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Guernica

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Morgan Finn

GUERNICA

Picasso furiously painted his huge black, white and gray mural in six weeks for the 1937 World's Fair after Hitler's Luftwaffe destroyed the tiny defenseless Basque hamlet on a packed market day as a bombing experiment. Mostly women, children, the elderly, even animals in the field were shot down as they fled.

I. WOMAN WITH THE LANTERN

Never again will I lean from my window
and believe an orderly mind
can hold back sorrow. Instead,
I will live out my days wearing weeds.
Assemblymen who swore beneath our ancient oak tree
to protect us, lay scattered in pieces
...clergy blood colors the soil;
Ah, Miguel, our Archangel, avenge us!
If Napoleon, if even the Moors
could not break us, neither will Franco.

What's done is done, *mis caros*.
For now, weep and curse fate.
Then pull the edges together.
To endure, pretend a little, nod vaguely.
If I could, I would gather you to me,
reminding you as my own children
that we must go on. Always there are angels
and other lanterns. Haven't you heard
how, mid-durge, the *Gernikako Arbola*,
our sacred oak, has not fallen?

II. THE DESPAIRING WOMAN

Has anyone seen my little Cecelia—
her footsteps full of
hesitation—not tripping over rubble,
but grabbing the air as if
she might? Because of her illness,
whose name moves over my tongue like bad milk,
we honored her Saint's Day early.

Even on this street of corpses,
I could spot her pale hands—
tapered as fish at market—
fingers coming to life
as she makes bread,
their clumsiness hidden in dough—
her short vision making our courtyard
seem to her more than gray buildings
held together by clothesline and rumor.
For Cecelia, the giving dough is enough,
and the embrace of clean sheets—
though who knows for certain
what she kneads and gathers in.

Blessed Mother, since her birth
my brow has crinkled from praying
to Santa Lucia, the virgin, to Santa Bernardina.
Please do not let this be their reply: Cecelia
snatched from me, no bread
for our table, laundry fluttering
until morning...

III. THE SPEARED HORSE

Our hooves clattered a warning on cobblestones,
but your crass music blocked us out.
Listen.
Must martyred saints scratch

at your doors? Or do you think
my bowed back could carry you
to safety?

From the stable I felt
death straining and refused
to come out. Beatings from drunk masters
are better than bowels rotting in the arena,
or being herded to market. It is never
prudent to sleep lying down.

The earth waits, the earth wishes
to swallow our shrieks,
but this is not the first time
we've been brought to our knees,
tongues protesting...

IV. THE VICTIM OF FLAMES

Even now, Mama, you draw
your shawl around many sorrows,
yet turn away from me.
Years I tried to make up for what my presence
does to you. I've knelt
for *your* absolution
before Holy Communion,
but the slash of your mouth only tightened,
causing me to run by your clock after marriage,
my words out of sequence when my husband
tried to unbraid my hair, mine the last lamp
burning in the courtyard hours after
Javier stopped calling me to bed—
so that mornings he would wander outside to test
oak trees for warp as I spewed from the window:
“Can your fine ships keep our skies from exploding?”
as he stomped off to butt planks, and I
kept scrubbing even that high window

V. THE DISMEMBERED WARRIOR

Only then could I focus
on matador dreams
of how to stop German bombs.
Long before I raised
the Basque sword against fascists,
these shoulders bore my parents,
Jacinta,
her family;
perhaps I would have made a good priest
if my first vision of Jacinta
had not cut with such a hot edge

through my prayers. Yes, even at our wedding,
I saw her petals start falling.

El Toro, with the vigilant eyes—
when my Jacinta beats out her grief
on your vast shoulders, please tell her about
the flower blooming from my broken sword.

VI. THE LAMENTING MOTHER

When my daughter greeted me crying,
I refused food—until my milk ebbed.
Nothing tempted, not even those big purple grapes
I craved while pregnant—back when I still
slept and sang, Manuel's hand on my belly.

Mother of God, what is wrong with me?
None of my sisters swore at their infants
when they whined away nights, but I fermented,
shaking my baby the way a dog shakes rabbits,
spewing taunts like in the gypsy *soledades*:

Your father bounces you on his knee.

Tell me the last time he held me.

Hungry again, my bawling daughter?

Here, let my fists feed you,

let them turn you the purple of grapes.

When the bells of Santa Maria chimed,
followed by guttural sounds,
I thought anything louder than
what shrieks inside me must be a sign.
Bravo, the pigeons are migrating early! I cried,
praying that our men would return
from the Bilbao front to snare them
with a net. Except rubble and flame rained
down. Releasing a tiny sigh, my child went limp
as a pigeon at market. I implored El Toro for mercy,
but He turned away from me

as a sky full of roaring falcons swooped
down—until it was all the same to me:
pigeons and falcons, dogs and torn rabbits,
bombers and the sad-eyed Mother of God;
who can escape the net, the net?

VII. THE SURVIVING BULL

Stiff your Oles! and roses,
your pious candles. Look around you,
instead! Basque shrieks have split
the air, leaving behind only corpses, which I
have presented to you as children. Yet
you continue to gawk as if expecting
a curtain to fall, their remains
to jump up for one last curtsy or bow.
Do you imagine I lost sleep
to turn their despair into art just for your
entertainment?

Stop smacking your lips
in mock sorrow, secretly glad it's not you.
Shame for slinking around like mongrels,
poking here and there with insatiable fingers,
coaxing my hide to expose old wounds,
any patch of thin skin where the sword
can enter. God knows how long
I have glared across these tablelands,
backed against the Bay of Biscay,
without glancing behind me—except for
an occasional bellow over my shoulder
where some damn fool bird
keeps singing its heart out.