

VERSOPOLIS TWO

white without a hint
bjuda bla ħjiel

Leanne Ellul

dedicated to the memory of Zvezdan Reljić

translated from the Maltese by Albert Gatt

Versopolis at Ledbury Poetry Festival

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VERSOPOLIS
*is a unique, Europe-wide platform.
It gives emerging European poets
the chance to reach an audience beyond
the boundaries of the language they write in
by translating and publishing their poems
and inviting them to perform at festivals.*



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LEANNE ELLUL writes poetry and prose, and has published for both adults and children mainly in Maltese but also in English. She was named Best Emerging Author in the 2016 National Book Prize, and her works for children have garnered various awards. Ellul won first place in the national competition for theatre writing and the Novel for Youths Prize 2014 with *Gramma* that was also translated to English and published in Arabic. In 2023 she won the same prize for her forthcoming novel *be;n il-kmiem. L-Inventarju tal-Kamra l-Kaħla*, her first poetry collection, was published in 2020. Her second collection, *Bjuda*, was the culmination of an interdisciplinary project bringing together text, images and music, centered around the colour white. Ellul lectures in Maltese language, literature and creative writing. In 2024 Leanne was chosen as one of *adda's* spoken word poets. She has translated a number of books, especially children's books to Maltese. She is active in NGOs organising a number of festivals and open mics, namely Inizjamed and HELA Foundation. www.leanneellul.net

ALBERT GATT trained as a linguist and computer scientist. He has translated several works of poetry and prose, including *Last-Ditch Ecstasy* by Adrian Grima (Malta: Midsea Books and Mumbai: Paperwall Publishing, 2017), *In the Name of the Father* by Immanuel Mifsud (UK: Parthian, 2019), *Exodus of the Storks* by Walid Nabhan (UK: Peter Owen, 2022) and *The Lives and Deaths of K Penza* by Clare Azzopardi (UK: Praspas Press, 2022). Excerpts from his translation of the modernist classic *Nanna's Children in America* by Juann Mamo (1934) have appeared in the journal *Countertext*. The poems *On Pain* and *On Killing I & On Killing II*, translated from the original Maltese by Leanne Ellul, appeared in *Columbia Journal* in March, 2022. He currently works at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, and is affiliated with the University of Malta. His research focuses on the use of language in artificial (AI) and natural (that is, human) systems, and on the relationship between perceptual and symbolic data.



il-ġir jaqa' f'għajnejk
jew farka farka

1

ta' tliet snin tkun għadek tiftakar torqod fil-fil ta' bejn sidirha,
fit-tikmixiet ta' ġilditha, fit-tpaħpiħ ta' dirgħajha xxamplati,
f'żaqqa tiljiet xaħam sproporzjonat – tkun torqod fiha kif trid.

ta' tliet snin tkun trid ukoll tħares minn tarf sa tarf tal-kamra
mbajda sala la bidu la tmiem bl-irkejjen ta' ġewwa fuq barra.
imma l-iktar l-iktar tkun trid tħares lejn is-saqaf ħa tara l-istilel
enamel,
ħa jħeddluk, ħa toħlomhom, ħa tmur fihom, meta mhux jekk, jista'
jkun.

u meta taħseb li vera tkun trid tibqa' tħares, iddur fuqek ġisimha
kutra
shuna dix-xorta ta' mara-omm u tghidlek pronta, bħallikieku l-iktar
li jimporta x'għad jigr: tħarisx 'il fuq għax il-ġir jaqa' f'għajnejk.

2

imbagħad kif tisma' t-tħaxwixa tal-pakkett tal-krisps mill-kbar
ħerġin iqarmcu friski friski minn taħt imħadditha, taqa' farka –

bits of plaster in your eyes
or crumb by crumb

1

at three the memory's fresh of sleeping in the cleft of her breast,
the folds of her flesh, the flab of her arms at rest,
the lopsided lumps of bellyfat – so many ways you could fold
yourself asleep within her.

at three there is the urge as well to scan the room from end to end
take in this endless whitewashed hall, its corners inside out.
but what you want most of all is to stare at the ceiling at the
enamel stars,
let them lull you, slip into your dreams, let yourself go there, when
not if, maybe.

but when all you really want to do is stare and stare, she rolls over,
this mother-woman of sorts, her body a warm blanket and cautions,
as if all that matters
is what may come to pass: if you stare up you'll get bits of plaster in
your eyes.

2

but then you catch the crackle of a family-sized packet of crisps
and out they come, fresh from beneath her pillow, and down
floats a crumb –

kif tidhol f' did-dinja
jew il-kamra l-bajda

niftakarni nidhol f' did-dinja
kamra bla bibien u bla twieqi
bla kantunieri u bla crieki
bla xfar, bla rdum u bla lqugh

fil-kamra bil-kollox kulur wiehed
san-nifs li tigbed u n-nifs li trodd
sal-ponta tas-swaba' u s-swaba' ponot

jekk taghlaq ghajnejk tara haqa tnejn
meta timxi qisek qed timxi fuq ic-cpar tajjar
qisek qed timxi fl-arja u thossok qed ittir

xi darba se niftakarni nohrogni minn did-dinja –

how you come into the world
or the white room

I remember how I brought myself into this world
a room with no doors no windows
no loops or corners
no edge, no cliff or barrier

in the room all in one colour colouring all
down to each breath taken in and rendered back
down to the fingertips and the fingers, tips

close your eyes and you might see a thing or two
when you walk as if you're treading cotton mist
as if you're treading air and taking wing

some day I will remember taking myself out of this world –

l-atrofija tal-ġerħiet

jew sa ma nwegġa' ġewwa

kull ġerħa f'ġismi tajtha isem differenti
kull ġerħa ġrat xi darba u mhux ohra
u ovvja daqs dal-kliem qisu sentenzi skumnikati

u ġieli l-istess ġerħa m'għandha l-istess isem
bħall-asfissija li taħkimna kull flgħaxija
bħal dabra dejjem tikber fuq sieqna l-leminija
bħad-dellirju li jgħassarna maż-żerniq

jekk tibqa' tghidu l-kliem atrofikat af tiffurmah

kull ġerħa f'ġismi tajtha isem differenti
bħal dieħes għadu jgħawwar sa ma nwegġa' ġewwa

the atrophy of wounds

or until I feel the pain inside

every wound in my body I've named a different name
every wound happened once upon a time and not another
obvious as these excommunicated words disjointed sentences

even the same wound will have a different name sometimes
like the asphyxia that assails us every evening
that mottle on our right foot that keeps spreading
the frenzy that besets us with every sunrise

keep mouthing these atrophied words and you might give them
form

every wound in my body I've named a different name
like a suppuration festering until I feel the pain within

il-bottijiet tal-krema mmerrqa
jew minn għaxra tnaqqas tnejn

kien ipogġi għaxar bottijiet tal-krema mmerrqa skjerati qishom
suldati lesti jitqatlu għal xulxin, jixtiequ jkollhom xi jgħidu.

imbagħad, kien jiġi, u jistaqsi kemm jifdal jekk minn
għaxra tnaqqas tnejn. kienet, l-ewwel tgħidlu xiex.
kien jgħidilha li ċenteżmi, skont kemm jiswew
il-bottijiet tal-fażola u l-qlub tal-qaqoċċ.
jew laned.

kull bott kien ċenteżmu u jagħmel id-differenza kollha.

ħlief għaliha.
sitta u sebgħa jagħmlu baħħ.

in-numri saru ħrafa.
iċ-ċenteżmi qishom ċicri.
anke tnejn u xejn qishom l-istess.

- u dix-xitwa qed ticolna ġewwa barra
- u ebda bott jew landa mhuma se jsalvawna
- lanqas il-ballottri ċassi taċ-ċenteżmi

runny cream
or subtracting two from ten

he would line up ten tubs of runny cream in rows like soldiers
ready to battle unto death, itching for a fight.

and then he'd amble over, ask how many would be left if you
subtracted
two from ten. to which she, for starters, would answer what.
cents, he would say, depending on the price
of beans and artichoke hearts in cans.
or tins.

each can a cent and that made all the difference.

but not for her.
six and seven made a nought.

numbers turned to fables.
cents became like chickpeas.
even two and zero looked about the same.

- and winter's gnawing at us from the inside out
- and no can or tin will save us
- and nor will vapid weasels etched upon a cent

il-kulur tat-tfulija
jew ebda ordni alfabetika

tinsistu li l-isfar il-kulur tat-tfulija
il-kulur profetiku ta' u iva min jaf
u xi darba issa naraw forsi jista' jkun

l-ixkuma mhux magħquda u l-eroina pprojbita
(il-mekkanizmu tal-maskilità/meskinità tiegħek)

it-tajjar, il-melħ, il-formajka, il-ġizimin
ebda ordni alfabetika ħlief it-tfulija
tibda minnha u terġa' lura lejha

dan il-pellegrinaġġ lejn il-qofol
lejn il-qalba u x-xitwa u x-xita
niezla bħal borra tinfidkom bħas-silġ

the colour of childhood
or no alphabetical order

yellow you insist is the colour of childhood
the prophetic colour of oh well who knows
and we'll see sometime perhaps could be

the curd's uncurdled and the heroine's off limits
(the mechanics of your manliness/meanness)

cottonwool, salt, formica, jasmine
no alphabetical order save for childhood
where you begin and where you circle back

this pilgrimage towards the core
towards the heart towards winter and rain
falling like snow penetrating you like ice

l-istejjer tas-silġ

jew meta saqajna jhossu l-irtuba

1

l-ewwel darba li nitgħallmu fuqu
nitgħallmu biss dwar is-silġ blokkok
mhux borra, borriet, boror

2

terġa', nitgħallmu t-tieni darba
meta naqraw l-istejjer tas-silġ
tat-toroq infurrati bil-kešha fina u
l-attakki mnervżin tat-twejqiet imbexxqin

3

it-tielet darba ninżlu fis-silġ lewn
il-ħmieġ tal-qigħan taż-żraben
lewn it-trab jistrieħ bħal borra friska
u nitqarrqu meta wiċċna ma jidhirx

4

nitgħallmu l-iktar is-silġ meta
nimteddu fl-orizzont –

5

u qatt ma nitgħallmu s-silġ
daqskemm meta
nogħdsu fih

stories of ice

or unfirm ground

1

the first time we learn about it
we learn of ice in terms of blocks
not snow or snows or snowing

2

and then we learn a second time
when we read stories of ice
off streets gossamer-lined with cold and
jittery snipes from little half-open windows

3

the third time we descend into the ice
the colour of boot sole dirt
the colour of dust at rest like freshly fallen snow
and feel let down when our face cannot be seen

4

we learn most about ice when
we lie across the horizon –

5

and we never learn about ice
as much as we do when
we dive into it headlong

il-ġnien fix-xemx ta' Mejju
jew riħa mill-majjistral

1

darba omni għallmitni nikteb il-fjuri fil-plural
ħa nagħlaqhom bejn il-paġni ta' kliem tmiem
la m'hemmx ħajja tħuf fil-vini u l-għeruq
ilhom li telqu l-petali jfuħu mgħaffġin jispellu
sillabi skjerati u jarmu fwejjah modi oħra

2

il-ġilju traxxinat bit-thewdin ta' ġimġha oħra
il-manjolja mitwija fil-qarsa bejn il-bejn
l-orkidea tistira minn bejn it-tinjiet
it-tulipan jithajjar isir il-warda
il-ġizimina qed tni u ma ssibx tarf
il-gladioli u d-dalji f' dal-ħafna folji żarmati

3

dawn il-fjuri ta' omni li tgħallmet tkabbarhom
qabel kbirt jien u wara li kabbret lili
sabet ġnien qed jistejjer fix-xemx ta' Mejju

a garden in May sunshine
or a whiff of the northwest

1

my mother once taught me how to write flowers in the plural
to hold them closed between pages of word ends
since no more life roams in the veins and roots
they're long gone the petals pressed roaming spelling out
scattered syllables giving off other scents

2

the lilies are dragged through the worries of another week
the magnolia's folded in the pinch of in-between
the orchid stirs from the folds
the tulip would rather be a rose
the chrysanthemums are dried for years to come
the jasmine wilts and loses hope
the gladioli and the dahlias lie in this scatter of pages

3

these were my mother's flowers which she learned to grow
before I grew up and after she'd raised me
she found a garden blooming in the May sunshine

kif taqbad tfisser il-mewt
jew m'hemm ebda hajja ohra

jekk xi darba taqbad tfisser il-mewt, ghidli
inkun nistenniek tfissirli xi tkun il-waqfa zoptu,
is-sirda tifliġna bis-suspans jikolna minn ġewwa
sa ma difrejna jiddizintegraw fid-dħaħen opaki

nixtieq li wara l-mewt m'hemm ebda hajja ohra
m'hemmx mod ieħor kif jgħaddi dat-turment
magħdur imġebbed bis-siġħat artillerija fija

jekk xi darba taqbad tfisser il-mewt, ghidli
għaliex il-mewt tissejjaħ mewt u l-ħajja hajja
għaliex mhux il-mewt hajja u l-ħajja mewt
din l-arbitrarjetà tal-mewt u l-kelma mewt
– xejn ma jagħmel sens

nixtieq li wara l-mewt m'hemm ebda hajja ohra

lanqas l-ispazji bojod li jgħidu li jaraw u
d-dawl jgħammex sfukat ma jagħmlu sens –
din il-bjuda li naqsmu flimkien bla
ħjiel ta' hajja

to fathom death
or there is no other life

should you begin to fathom death someday, give me a shout
I'll be waiting for you to explain the sudden cease,
this nerveless chill whose suspense gnaws us from within
until our nails disintegrate and go up in opaque fumes

I hope that after death there is no other life
there is no other way for it to end, this sapping
inner torment prolonged in salvo after hourlong salvo

should you begin to fathom death someday, tell me
why we call death death and life life
why death cannot be life and life death
the arbitrariness of the words death and life
– it makes no sense at all

I hope that after death there is no other life

not even the expanse of white they say they see or
the blinding flash of light make any sense –
this white we share without a hint
of life

il-ġilda fina fetu

jew dakinhar li twelidt

ried jixtieq li kont tifel, dakinhar li twelidt;
ried jista' jaqbad iċcarrat kemm-il plasenta jsib
ha jpartat dat-twelid tad-demmm u l-ilma
ma' demm u ilma ieħor, ha jpartat dat-twelid
tal-ilma u d-demmm mal-abort tat-translucidità
jizloq fuq ġilda fina fetu u swaba' mutraba

dakinhar li twelidt seħet is-siġhat jitkarkru
f'biġja qisha sirena marradija, mhux ta' tifel
ta' tifla, mhux kif xtaqt u qatt ma stajt

meta d-dinja mbagħad falliet, imbagħad
twelidt jien – din – aqraha fl-ewwel persuna.

fine foetal skin

or the day I was born

he willed himself to wish I was a boy when I was born;
would have willed himself to rip every placenta in sight
exchange this blood-and-water afterbirth
for another blood, another water, exchange this afterbirth
of water and blood for an aborted translucidity
slick along fine foetal skin and fragile fingers

when I was born he cursed the endless hours strung
in one long ailing siren's wail, not a boy's wail
a girl's, the never wished-for and never could

when the world foundered, finally I
was born – this she – read that in the first person if you will.

nixtieq li wara l-mewt m'hemm ebda hajja ohra

lanqas l-ispazji bojod li jghidu li jaraw u
d-dawl jghammex sfukat ma jagħmlu sens –
din il-bjuda li naqsmu flimkien bla
hjiel ta' hajja



I hope that after death there is no other life

not even the expanse of white they say they see or
the blinding flash of light make any sense –
this white we share without a hint
of life