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“After Flight”

by Ilija Trojanow

TRANSIT vol. 13, no.2

Translated by Ambika Athreya

Translator’s Introduction

Ilija Trojanow was born in 1965 in Sofia, Bulgaria and emigrated in 1971 to West Germany, where his family sought political asylum. Since then he has lived in Kenya (where he spent most of his childhood), Germany, India, and Austria, among other places. He is active as a journalist, translator, author of fiction and publisher. His numerous works include the novels *Eistau* (2011, engl. *The Lamentations of Zeno*), *Macht und Widerstand* (2015), *Doppelte Spur* (2017), the journalistic *Der entfesselte Globus* (2008), and the essayistic monograph *Kampfabgabe* (2007, engl. *Confluences*).

Nach der Flucht, a collection of aphorisms that meditate on the aspects of involuntary migration, appeared first in 2017 with the S. Fischer Verlag. The aphorisms are split into two-groups of ninety-nine: the first, “Von den Verstörungen” (On Disturbance), is ticketed by ascending Roman numerals, the second, “Von den Erretungen” (On Deliverance), by descending Arabic numerals. With Ilija Trojanow’s generous permission, I have selected a handful of these for translation into English. I do this with the misgivings of any honest translator. Like lace, *Nach der Flucht* draws as much of its beauty from spaces between the aphorisms as from the minute stitches that went into each one. In excerpting this way I have necessarily altered its texture. I hope that readers in English nevertheless get a taste of some of the most moving images from Part I: a child hovering between shame and protective instinct for a parent ill equipped to confront school enrollment; an adult giddy at recovering her capacity to throw a party once more; the migrant figure negotiating between the unwieldy languages at war in his own head. In Part 2, I have tried to capture what I felt was an increasing level of self-possession in the voices. It struck me as essential to this text that it transcended lachrymose nostalgia to imbue those voices with an insistent agency.

Any translation is an unstable text, laying bare a series of contestable decisions. Perhaps most contestable in this case was my approach to “Der Geflüchtete.” A noun built from the past-participle of the verb “flüchten” (to flee), the word is widely understood to mean “refugee.” But another word in German, “Flüchtling,” would also map to the same translation, and I wanted to convey the connotation of the action—in this case, forced flight—whose completion serves as the very basis for how others might define an individual. “The one who has fled” felt clunky: and indeed, the translator Jon-Cho Polizzi suggested that perhaps I should steer clear of “one” when trying to carry these “feral noun varieties,” as he describes them, into English. At Jon’s suggestion, I moved to “those who (have) fled” where the statement seemed general. Where the term seemed attached to a specific individual, I used the perfect participial construction “having fled” placed before the subject. I likewise vacillated with the translation of “Heimat” —a term with

connotations both violent and elegiac. In one instance, I did not feel the translation would lose much if I drained it to the relatively innocuous “home.” In another, more metaphorical instance, I chose to translate it as “homeland.” Finally, where the word itself was the object of discussion, I preserved the German. For their thoughts on these, and other dilemmas, I wish to thank Ilija Trojanow, Prof. Deniz Göktürk, Elizabeth Sun and Jon Cho-Polizzi, as well as the participants in Prof. Robert Alter’s translation workshop.

On a personal level, this work came to take on special significance for me. Both countries in which I have enjoyed a privileged life—the United States and India—are marching their way into violent theocracy. These developments have left me ashamed, and at times—despite the luxuries conferred upon me by my citizenship—feeling adrift. In the process of translation, *Nach der Flucht* thus became to me something of a poetic compass.

“After Flight”

To my parents, who endowed me with flight.

Note

This text was inspired by the cycle “The Migration Series” by the artist Jacob Lawrence.

To Begin

The refugee is often an object.

A problem to be solved. A number. An expense. A full stop. Never a comma. Since the refugee cannot be willed away, they must remain a thing.

There is life after flight. Yet flight continues to exert its hold lifelong, irrespective of individual qualities, of guilt, conscience, intention, longing.

Those who have fled are their own category of human.

Part I

(On Disturbance)

I.

Flight justifies itself, life thereafter continues to raise new questions.

II.

There is nothing fleeting about flight. It engulfs life and never again sets it free.

III.

Having fled, he is always introduced as someone who once came from elsewhere, who entered the inn on a winter’s night, uninvited. A ward served a plate of soup, as would befit him. No matter how many years have passed since his flight, locals mark him as one with whom they lack some essential commonality. Even the shortest biography makes space for his hyphenated identity. Could it be because he still counts in his mother tongue, he wonders?

V.

First day of school. He can manage a few scraps of words, his mother can manage a few scraps of words. Together they stand in front of the principal's door. They are late. *Class 1b*, says the principal, *on the second floor*. She points upwards. A wide staircase. As they turn into the hallway, a door is slammed shut. The mother knocks on the door. *Come in!* A room full of children his age. He starts to feel shame. His mother's speech is broken. He himself can do no better.

No, no, no, the teacher fends them off with both hands, *I already have four Turks in my class*. And she shoos away mother and son. The staircase has more steps on the way down. He knows what will happen. They will have to go to the principal again. He feels even more shame. The principal rises. She marches through the hallway, up the steps, down the length of the upstairs hallway, to the classroom door. She pulls the door open and says something brief. He sits down in the last row. Because he understands little, he looks around furtively. Who, then, are the four Turkish kids?

XII.

His name renders him conspicuous. Because others think they can make sense of him through his name. In foreign lands, some who have fled may trim their names of a few consonants. Arrival requires that he come up with an easy way to pronounce his name. Or resign himself to a different pronunciation. To get used to it, so as not to lose it altogether. Until one day, the original pronunciation sounds strange to him. Wrong, almost. Not everyone buys it when he claims: the pronunciation doesn't matter to me. Some say the name correctly, but it is a different name. Rarely is he asked: What does your name mean? Or: Why were you given that name? That would open a conversation. Instead, friendly silence after the greeting.

XIV.

All those who have fled arrive in their own way. Some on the morning after the flight, others in that moment when their naturalization papers are handed over to them. Some arrive over and over again, others never do. For his mother, arrival comes on the day she is able to play hostess again. The evening she can receive and entertain for the first time in the new country. And not others who have fled, those who exchange stories like cigarettes, but rather locals, whom she has come to know without intention and free of motive. She can hardly bring herself to invite them, she scrapes together the money for a meal that meets the most modest of expectations. She gives herself over to the occasion. She is fully present. For a few happy moments she forgets the grammatical errors that slip through her painstaking banter. She serves up her arrival with a dazzling smile.

XXIV.

Putting down roots is not always an effective remedy for loneliness.

XXIX.

At times he is stalked by the sense that his childhood is trapped in his mother tongue, and that he must translate from childhood into a foreign language. Without a dictionary. He watches himself under a bell jar, on a swing. It snows, the flakes melt on his hands. In

another language it seems to him that this is no longer his childhood, but a masquerade of silent ancestors.

XXX.

On other days it feels as though the languages, unable to march side-by-side on equal footing, are at war with each other in his head. They stick out their elbows, pushing and shoving, babbling some turn of phrase at him, as a pitying storeowner might press one with life-saving provisions. With its massive body, each tries to push the other language into the shadows. If only he could assure them that they were all simultaneously entitled to speak forth from him. Alas, he cannot: The command of one language implies the neglect of another. One of his languages is perennially a shadow of itself.

XCVIII.

There are those who have fled who feel no homesickness. *Our home is where we find work and bread.* They are the pragmatic ones, who have reduced their lives to the essential. The only question remains: does this mean they are more welcome? That they find work and bread more easily? Everything else would then be fine: the right to a pension, life insurance—everything else would follow on its own.

XCIX.

Homeland is that which refuses to die. An illusion that never disappears, even when you have stopped believing in it.

Part Two

(On Deliverance)

97.

Motion, in itself, is neither good nor bad. It is a state of matter. It is not easy for those who have fled to remain still. Even when held in place.

96.

Once in motion, stillness seems to him an imposition, a hazard, an unreasonable demand. A state of irrevocable decisions, of being walled-in. He has nothing against walls, so long as they are soft as wax.

95.

The sight of those fleeing disquiets those who are settled. People in flight haul their possessions in a suitcase, a backpack, a plastic bag, a pushcart. All their worldly belongings, as they say in the vernacular. It is not *all* their worldly belongings, but instead a peculiar farce, valuables reduced to a single unit that can be carried on one's back. Everything with which those who are settled surround themselves, that for which they toil, gone, all at once and forever. The image of a refugee's journey reveals the excess of these excesses.

93.

But the truth of the day is not the truth of the night. Flight can be an act of resistance. Of self-empowerment. An awakening. The refugee can have agency, be an activist, a rebel; someone who has wrested his life, and that of those dear to him, from the jaws of fate. The classification as innocent or victim defangs the story.

89.

Since the state is supposedly the highest expression of civilization, one is tempted to suspect that the refugee—who, by his very existence, seems to question his Highness the State—is a barbarian. It takes an eternity to dispel this suspicion.

84. Having fled, he is compelled to translation. He translates not only between the language of origin and that of arrival, between the dialects of childhood and the present—those are relatively easy tasks. He must also smuggle the essential from motion into stillness, carrying it back and forth between sweet and savory. Most of the time it happens in fits and starts. He cannot escape this task, there is no suitable intermediary between these poles.

35.

Accent is the handwriting of the tongue. Imagine if we were all to speak like newscasters. Like bearers of bad news. The accent draws beauty marks on the skin of language.

20.

Near a metropolis in a rainforest, the Rio Negro and the Rio Solimões flow together. So claims the map. The truth is that these waters refuse to coalesce, the two rivers instead repelling one another. A sharply drawn line divides them. The pH of the Rio Negro is 4.5, that of the Rio Solimões, 7.6; the temperature of the Rio Negro measures 28 degrees Celsius, that of the Rio Solimões, 22; the Rio Negro brings with it a cargo of mud and silt. The Rio Negro flows at an average velocity of 1.5 kilometers an hour; at 4 kilometers an hour, the Solimões is far more speedily underway. It would seem that nothing could join the two; *and never the twain shall meet*. Yet, twenty kilometers downstream, any visible sign of erstwhile sovereignty has been extinguished. The waters are now one, a new river has emerged, with its own pH-value, temperature and speed, carrying with it both mud and sand. Henceforth it is the Amazon.

2. *Heimat* exists only in the plural, yet is used in the singular in speech.

1. Only once detached from the confines of origin and the impositions of arrival, are those who have fled truly free.