

Forgetfulness

BY THE SAME AUTHOR FROM SHEARSMAN BOOKS

Anonymous Intruder
Shifting Registers
Makers of Empty Dreams
Identity Papers
New York Hotel
The Underground Cabaret
Night Window

Bitter Grass
(translated from the Italian of Gëzim Hajdari)

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Forgetfulness

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Alcatraz, eds Cassandra Atherton & Paul Hetherington
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Alors, j'étouffai des sanglots d'humiliation et j'écrivis cette
page-ci, mais avec beaucoup plus de littérature ridicule.

—Max Jacob

For Justyna and Chiara

Scattering My Mother's Ashes

1

In the village hall, a man with learning difficulties is reading out a poem he has written. 'What's the point of writing in that silly way?' my mother wants to know. She looks out of a window at the cows. They are of a rare breed, much smaller and more delicate than ordinary cows. 'So pretty, yet soon they will no longer be here,' she says. And here is my father at the door, buying raffle tickets. I haven't seen him since he died. He won't know of all the changes that have taken place since then.

Waiting to cross the street, I saw my mother go by in a coach. She was at the back on her own, staring out of the window. I ran after the coach, waving, and caught up with it at some traffic lights. I put my hands together in a begging gesture and the driver let me on.

My mother was glad to see me, but not quite sure who I was. She told me she was on her way to Portugal to visit her youngest son. I didn't tell her she was on the coach to Birmingham, the city where I was born.

At the next stop, the door at the back opened, and stayed open even when we set off again. The driver must have forgotten to close it. I had to hold my mother tight when we went around a corner.

Now that I'd quit my job at the university, I had plans to go to Milan and hang out with an old poet friend there. My colleagues wished me well in my retirement, even though I'd told them I wasn't retiring; I was dropping out of the system, resting for a week or two, then setting off on new adventures before I developed dementia like my mother.

A fortnight later I was in Milan, the wind sweeping down the dark, deserted street where the bus had dropped me off. There was no sign of the poet who'd promised to meet me, but after a while I heard someone softly singing. A young man, who looked like a student I'd once known, emerged from the darkness. I wanted to ask him the way, but when he saw me he drew back, and no words would come to me.

Catching a glimpse of myself in a waiting-room mirror, I saw what looked like a black cherry on the lower lid of each eye. I thought perhaps they were enormous sties. Yet they'd appeared out of nowhere and didn't hurt when I touched them. They made me think of trapped, bruised tears. If I pressed harder, would they burst? What kind of mess would they leave behind?

Not too long now till we reach the top, I tell myself. We are pausing for a rest on some mossy rocks in the cold sunshine. I feel like a stranger among family and friends, many of whom I haven't seen for years. We've come together to scatter my mother's ashes. A little further up is a small plateau with a café. I'm desperate to be on my own, just for a few minutes, so I offer to get hot drinks. There follows an astonishingly complicated series of requests. Everybody wants something different. By the time I reach the café, the only order I remember – perhaps because it was the last I was given – is a *cocoa, made with half-milk, lactose-free, and half-water, with one and a half lumps of light-brown sugar*. In front of the unsmiling woman at the till, I find myself unable to speak. A young man walks in. It takes a moment for me to recognise him as the son of one of my cousins; he has three small children of his own now. Seeing the look on my face, he offers to help with the orders. He remembers them all even though he wasn't really paying attention, he tells me, with his hearty smile. 'We'll be at the top in no time,' he says.

I was walking down the street when I saw a little old man rolling on the pavement and weeping. It was only when I bent down to see if I could help him that one or two people stopped to see what was going on. The man recovered quickly once he had our attention – he said he'd eaten something that didn't agree with him.

Later I saw him outside a church, again rolling on the ground, but this time with louder, angrier sobs. When he saw the weary expression on my face, he began to cry even louder.

'Don't you realise we all have something to weep about?' I said.

'Yes,' he said, 'there is so much to weep about in this town, isn't there?'

I didn't tell him my mother had died; I hadn't yet found the heart to weep.