

SAMPLER

Time Being

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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Essays on Politics and Poetics*
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Lilies from America: Selected Poems
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Releasing the Porcelain Birds: Poems After Surveillance
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Sulla Soglia Della Dimenticanza / On the Side of Forgetting
Edizioni Kolibris, 2015

The House of Straw
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*Seamus Heaney and East European Poetry in Translation:
Poetics of Exile*
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*Burying the Typewriter:
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Carmen Bugar

Time Being

SAMPLE

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For Carl and Judith Schmidt

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Part I

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L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle

(the love which moves the sun and the other stars)

—Dante, *Paradiso* XXXIII

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The house of shells

I

Egg-shaped stones, peach-coloured
jingle shells, razor clams,
rosy stones, quahog clams,
blue mussels, scallops and whelk.

Our children ran shouting on sand dunes,
the winter wind lifted their words
in the freezing air, blowing them
into the song of upwelling waves.

The newly-rented, empty home,
There, on a sheet of paper, we drew a house.
We sat on the floor and filled in the walls,
windows, and the roof—with glue,
stones, and golden nacreous shells.

Alisa made a little path of blue mussels
from the white road to the door,
Stefano put in the razor clam chimney,
the whelk was the tree in the garden.

II

Our belongings sailed the wintery Atlantic
for more than one month.
Toys, our beds, plates, books,
clothes took forever to arrive.

We slept on air mattresses
feeling homesick. Homesick for what,
we kept asking ourselves?

III

Now and then someone draws a flower
or a little tree in the garden: after all,
spring shows signs of arrival.
Outside the kitchen door,
a cardinal and a few robins hop around.
The cardinal peers inside:
it looks comfortable with me,
as long as I sit still.

January–March 2016

SAMPLER

A prayer for my children

On the US Presidential Inauguration 2017

This year, what you learn at school,
sitting at your tiny desks in the sunny room,
is the “lock-down drill”. We come from other
countries, you remind me as you recount hiding
in closets, holding your breath, while your teacher
pulled down the blinds: is this a free country,
you ask. I say that these are changed times.

Out there on the campaign trail, the man
who is now president-elect talked of grabbing women,
calling it “locker room talk,” used an arsenal of words
you should not know and should not use,
according to the laws of common decency.
Vulgarity and corruption are as old as the world,
your father says, yet this won’t hearten our hearths.

*

This year we bought our first house, stripped rooms
to the bare bones of wood, repaired every wall,
sealed all the holes, changed the wiring to make it safe,
put up a brand-new roof, painted it all.
Neighbors came by to meet us.
We planted our first rose bushes, our first tree.
I won’t renounce the hope that you grow your roots.
The world within must meet the world without,
and nothing but love will come out of my pen;
our prayers must join the prayers from others
while the ship of state sails these troubled waters.

Water ways

For Alisa, who shouted, “Mommy, I keep losing your steps!”

The water is writing on sand
many drafts of the same story,

one more shimmering than the next.
I go there to memorize their turns

and feel their calling power,
wrestle with their yesses and whys,

I get involved, make footnotes on some pages;
the ocean erases them impatiently

offering shells the size of my feet
shhh, it says, now listen.

*

My daughter says the clouds try to bloom
above the water—white hydrangeas—

but the water pulls them down;
clouds are children of the water, I say,

it's hard to let go of children.
Under the bridge this morning the river

passes for a mirror half fogged over—
visions and revisions touch its surface

as we look on; mommy, my child says,
the clouds caress the water.

A white hawk appears above us
held up by the warm breath of the earth,

the tips of its wings recall silver lining
gliding out of view like a thought hard to hold.

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Part II

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

(In the middle of our life's journey)

—Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I, line 1

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For the time being

We are fine, they say, for the time being.
Enough food in the pantry, prescriptions filled,
No need to go out of the house,
Except to let the dog run in the yard.

Our road has fallen silent, we can hear the trees
Near the river, it feels like a long Sunday
But without the church. There is plenty of time
To watch the trees bloom. When was the last time?

The elderly are used to sitting the days.
But we are also fine, the younger ones, for the time
Being. We have time to play with our children,
Bake, wash the curtains, and make love again, finally!

Now that the shelves at the shops are empty
And the parking lots are drive-through
Testing labs, we have time to pray
For those who are dying in the hospitals.

We pray the nurses will stay healthy through
Extended working shifts. We pray the doctors
Get a good night sleep before they fight to grip life
Slipping through their hands, for the time being.

In other countries many sing from their balconies
To cheer each other up through so much dying,
We call, check in, reassure, and smile
From a distance, hoping: for the time being.

Lockdown

children are
flowering
at the windows

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