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FROM OLASZLISZKA

SZILÁRD BORBÉLY

FOREIGNER    Everything here is pure mud. Even the wheels  
of my car got stuck in the  
rutted dirt road. The water and the land are eternal.  
There is no history of anything in the mud —  
through it came the Sarmatians, the Huns,  
*the Avars, Tatars, Turks, and the Soviets.*  
Since time immemorial, we have tread in each other's  
footsteps.

I strolled a bit along the riverbank.  
I should have brought my rubber boots,  
I think. I don't even know anymore  
what I'm looking for here in this desolate place,  
where everything is so deserted,  
the houses and the streets are so solitary,  
even the meadow is so bare, and the forests,  
chopped down carelessly, leaving nothing above waist  
height,  
denuded, the trees debased . . . Who can understand this?  
The faces are bleak, comprised only of wrinkles,  
hopelessness concealed in the creases,  
and residing everywhere is motionless  
contempt. For them, the foreigner  
does not exist. This is a great danger:  
for they expect and hope for

nothing.—Who was able to take their last treasure from them? How could this have happened?

CHORUS

Hope is what keeps everyone alive,  
so there will be a meaning to the morning,  
to the day, and thus evening too  
shall not arrive in vain. But if sleep does not bring peace  
to the body, if there is nothing  
to grant desire  
to the day that follows,  
what shall a person do?  
If festive days are mixed  
with work, the year's rhythm  
shall be uplifted. But if not,  
man shall be unpolished, he will be savage,  
rough in his speech, illiterate, lacking in desire,  
like a vineyard whose master has died—  
the ground overrun by weeds.

VILLAGER

Where are you from? Who are you looking for?

FOREIGNER

No one. I've come as a tourist,  
I got a bit lost, and I took a side road.

VILLAGER

You a foreigner or what, that you don't know this place?

FOREIGNER

I wanted to find the *ohel*,  
and I strayed onto a muddy road by the riverbank . . .

VILLAGER

What are you looking for? Ain't nothing like that here . . .

FOREIGNER

I was looking for the grave of a tzaddik, a wise man . . .

VILLAGER

Now I get it. And his nose isn't even that big.—

They usually come in the summer, not this time of year.

FOREIGNER

I know that the fourteenth day of the month of Av  
is his commemoration day. I came for that.

VILLAGER

Them like these only cause trouble,  
they just come here and then they stop again,  
Leaving no money for us.  
Why do we watch them, as these penguins  
go waddling up the hill,  
with their funny hats, their strange bowing and scraping,  
their fringes hanging out, they wear those straps,

and they bow down to a piece of wall!  
Why do we watch their swaying beards,  
their questions, which they carry back,  
they come from even beyond the Pacific Ocean,  
in order to see the graves. What fools.  
Who cares about the grandfather's ear flaps?  
We don't need their questions, which they  
themselves can't even stir.  
What do they want here from these few battered stones,  
their engraved letters chiseled by the frost . . .  
There once was a people here who could not forget—  
But why should we care that the evening mist  
above the river is painful for them,  
the scent of grapes and the earth is painful for them,  
for only here is the plum so blue—and it hurts them  
to love the walnut tree's sharp scent, to love  
how moths are *frightened away by the tobacco leaves*  
hidden in the eiderdown: Who cares?  
They don't live here anymore, let them get lost already!

FOREIGNER It is a mitzvah to remember our dead . . .

VILLAGER Speak so I can understand, buddy,  
this country is ours now.

FOREIGNER It is the sign of grace and pleasing to God,  
if we remember our dead . . .

VILLAGER Who cares about your old piss-soaked  
great-grandfather  
or his withered old bed-crones. My father never told me  
anything about them.

FOREIGNER Memory is the greatest treasure of a people.

VILLAGER Let the state remember the past. That's why we pay  
all those cock-sucking politicians. So that instead of  
stealing by night,  
they can steal by day, all they do is lie and steal.

FOREIGNER You know, that memory  
is a duty. To speak to your children  
again and again, to tell them who were

your ancestors, what their fate concealed,  
what caused them joy, and what were their character flaws,  
because the past is knocking at the door.  
And at one point there shall arise, in the memory  
of a grandchild, an old mistake,  
committed by somebody who was  
one of the ancestors. And should this occur unconsciously,  
there is no protection. But if one knows,  
then the mistakes might be avoided. Forgetfulness  
of the family's past becomes the hand of fate  
striking down: it grabs and shakes a person.  
And by then it's too late, because the past  
lives in secrets; along hidden paths  
it comes from memory into a body of today—  
and that leads to death.

Translated from the Hungarian  
by Otilie Mulzet