller

CHU

A monk asked Chao-Chu:
Is the nature of Buddha in the
dog?
Ehhhh, said Chao-Chu

1.
A car ran over the cat Chu
and I wept for my cat Chu
(affectionately I called him Chu-Chu)
as if he were my son or my friend-beloved

But my weeping distressed me—
how can you, I said, cry for a cat
while death consumes people in its thousand mouths
the land is filled with widows and orphans
and many parents lost their sons
and he who didn't die in the war died in a terrorist attack
and he who didn't die in a terrorist attack
died in a car crash, floods, fires

And he who didn't die in those died from old age or illness
and he who didn't vanish in death
is now blind and lame or scarred with burns
and all are awaiting the next war

that will destroy even the birds and cats

2.

The cat Chu like most of the cats in our land
was a fourth-world citizen
living at the bottom of society's ladder
below the beer guzzling foreign workers
below the shaking drug-addicted whores
together with the litter-nibbling hobos

But I raised him from the gutter
to be a domestic noble tiger
a green-eyed striped tiger
daintily stepping on pillows and armchairs
feeding on Italian preserves
and choosing to catnap with his head in my palm

Am I an orphic poet who seeks
his beloveds in the lower worlds
who favors a stone the builders refused[1]
who imports his poems from the lands of death?

3.

At night Chu came to me in his spirit
and said in the language of humans:
"Now that you've written two poems
you're ready to forget me
but I'm a cat of three poems
if not more"

[1]From Psalms, CXVIII, 22: "The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner."

VOICE

What is his true voice?

Have words enfolded him
in murmurs
in forms
in worn-out patterns that came before him?

"Person" described him
better than "frog"
but the croaking of frogs in the night's ponds
or the whistle of birds at dusk
or the sound of fruit dropping to the ground
drew him out better than Hebrew
as Being revealed itself to him in its fullness

And at moments of involuntary openness
when fatigue dissolved his inhibitions
Yiddish melodies floated up in his mind
songs of mournful wisdoms
of a cursed chosen people of God
tunes of an exiled truth and suffering
and the rolling of the dead[1]

And at times other voices
voices of others
sneaked surreptitiously into his secret cave
echoed in his voice and from within
infecting his voice with alienation
alien voices echoed in his voice simulating his voice
his voice at times getting lost in simulation

But was it really simulation
was there really a voice that was not his voice
as it used his mouth his palate his tongue his teeth
in order to set forth in the world
out into a vastness of odd-looking funnels

And wasn't his voice muddled up
when adjusted to the auditory frequency of listeners
who had no intention to listen
and certainly never made the effort
and in fact never could

A suspicion rippled through him
annulling any pure sound
true like the roar of a river
virginal like the note of a reed
that has just been pulled from the edge of the swamp
or cruel and desirous like the wail of prairie wolves

But always an intense pain
an absolute final truth
whose voice was a scream or a shout
a voice distilled of dross
a voice of pure pain
pure voice of pain
four final words
and the song of wasps
in landfills

[1]Alludes to Midrash Raba, 96, and the belief that when the Messiah arrives, Jews who had died in the Diaspora would roll under their graves, through tunnels and caves, to Israel for the Resurrection.

