

Excerpts from



Sister Prometheus

Discovering Marie Curie

Douglas
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Smith

WOLSAK AND WYNN



BIRTHDAYS

Mama abstained from the cherry wine on my sixth birthday & sipped *koumiss*, fermented mare's milk, the sour Tatar "cure." But her coughing could not stop, not that day, nor after long months absent, drinking ice-water in the Austrian Alps. She passed winters in the useless sun – Nice, Monaco, back to Nice. A final year of gasping, exile in the quaint air of Salzbrunn, one last summer in the needle-forest of Gdynska before her return to the damp dust of Warsaw. I turned ten the day she summoned us to her bedside. We kneeled, & she made a sign of the cross above our heads. She could not speak. She dropped her hand. The next night she was dead.

OBSERVATIONS, I

And so they both had vanished, sister & mother. Vanished from inside the clothing of their names, as if they had deserved to vanish; as if they had been expecting to vanish all along & had been in touch with whatever was making them vanish & loved it more than they loved those who said their names to try to stop them from vanishing, & kept on saying the names even after they were gone. So that the irretrievable became their names – *Mama, Zosnia*.... When Papa pronounced them, in remembrance, they were pronounced with a solemn grimace, as if the names were the prayer itself, a singular chorus intended to retrieve *wife, mother, daughter* from the realm of their abstraction, to return them to their bodies, if only to give them back the feebleness of their hands.

“EVENING, AFTER SCHOOL, 1886

A single Polish phrase, whispered in a hallway between classes – by student or teacher – & overheard by the Director, this could be your death-sentence, & your family’s death-sentence. So, crossing the apartment’s threshold every evening was crossing a border from the country of No to the country of Yes. One evening I was broken with fatigue (it had been the final day of the final year’s oral examinations, in Russian) & I forgot which language belonged where. During dinner, in some sentence going astray, I said “in the first time.” Papa put his fork down. I put down mine as well, waiting for the spring in his tongue to uncoil. I searched the table-cloth for camouflage. “Maria, ‘in the first time’ is a Russianism which violates the purity of our language. To finely-tuned ears it sounds like the groan of a sick cat. Please, do not make this mistake again. In Polish, it is ‘*for* the first time.’ We must keep our language polished, like a gem.” Words were the nation’s diamonds. They sparkled & cut, compressed in the darkness of Polish history. We spoke them in secret, like spies, waiting for the moment when a syllable would no longer be treacherous, a tongue no longer lethal.

HOTEL OF THE GRAY ROCKS, PORT-BLANC, SUMMER 1897

That village was like a mute factory producing: wind – wind that by day swung down from vast plateaux & cut across the sand, agate & silvered, defacing orange rock-cliffs as it rose from green waves transparent & nearly too far below to be heard; wind by night that squirreled low among the cluster of stone houses & the chapel where the skull of St. Gildas covered in a strongbox like a dull jewel. I was eight months pregnant, but we would often pedal to Brest. Large & awkward, no longer Pierre's *enfanticule*, but carrying one. Once, we had set out in the heat, & had rested in a green gorge with a stream banked with buttercups. Just outside Brest, four young horses pulling carts were so frightened of our bicycles that we were forced to tramp across a ploughed field. The ruts were deep, the muck thick, weighing down our shoes & clogging our wheels. I felt the child churn as we reached the moor above the town, & I was sure she was going to announce herself there, in the light of a huge, yellow moon that had risen suddenly. I pulled up my undershirt, & I shone like a magic cone. We both put our hands there, soft, & felt a supple, almost insubstantial turning. We heard an apple fall, a brusque thud somewhere in the orchard darkness. Pierre joked it must be the ghost of Newton. It was one of our last moments alone, as only two, our shadows in the moonlight taking on the quality of darkness as if being carried gently inside a mouth.

PIERRE, III

Before they closed the coffin so they could slide it into the ground, I had to give you one last, horrible kiss on the head, the head you used to offer me, eyes always closed, (as they are now, because the moment won't dissipate. Therefore, the hair on your temple & the hair on your beard is still graying). And though the wound was wrapped, on the right side bone jutted out, vivid, still wet & blood-caked. I covered the gauze with flowers & the little photo of me; "petite etudiante bien sage," I could hear you whisper. They packed you in the ditch. Flowers bundled in strewn piles. I put my hand against the coffin & a cold calm – some accumulation of molecules condensing inside ? – rushed out & washed over me. Disparate end of everything.

IN THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE

I always liked to keep a little vial of Radium salts by the bed. It shone in the darkness & I could write legibly if woken in the night by an idea. Even now, if you consult my three black notebooks in the Bibliothèque Nationale, you sign a certificate that you do so at your own risk. People will be signing certificates for at least one thousand six hundred & twenty years, until the evidence of my fingers begins to fade, but only by half from the same pages you can touch with your own.

About the author

Douglas Burnet Smith divides his time between Paris, France and teaching at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. Smith has served as President of the League of Canadian Poets and as Chair of the Public Lending Right Commission. His poetry has received nominations for multiple awards, including the Governor General Award and the Atlantic Poetry Prize. *Sister Prometheus* is Smith's twelfth book of poetry.