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Four Poems from *House of Razor Blades* by Linda Maria Baros

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Kathryn Kimball
Four Poems from
House of Razor Blades

Linda Maria Baros
La Maison En Lames de Rasoir

*If the Lintel of the Door
Cleaves Your Head in Two,
It's a Bad Sign*

*Si le linteau de la porte
te tranche la tête,
c'est mauvais signe*

I was born in the workers' lunch pail of the ninth decade,
at a time when my house was only a wall.

I am coming to you from the land of the blind.

A long time ago my left eye dribbled
onto the buttons of my shirt.

I've been walking now for seven years, my right eye
in my right palm.

At home, the one-eyed made the law.

As for me, I left the country of my childhood,
where I used to weep, hidden away in the junk cupboard,
under the sink.

But I've forgotten those stories that once polished
the counterfeit coin of my ravings.

I'll tell you only one thing: I made it; here I am.

*The Lack of Walls
Makes for Strange Shapes*

*L'absence des murs prend
des formes bizarres*

From the door to the window,
you pace the livelong day,
like a horn honker on the A4:
the straight lines cut up the view,
demarcate the wide expanse into plots,
clear off the stubble and brush.

You repeat a well-known fact: on the highway,
the lack of walls makes for strange shapes.
Horn honkers from other solitudes show up, quadrupled;
they move onto the herringbone zone and pick up speed.

Their voices fade, rot,
erased to the bone, down to the very lime
—allegories of the day, of the night—
remaindered on the ceilings.

But you, at top speed,
you open up the view every day,
as if it were a tricky Zipper of Lightning:
because from the door to the window,
the A4 leads straight to the sky.

There are days when you would like to make yourself a spot,
on the window sill, take a walk in secret,
your eyes closed, like on a hypnotic bridge,
like on the edge of a deep silence.
(From below, only emptiness looks at you, its height.)

Like you were someone else,
legs sunk to the knees
in a deep silence,
someone taking a walk there in secret.

For a moment only, because the air
behind the bars of the window shoves you back
like in a high security ward.

And the room re-absorbs you into itself.

<i>Always Keep a Bottle of</i>	<i>Avoir toujours une bouteille</i>
<i>High Octane Under Your Pillow</i>	<i>d'essence sous l'oreiller</i>

Tie yourself solidly to the bed,
during the wet mornings,
with glistening ropes of alcohol. You're as hoarse
as crack-voiced boys,
who in a big hurry hustle
divine, narrow-hipped girls
into the glass elevators of the night.
(Their shadows alone could land you in jail.)

Do not try, in your treacherous way,
 under the ceiling's filters, there where the bromide blooms,
do not even try to understand the walls,
 and their right-angled strategy,
 nor to plough them systematically
 with the salt stores from your own damned temple.

And furthermore, do not try to pull out the electric plug with your teeth,
 you've done it so often it's become a habit,
 or crunch up the light switches, and like some crazy bastard,
 bite into the doorknob—its verdigris will result in burns—
 or, even worse, swallow in one gulp
 the magnet that shuts the window.

Do not ever again try using the skin
 you've torn from your chest,
 to polish, from high above, through the windows,
 to polish long and hard like a person possessed,
 — even if you wanted to do it on the way! —
 that brand new, red, shiny chassis
 moving slowly up your street
 like a hooker...

During wet mornings, with its bilious reflections,
 tie yourself nicely to the bed; do it deliberately;
 as if you wanted to cling to a mast,
And never again listen to the crackling coming up from the street,
 teaching you how to burn yourself alive,
 up in your attic room, under the sloping roof,
 as if in the central train station.

Commentary

Linda Maria Baros, Francophone poet, translator, and literary critic, was born in Bucharest, Romania, in 1981, during the Communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. When only seven years old, she wrote and published her first poem in a literary journal.

In 1998, she left Bucharest to study in Paris. In 2011, she received a doctorate in comparative literature from the University of Paris, Sorbonne. An accomplished translator as well as poet, Baros has translated over twenty books into French or Romanian. She directs numerous poetry festivals in Romania and France and also serves on editorial boards for literary magazines. She currently lives and teaches in Paris. Her poems have been translated into twenty-five languages.

La Maison en lames de rasoir (*The House of Razor Blades*), from which these poems are selected, won the prestigious *Prix Apollinaire* in 2007. Baros has published four other books of poetry, including *Le Livre de signes et d'ombres* (*The Book of Signs and Shadows*), which won the *Prix de la Vocation* in 2004.

Baros sees poetry as a means to expand her reader's sympathies and understanding: "I simply want to forge a greater capacity in the [reader's] heart," (trans. by Jane Holland, http://www.lindamariabaros.fr/en_poetry.html).

This selection of poems by Linda Maria Baros presented several translation challenges. Baros's prevalent use of surreal or dream imagery, evidenced in the very title of her work, *House of Razor Blades*, can be difficult to ferry from one language to another. I found it helpful to settle on what I saw as the import of each poem and proceed from there to word choice. Each poem presents the translator with its own unique quandary and excitement.

Some of these difficulties required finding ways to suggest in English the double meanings available in a single French word. For example, in the poem "If the Lintel Cleaves Your Head in Two," the single word *la gamelle* can signify both a worker's lunch pail or a soldier's mess-kit. Because the line suggests time and place (Romania under Communism, 1981), I preferred the evocation of factory workers instead of soldiers, but either connotative meaning would have worked. In the same poem,

the single French word “*le débarras*,” means junk cupboard. I struggled to capture the connotative echo of *bon débarras!* (meaning “good riddance!”) and first translated the word as “good-riddance cabinet.” But perhaps the image of a forlorn girl weeping under the sink among old sponges and cleaners is effectively relayed by the English work “junk” without the “good-riddance” echo. It’s certainly more concise.

The title “*L’absence des murs prend des formes bizarres*” calls for an aphoristic-sounding translation because the line is later introduced as “a well-known fact.” After several attempts at translating freely (“No Walls and You Start Seeing Things”), I came back to a more literal rendering. “The Lack of Walls Makes for Strange Shapes” serves as both title and aphorism and also makes the philosophical point that absence can be an agent. The lack of demarcating walls on a stretch of A4 highway is likened to the blankness of a sheet of A4, the standard size paper used in the E.U. Both an open landscape without visual barriers and a blank sheet of paper can give rise to high-speed and startling movements of the imagination.

The point is forcefully made again with the mention of the herringbone pattern (“*en épi*”), often used to demarcate a merging or safety lane (which, as the poem mentions, impatient motorists sometimes use to speed ahead). The herringbone pattern is imaged again in “*fermeture Éclair*.” *Fermeture Éclair* is a well-known brand name of zipper in France—so could have been left perfectly comprehensible as “zipper.” But *éclair* means lightning and thus suggests not only the jagged, herringboned formation of a zipper (and streaks of lightning) but also the electric speed of the imagination—hence “Zipper of Lightning.”

Translating titles can indeed present problems, as in the use of an acronym with no equivalent in English. “*Q.H.S.*” stands for *Quartiers de Haute Sécurité*, which could be rendered into English as “Maximum Security Ward (or Wing).” I chose “ward” to underscore the poem’s mention of hypnosis, engulfing emptiness, and window bars, suggestive of a psychiatric hospital rather than a prison. In this case, there seemed no way to preserve in English the sterility and coldness of an acronym’s shorthand.

The final poem, “*Avoir toujours une bouteille d’essence sous l’oreiller*,” also presented a title challenge: preserving in English the suggestion in the original of a correspondence be-

tween the alcohol of drunken stupor and the flammable gasoline of self-immolation. The choice of “High Octane” (“Always Keep a Bottle of High Octane Under the Pillow”) hints at both. The poem’s speaker, with dripping irony, seems actually to advise doing all the self-destructive things the poem mentions by *not* advising them, a use of the cunning rhetorical device of apophasis.

I render *la salière de ta sacrée tempe* as the “the salt stores from your damn temple,” which refers to the side of the head and its drip of salt sweat. If I translate *tempe* as “temple,” then a partial misreading may occur in English; one could well think “sacred structure” before thinking anatomy. But I have risked this suggestive misreading and have used the cognate instead of choosing a word with a close but inexact meaning, such as “brow.” “Brow” might clarify but would do away with the word and sound play of the original (*tempe/temple*, which hints at the metaphor of the body entire as a “temple”). The walls of this “house of razor blades” are emblematic of the blank canvas/paper upon which the artist creates—and no “crazy bastard” of a lover is to sow the body’s destructive salt on the fertile ground of art.

Published when Linda Maria Baros was twenty-six, this award-winning collection of poems is a stunning achievement. Translating these carefully crafted poems has been a discipline in finding meaningful English equivalents for Baros’s searing revelations.

Source text:

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“Si le linteau de la porte te tranche la tête, c’est mauvais signe.”

“L’absence des murs prend des formes bizarres.”

“Q.H.S.”

“Avoir toujours une bouteille d’essence sous l’oreiller.”