

The Unseen Archive

Szilvia Szita

(sample poems)



Part 1

The Body Collects

(snowdrops)

At winter's end,
once a year
and always on a Sunday,
we walked to the edge of the village.

Branches bowed under snow.
We bent, too.
Not in wonder,
but the way
peasants bend to any task.

We hunted for snowdrops.

To reach the fragile stems,
we dug beneath the crust.
My knitted gloves turned sodden;
I took them off
and held the flowers in my red fists.

We spoke little, seldom laughed.
Snowdrop-picking, like all things,
was work,
done without words.

Schneeglöckchen, snow-bells,
the Swabian neighbours said.
For us: *hóvirág*, snow-flowers.
Names reveal so much about the eyes.

“Well, that’s enough.
Let’s go.”

Yet, surely,
some of us before leaving,
looked around—
saw the violet sky,
the grey trunks,
the branches interlaced.

But the animals were waiting at home.

Now snow comes rarely, or not at all.
I find them in a garden centre in February,
bright white, potted, labelled.
How should we name these little things?

Flowers?

Bells?

Drops?

(the first child)

She was two.

The hospital was overfilled.
The women of the family
took turns beside her bed.
Fairy tales, silent worry,
rage against life.

She had one task: to drink.
She did not.

For days,
she lay there,
eyes closed.
Her favourite mug
on a little table.

Morning after morning,
the mug remained untouched,
the chairs occupied.

Then one evening,
with cracked lips,
she asked for water.

Her pajamas clung to her body,
her hair in damp knots.
Her dry mouth, a tunnel.

She drank,
then vomited something bright
into her little blue bucket.

Cool hands held her forehead.

(accident)

She fell on an axe as a child.
A scar on her knee helps her
remember.

She is an adult now
and has a little daughter.
When the heatwave comes,
they go to the lake.

She lies on warm sand,
so still, she could be a statue.

The daughter observes
how the sand
takes up
temporary forms.

The mother's scar
on the left knee.

She has the same
even if she has
never seen an axe.

(empty-handed)

Coming home from school,
walking up Liberty Road.
The scent of lilac in the air.
I was holding Mum's hand,
her thumb rubbing
circles on my knuckle,
the way she always did
when she was thinking.

I was telling her
what we had for lunch at school—

Mum stopped.

She needed to wee.
In the middle of the pavement
a strange, clear liquid trickled
out of her trouser leg.

Someone took my hand
and pulled me away from her.
Said Mum would be taken to the hospital,
but would not come home alone.
He mentioned a little brother,
and that her hands would be full.

I looked at my sweaty, empty palm:
Where will I keep mines?

(family nest)

"Why do you go in to see Dad every day?"
I make little balls from fresh bread.
The children, like nestlings,
turn their beaks towards me.

"In Dad's throat,
there are tubes instead of his voice;
you cannot even talk to one another."

I try to explain something
I don't understand myself.
My children shake their heads.

They want
their father to come home
so that everything can be as it was before.
A parent, after all, does not change.

They have never before seen,
from so close, an adult beat-
ing his wings, trying to fly.

(nine men's morris)

"What colour is this now?"
Don't say you can't see.
"If I could see it I wouldn't ask."

"Which one am I? The black?"
What do you think?
"I don't know.
If I knew I wouldn't ask."

The first few moves are always right.
The hand still knows the patterns.
Then again: "Which one am I?"

For a moment, she looks at me
behind her glasses. Not long enough
to call her back from that empty room.

"You have a mill."
Three in a row, you can take a piece.
"Me? Where?"
She reaches across the board,
removes a piece: her own.

"What colour is this now —
white or black?"
Don't say you don't know.
"If I knew I wouldn't ask."

(hills)

I sit on the marble stone.
Bright pansies blossom beside me.
My grandfather lies beneath.

Two old women arrive.
A watering can in one hand,
a cane in the other.

They do not sit down,
though the stone is warm,
still holding the heat of the day.

They keep the graves in order,
as they keep the house in order,
and the yard.

They no longer recognize me.
"You come to see him
so rarely", they say.
What a strange sentence.

To me, his gravestone
is the place where I sit
to watch the hills.

(rain)

The first drops fall without warning.
My mother ducks under the arcade
of the corner shop. I watch from the car.

She hasn't seen me.
Doesn't even know I'm here.
Is this what it would be like
if we didn't belong to each other?

Is this how she greets people, how she smiles,
how she talks, when I'm not watching?

She's been losing weight,
skirts suit her again—
that narrow waist I only knew
from old photographs.

Others have taken shelter beside her.
Neither my brother nor I are there
to hamper her with our presence.

We no longer even have
a key to her flat. My mother chats,
my mother smiles, everyone knows her,
people stop to say hello.

I start the engine, park in front of the house,
ring her bell, though I know
she can't be home yet.

Listening to the rain on the roof,
I wait
as if I were an outsider.

(mirror)

I had meant
to keep your garden in order.
But my hands can't be relied on.

Where flowers ought to be standing
there are leaves that fell last autumn
and cleavers matted over everything.

A slow-worm slides past my foot:
rain on its way.
The lilac sends its roots out
stubbornly, wider every year.

The garden fork
leans against the shed wall.
I listen to the compost breathe.

By the time I reach the hospital,
it is already pouring.
But you cannot see the drops
hitting the ground below:
the ward on the upper floor
speaks only to the air.

You have never been this far
from the muddy yard,
from the soft earth of the flower beds.
You want to come home.
You can't.

You call me "my angel"—
and yet I am the one
who hides from you
the garden running to ruin.
The mirror of your body.

(for sale)

The house suddenly comes alive.
The furniture starts talking,
the drawers won't shut up.
The lamps wink at one another,
chair legs tangle together.

I cannot take them with me,
there's nowhere to put them.
Grandfather's wicker chair,
the oval table from the parlour,
the green bread-chest—
I let them be crushed.

I feel relief
when someone wants
a thing or two.

My brother takes two vases,
an alarm clock that stopped working years ago,
a tablecloth.
All I wanted
was the misplaced war diary.
Or a yellowed
shopping list.

I hear the cracking,
the furniture in its death throes.
My arms and legs are black and blue,
I keep walking into things
the way I did as a child.

Back then my grandmother
would reach into the mirrored cabinet
for a huge handkerchief,
and wet it under the outdoor tap.

In the end,
I place a pair of
knitted, leather-soled shoes
in the woven basket.
A box of men's handkerchiefs
goes in beside them.

"Hold these against the bruise,

my angel."

(there is somewhere)

The fishing lake's green water.
A small garden. A fire pit.

Someone held my hand
those years when I wanted
to do everything
alone.

Fish thrashing in the net.
Vegetable beds carefully hoed.
Bacon fat sizzling, hot.

The fish's lung bursts.
The soil dries out, and after dinner
only a few sticky, soot-smudged napkins remain.

It took decades to understand this.
It takes even longer to forgive.

Someone, hold my hand.
I no longer pull away.

(instead of a photograph)

We pass that way one last time.
The dirt road is concrete now,
but already full of potholes.

The garden is overrun with hollyhocks,
and where the alfalfa once grew
stands a rickety garage.
The roof seems to sag in the middle.

We don't get out of the car.

My mother at the wheel;
the keychain charm trembles on the ignition
as she turns off the engine.

This poor copy of her childhood landscape
is easier for me to look at.
I even offer to take a photograph.
A stupid idea. My mother refuses at once.

Her sweaty palm leaves a mark
on the wheel,
yet however tightly she grips it,
this story is no longer hers to steer.

A man appears in the yard.
"Are you looking for someone?"
He frowns, going up the steps,
his hand on the door handle.