

THE FLAX COMES INTO FLOWER

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with photos by Régine Ganzevoort

The flax comes into flower,
sky-blue in the morning cold.
The May lights the land,
beckoning all who did the weeding.

Earlier, not today or tomorrow,
weeding women crept across the field
a basket to hand for tares.
Just picking away, flattening weeds
as if squeezing fleas dead
among the thistles.

So I recall it
in the lost age
of an old flax worker
among sprinklers and sprayers.

So I let a Flemish wheel turn
in an old scutching shed
full of rust-red implements,
I kick off the days
with hands and feet

So as in a trice of eternity
to return to the hard times
when the May was planted here,
the harvest celebrated
at the time of the pulling.

So I turn time back,
set my memory going.
They're already singing, the
buxom wenches of Meetjesland.
Those girls sing till it rings
so as not to lose their youth.

We join in, join in together
down in the open field
ruttish from the midday sun
that beats down on us
like late lightning.

And then see, see from afar
how in waves of liquid light
the flax lies drying.
How quickly your hands then itch
with impatience to grasp it,
to set it erect

Out to the horizon
like a procession
of young maidens
expectant for the wedding night.

And for a while you once more breathe in
a scent of summer dissolution,
the stench of a seething womb
after the retting in the Leye
when work gets going:

You catch hold of a golden tress
and then one more, and so much more
and then before you realise
flax-fever has caught hold of you.

The return wheel
the deseeding hammer
the breaking rollers
now take hold of you.
You sweat out poisons
but your dreams are no illusion:

So as usual she presses the crumbling loaf
against her milky breasts,
a knife in her right hand
that knows how to flay rabbits
or to iron linen
that's part of us like a birthmark.

Not in a bed that creaks like a haycart
but in stocks you creep away,
overheated, completely inside out.
There the light unloads nets of shadows
as in the kneeling box of a confessional.

But you have no sins to confess.
Your life was a battle of attrition
in the service of flax.
The land could still breathe freely
like she did then, as she sometimes
smelt of apples between the sheets.

Not now, today or tomorrow
will I stop my Flemish wheel.
Then I enter the flax-field
with a child of this age.

Industry has gained terrain.
A strange nature comes into view,
a monster of no worth
only good to milk
from time to time
like a mock-sweet cow.

That's how I see it now:
an old flax worker
preparing his farewell
and would say more, hand in hand
and time after time with a great grandchild:

'Just look there at that stock,
just like a stuffed she-ape!
As thin as a thread she'll one day be
transformed into a band of flax...

You'll no longer recognise it then
in a sheet of paper
or a snow-white linen sheet.
Flax, lad, is older than Christ.'

With a bundle of flax-straws as amulet,
the May in me against illness
and the chirping of a blackbird
that punches a hole in the light

With the pen as tally-stick
for an old debt
and in dialogue
with the black custody
of characters in a script

I count out how long we still
shall eat humble pie
in the drying-kiln
of mother nature

As if I heard say
with hands and teeth
that she sweats out secrets
that no God's acre will give away –

For the sea's showing red.
Fish are changing sex.
The one who hunts in a threatened
rainforest for the slender lori

Comes back equally deceived
as the one who runs
deep down onto coral reefs
and finds more debris there
than plant life.

Choose then on this free-trade globe,
merry-go-round with no mill-brake,
a lawn without flea-bugs
as your footpath.

Pull furrows in your memory
and run along the ridges
on the broad back of time –

So sparks will leap off the words,
signals that show their hand.
They have already been refined and
spun into a thread of life.

You draw them with your hand
as if drawing with open soil
a lifeline
to the centre
of a flax-field.

A handful of fingers is what
you need to scatter the seed.
As of old, when the land
here was vigorous and throve.

Refrains keep on sounding
but with deep undertones,
the losing of a bass
more black than flax
can ever rot or rot –

For our planet gasps for breath.
It glows on among the industries,
waits till the icewater melts
to send us off to the moon.

So choose for your old age
a heavenly body
freed of userers
and acid rain
in the flowering-month.

Roll time off like a ribbon of flax
before the earth
becomes a vending machine
for consumption

As if you still were a step ahead
as long as the flax comes into flower
in a trice of eternity –