

MARJORIE STELMACH
The Divestments of Autumn

i. As above, so below

We must love life before loving its meaning.

—Fyodor Dostoevsky

Late twilight, early autumn.
High, distressing winds in the cottonwoods and locusts.
Scores of the dying drift from the branches
to lodge in the understory.
As above, so below.

How did I learn
this discontent? Not from the cottonwoods and locusts,
calm as ever in their autumn losses. Nor from
the Rose of Sharon, bearing her crown
of the seasonal dead.

A barred owl dips
and crosses my vision in a ghost-gray hush
with death in its talons, its shadow-wings
staining the tangle of bushes
where mute birds huddle,

black and knotted
and smaller than their voices, smaller than their heartbeats.
An alchemist, Earth, tending transparencies—
banked fires, coiled waters—intent on
transfiguring light.

Humble down, I tell myself.

Love this.

ii. Twenty-nine Bones

*It's about the people, who have stopped believing,
because the cup of evil has run over.*

—Dmitri Shostakovich, speaking of his *Eleventh Symphony*
subtitled *1905*

It happened the year before he was born,
but he knew the story, how the Tsar's soldiers

had dragged a sled burdened with massacred children
through St. Petersburg's streets, children

who'd climbed the trees for a glimpse of the soldiers,
their uniforms and guns.

The soldiers—laughing—shot them.
The children, too, laughing, their corpses smiling.

Twenty-nine bones in a human face.
Smiling.



Nineteen-nineteen. *Petrograd* now. A prodigy
starving in a shattered city, his family, too, starving.

Dmitri plays nightly for the silent films. His job
asks nothing commensurate with his genius:

to sight-read a music scored in the huge
faces above him, faces of light encoded

with suffering—*noble* suffering, always for love.
Love in the lit bones of the faces.

Night after night, the theater packed,
the audience hopeless, starving.

Humble down, he tells himself. *Love this,
like everybody else.*

iii. A Language Incomprehensible

Chaos instead of Music

—headline in *Pravda*, January 1936

It opened to awe, to ovations, all of St. Petersburg
lauding his *Lady Macbeth of Minsk*

until Stalin himself attended, and the show closed
that night. Had he seen himself in the predatory Lady?

No surprise that night the NKVD arrived at Dmitri's door.
No surprise either that in a heartbeat the artist recanted.

But how to recant an opera? *I'd begun to speak,*
he confessed, *a language incomprehensible*

to the People. Witnesses claim he was pale,
he stuttered, again and again adjusted his glasses.

He bowed to the humbling for the sake
of the uncomprehending People. And soon, it was

Come home, Dmitri, all is forgiven.
Stalin

Soon he became a Soviet Hero for works exalting
the proletariat. Other works, secret, began filling the dark

of a locked desk drawer—death in the scoring,
terror in the strings, never performed.

iv. Atonement

Shame is the feeling that saves mankind.

—Andrei Tarkovsky, speaking of Shostokovich

In the glass: my face
with leaves falling through it—dusk’s familiar
cellophane self. In the darkening yard,
branches and small birds
emerge,

tangling my hair,
complicating my vision. By small shifts
of focus, I cast and erase my face
and its fleeting
components,

peeling the tissues
again from a wound on the verge
of healing. Soon I’ll abandon
this game, snap the light,
and disperse.

v. As above, so below: Reprise

Seek His face,
the Psalmist advises. Early winter has a face
lean as an oboe—bony brow, haggard gaze.
If God's face were to peel
from this sky,

peer down upon us
in our own image, it would be—nothing like this, but this
is the best I can say: *as if from an unsuspected
dimension curled inside a caesura,*
we could

just barely discern
the tones of a solo viola, rising from nowhere's ruins
bearing unbearable sweetness. Instead,
this cosmic drone, its chords intoned
ceaselessly,

becomes the caesura—
an absence suggesting Divine recantation—
a confession so terrible, so intimate,
it must not be heard: God's apology
(too late) for Time.

Seek His face.
But if God bent His brooding countenance even once
into our winter and lingered—a perfect continuity,
perfectly remote—would we see or somehow
know

in our marrow?
In the stirred hair of our napes? Taste a sweetness,
a leafiness, perhaps, or sense a chlorophyll-ing—
the skin's heightened affinity
for light?

vi. Humble down. Love this.

Full dark now.

Walking in the suburb's chill air, my eyes are drawn
to a woman's face cut by rectangular panes of glass,
a mosaic above a sink where
an aloe plant spikes

from one pane to another.

Shoulders unmoving, she gazes over her lawn, eyes lifted
from the work—hands immersed in filmy water,
stilled wrists broken at the waterline.
Or so I imagine.

An alchemist, Time—

stirring, stirring—as the Earth turns us into our dispersal.
The woman in the light won't see me pass.
She's watching, I imagine, the other side
of her face.

vii. Atonement: Reprise

I set my CD on continual replay. Each time it rises—
the great *dies irae* of the *Tenth* with its *ostinato*

buried beneath his elaborate scorings—
it lifts the hair at my nape: the same four notes

again and again, a Cyrillic encrypting of his name.
D E-flat C B. *D E-flat C B.*

Who first understood, when the broken
elegist rose, ghostly, from orchestral depths?

Who first deciphered the code, when the notes emerged
from his *ostinato*, spoke his name, and dispersed into hush?

Even decoded and long after everyone's death, it remains
an incomprehensible presence. A brutal re-wounding, plea

for forgiveness, act of feeble defiance? Again tonight
I try to summon some measure of healing

from the past's silent screen, but no code breaks through
history's flickering black and white. Nothing but *complicity*.

■

Who first
understood the divestments of autumn, saw
chlorophyll's crazed after-burn as *thirst*,
heard this lushest of all Earth's scores—
briefness, brittleness, ghost—

as *grief*?

How to recant an age? Early autumn:
the gorgeous sear of the air, but always beneath
the crescendo of beauty, the drone
of atonement.

Material concerning the life of Dmitri Shostakovich, including the direct quotations in part iii, was taken from Stephen Jackson's 1997 book, *Dmitri Shostakovich: An Essential Guide to His Life and Works*.