

KYOKO UCHIDA

And Love

Isn't it exactly like a language
learned together, the grammar of which
we studiously rehearse, puzzling out rules
and exceptions, singular, plural

first- and second-person pronouns, irregular
conjugations, possessives, the verb
to be always past perfect, the future
conditional, until we know by heart

what we say in unaccustomed accents still
of childhood: I am __. You are __. We will __.
Subject, object, complement. Remember
the very first time we understood, were

understood; the first time we made out
a compound sentence, a dependent clause, sought
declaratives. Run up a flag to claim this
new territory, a wedding dress

the color of surrender, for we give our-
selves up to a fortress of hard-
won dialogue, happily ever after.
Until one of us corrects the other's

grammar or an imperative goes awry,
unearthing ancient vocabulary
corroded with accusation that,
once spoken, cannot be taken back.

And now, in Amichai's bilingual
edition, one half is nearly illegible,
heavy ink forbidding, letters square as
darkened windows, shuttered against the last

of the rains, or bricks of Jerusalem stone.
I recognize only a few, the ones
most familiar, an alphabet worn
smooth with usage, known to us alone.

Quarantine

I hug my father for the requisite
seven seconds, per the TV ad I saw
my last visit: a foreign concept
in a country where we do not touch, once
we're old enough to bathe alone—or move
to Houston, where we shower alone, no

having one's back scrubbed and rinsed before
being lifted into the deep soaking tub,
sitting toe to wrinkly toe in too-hot
water up to our scoured necks. A touch
not to be felt again until the old
grow frail enough to need to be bathed. Now

a national seven-second hug campaign.
Nota bene: In the dream I hugged
him: an unthinkable forward gesture

though last year he patted my shoulder as
I bowed goodbye, the unfamiliar
weight of his hollowed hand folding me down,
as close to a hug as we'll ever come
to in the waking world, what's left of our
indebted days, our lexicon of slant

rhymes, moth-eaten silences. Now under
lockdown each in our cities as always
six thousand miles apart, mouthing *Take care*,
what little has changed between us but this:
We may never touch again—even if
we sought to: no more bird-bone Morse code

tapped out on my shoulderblade, no prospect
of testing the bath water so as not
to scald their skin blue as unsent airmail.

Detour

How do we begin to measure distance in
eyelashes, milk-teeth, a sudden fevered song?
We do not consider their small bodies
between us or imagine units of separation;
the geography we share is more singular than this.
For every detail you chart of night feeding or
a birthday nearly missed, every confession of
failure makes you untouchable,
takes us farther away from any destination.
There is no map for this, no itinerary, only
a state highway, slow and circular,
home. The only exit to watch for is yours.

For now we are safe in our understanding:
You do not say their precious names, as if
to keep them unrecognizable, yours.
You need not worry. What keeps us
here with only words between us is as
ordinary as the task of bathing the children,
the colors you'd like to see on your wife,
how she falls asleep with her glasses on,
waiting with the lights on in every room.

Winter

November

The maples all at once are aflame.
It comes later than usual this year, as if anything
were usual. Above the leaden slab of the East River,
helicopters spin in ever-deafening circles.

The scaffolding on the building next door goes up
overnight, the grime-streaked light in my window
caged in blue steel diagonals: X upon X upon X.
All night the clicking of their metal joints
warns of what's to come.
The gutting of the interior has been going on
for months. We should've known.

Don't be fooled by the developer's pastel rendering
of that gauzy future scrubbed clean of the past
tenants' coughs, cigarettes, dead skin and asbestos
we slough off and breathe in again daily
on our way to the subway, passing one another
wrapped in woolen assurances worn thin and pilly
in various shades of black.

Now the holidays are *upon us*, as they say,
like a wet blanket or a winding sheet.
Best to go about with eyes permanently hooded,
detour around the right angles spray-painted
on walls and mailboxes, rumors of fistfights
at the corner coffee shop, the woman on
the 4 train weeping into her headscarf.

If the sidewalk grows narrow again,
pretend not to notice. Don't look up
at the shrouded construction platform
blotting out the corrugated sky bleaching in,
no shelter from our own toxic failings.
Keep walking.
There is nowhere else to go.

December

You believe this is the end of something,
gathering in the hastening arc
of the year; it's only the beginning.

You pretend not to know what's coming,
as if these flags and marches aren't deadly stark;
no, this is not the end of something

that comes around again, like Earth revolving.
Unearthed is what you'd thought long buried. Sparked
by bitter years, it's only the beginning

of harvests unsought; no blinking
lights or silver bells will soften the blow. Hark,
the angels we've seen the end of. Something

wicked this way comes, only it's always been
there, waiting for this moment we've embarked
upon. Perhaps there's a beginning

and end to everything, even sinking
to the depths of history's shark-
infested waters; believe this is the end of something
we'd been warned of from the beginning.