

ÁGNES LEHÓCZKY

BUDAPEST TO BABEL



egg box

Budapest to Babel

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BUDAPEST TO BABEL
by Ágnes Lehóczky

to Tessa Sowerby,
for her white, open house

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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CONTENTS

PART 1

babel cycle

babel 1 <i>'confoundation'</i>	7
babel 2 <i>late summer festivities</i>	8
babel 3 <i>three vignettes</i>	9
babel 4 <i>bbl</i>	10
babel 5 <i>balal's journey to and fro</i>	11
babel 6 <i>garden dialogues</i>	13
babel 7 <i>mother's bon voyage to an island</i>	14
babel 8 <i>la bibliotheca total</i>	15
babel 9 <i>hieronymus bosch's pessimism</i>	16
babel 10 <i>brueghel's optimism</i>	17
babel 11 <i>adieu to m.</i>	18
babel 12 <i>mother monologue</i>	19
babel 13 <i>that translucent green</i>	20
babel 14 <i>notes between Budapest and Babel</i>	21

PART 2i

isn't cycle

Cargo	33
Summer dialogues...	36
Cupla focal	38
Wrought iron girder railway bridge	40
isn't (i)	42
isn't (ii)	43
isn't (iii)	44
Further contemplations on 'is'	45
Ecology of the lichen	46
Map of dislocations	47
Zero milestone; St Paul's	49
November meals on wheels	51
En route	52
Photographs, undeveloped	53

CONTENTS

PART 2ii

Nárcisz

Nárcisz's telephone call...	59
Nárcisz at an exhibition...	60
Nárcisz's vocation in Rome	61
Nárcisz en route for memory	63
Nárcisz's breakfast letter	64
Nárcisz's writing tablets	66
'Che cos'è ...?'	68
Nárcisz and the Magician	69
The recollections of Nárcisz	72
The Shouting Girl	73

1

The HB pencil breaks into three pieces;
an aftermath of your disappointment...
I chose the wrong country you say,
your anger scattered around the room
like bones, dry and hollow collapses
on the carpet beside a red suitcase I found
in a fast running stream in an early spring.

babel cycle

babel 1

'confoundation'

i.

this supper's geography is malformed now look
what you sprinkled on the top avalanches to the bottom
icebergs fissured they say our foundation
breaks down to its ingredients when a plate ruptures

ii.

the drummer dropped one of his sticks twice during the performance
the others watched him pick it up from the floor waiting
an ebony double bass carried another musician on stage
on its strings a marionette to perform cacophony non stop
two saxophones inflated the lungs of the saxophonists with the kiss
of devotion at which point you and i felt the need to applaud yet our
palms could never converge could never touch, out of approval
holding on to their cocktails the audience reversed out printing
laudative silence on the rim of their glasses

iii.

the encounter with her was more than peculiar and i did not know
it was the queen they said that woke me up around four at dawn in may
i was hesitant to shroud her with a wine glass although the plan was
elaborate; the festival programme slid underneath
i suppose it was the intimacy with this agitated body yes although
i knew there was the paper to divide us

babel 2

late summer festivities; a ballad about the mason's wife

to get to the turret we climb up the spiral staircase
that echoes our disintegrating words and laughter
you drag me onto the timber boards with one hand
with the other drawing over the cadaverous skyline
the flesh-coloured tower crafted from baked bricks scaffolds

picture a tower composed of the calcium of bones
masons insisting this way it would never collapse
blending the corpse of the wife with mud-baked bricks
and look, for the seventh day they erected the bastion
– I stamp my feet to prove how safe it is

this isn't that tower, you claim, to close the subject
your embrace from behind I actually do not like
my fist in your grip pointing at the hanging gardens,
your words about our ziggurat, a bed of mortar
built and dismantled, dismantled and built overnight

babel 3

three vignettes

(caught at high tide)

no-one slept, the baby woke the house around two
his teeth must have been growing to speak one day
ears were plugged to blunt the waves of cry yet
in this vacuum no aid against the babbling of the tide

(in between wales and england swallows flash in sharp ‘V’)

castles and forts along the line dividing countries
on an infinite ridge we walk; and it is easier to balance
on a highway to and fro suspended in the air than on
invisible tightropes drawn between mother tongues

(as far as king’s and back)

given the heavy pole it was much trickier to steer
the frail wooden vessel once let go against the gust
verbalised over and over, stupefied utterance
in vortex, meaning chafed, paddles drowned

babel 4

bbl

this moment of waking
far-off consonants
out of swooned dreams
to find fitting vowels

with language it is hard enough
but imagine the imagination
a glass of water simply
no complaints but without the glass

this is not my cat but the landlady's
a bean on a canvas just perfect
curled up like a cat
on my duvet to confound

have a bath without the tub
and landladies' language drowns
the carpet that saturates
I dry up with a vowel

babel 5

balal's journey to and fro

the movement was elementary and routine with which balal took the pair of socks out of the drawer rolled up like slugs entangled in love on a monday morning as it was chilly outside despite it being summer in england in june yes the movement was ordinary however balal drifted into meditation about the bamboozling phenomenon of unrolled material spraying sand out like lost syllables or like magma hardly audible sprinkling on the palms and the veins engraved in the palms then finally on the rug in fact the reception was slower than the motion of the grains of sand parachuting out of the socks onto the timber floor of balal's room to locate the source of the occurrence the answer gradually tiptoed in rumouring the obvious that it travelled from the mirage of the floating shoreline balal might have visited at the weekend but to carry all these fractions of sandbanks three hundred miles across the border all over to wales after surviving being spun and tumbled with ionic surfactants as far as the chains of the brecon beacons was somewhat perplexing and indeed there was a notion of the nonsense and the inexplicable in the subject matter when balal pulled the socks back on with the million crumbs like rambunctious morphemes in the warm vacuum of the mouth and climbed welsh mountains where the soil was red inevitably blending some of the spongy granules with chewy clayed particles of the native earth at which point balal might have wanted to ask *so what?* nothing! and yet spectacular and extraordinary that these grains could be carried unconsciously on the top of *pen y fan* left there abandoned for ever but does anyone know whether they would conform to the red soil that was full of iron

protective military terrain while these sand grains were awash with sand and air and minerals and other crystals yet they were only flesh-coloured morsels futile like full stops in an infinite sentence or if they would yearn for gulf currents to breathe them back to the north sea... increasing perplexity balal needed to contemplate vice versa finding welsh heather in the shoes picked up on sugar loaf transporting it all along to the east coast dropped among the coarse grass of the dunes three hundred miles away from a land that was six hundred meters above the sea suspended six hundred meter vertical difference in the density of oxygen and temperament which made balal wonder how the plant would root down in the slippery particles of the dunes and who would burn it down when the season came to strengthen its stem... this cargo of geography in socks and shoes would prolong the enigma of the incident raising inarticulate questions while picking out bits of heather from the fissures of the sole shaking sand dunes out of socks until the last gram the last iota retired in a crack of the timber floorboards

babel 6

garden dialogues

we don't know the name of the plant
we want to know the name of the plant
carrotly liquid streams out when we break
the stem; strange substance of meaning
I would dip my finger into
to draw my hieroglyphs on your forehead

but there is no credit in the phonemes that pour out of my mouth
shrivelled cherries half rotten papayas not worth purchasing
ok I find diphthongs embarrassing to say the way you do
lips need to be elastic slugs in the act of androgynous love
but look at these unusually shaped fruits I dare you to eat them
roll them in your sinuses and spit the pips drawing accents
on a vowel bearing *őszibarack* or *málna*; say it little by little

say it and then take a look at the tiny boy
who sits in silence on the stone floor
in the garden near a pot of flowers
reaches out for a handful of soil from time to time
to chew and then to swallow smiling with black teeth

Photographs, undeveloped

Somewhere a tourist book was warning the reader that this capital was grey. I depicted it. I saw a grey childhood. Swinging the Soviet Horizont in one hand wandering amongst art nouveau houses shooting around down town. Under arches of courtyards black and white: those films I have never developed. What I mean is I have never taken them to the shop. I did not need to. What I mean is I did not need to see them at all.

My mother in that other era used to sit on the roof drawing the passing sky on her own. Her hair was thin, uncut, colourless. She needed to climb up the ladder to get up there to the loft and from there to the top onto the tiles. Later she used colours. But in that era those colours became neutral on the paper; I don't mean decolorized. That era was neither toneless nor grey. It was a thick white glass. Through that glass was my mother observing those clouds, I think.

Much later, in another millennium, I saw those galleries on a poster. The grey capital's apartments on sale. But it was in a different country. What I mean is that it happened in another century. What happened in another century in another country? I think it is 'it' I talk of that occurred then between the black and the white. If anything this capital is in-between. It is painted naught, or it was. Light yellow, in January, when you look out of the train pulled by the rails, no, not too fast.

Why were we both disloyal? What I mean is why do we not live in the place, no matter where, that we actually live in? We meet here three times a year waiting for each other behind bins lining the dark at night. It is cold. A January. A January just before Christmas is what I mean. It is such a Christmas is what I mean. Those bins happen at each corner. One after another you hide from me and ask me to do the same for you. There is no plan in the future and so you leave the country on Christmas day.

Take the train to the border. What I mean is that border drawn between two pine-trees. They are pines of the same woods, of the same pine. In-between; take a walk in *tomb-land* where veterans of the Alps, of the same land of the same woods, still assemble from time to time. The bones used to be scattered. Sporadically. I see. Now... martially renovated stones... I fit my soles in your traces on a path of our sledge you used to pull in the snow. Forgive me if I don't spend any more time with you here. What I mean is don't I spend more time with you spending time with ghosts?

Don't blame the signs of the galleries in St Paul's. What I mean is there are no circular walls that could bring those voices back. We left them there in that discoloured era. Or is it that they only whisper in that white coloured glass? Leave the domes' troubles to the domes. And the trams' to bridges that can hold them no longer. I think domes should not talk at all and should not fool their visitors who pilgrimage from far-off lands, from black and white capitals. From white glass coloured capitals. From grey capitals.