

Four Brno Elegies

I

While rain went rippling out across the land,
 you shivered at a table, blank and alone.*
 The downpour drummed on all that black outspanned
 by umbrellas. The hours, the hours edged on.

Far from people, far from their strange ways,
 their tedious good cheer and useless prattle,
 the wind waltzed scattering hailstones and staves
 above the city. And all the windows rattled.

A train wheezed in just now, your train. You're back
 in the old country from travelling about.
 The inrush left boats bobbing in its wake
 and drizzle on the clouded station-mouth.

And drizzle . . . drizzle on the gasometer's drum,
 on the shunting car, on a soft grey scarf wound round.
 A friend is somewhere there . . . You always come
 again to him through cold space swept by wind.

It cleans out every corner and such fear,
 such absence and estrangement in the end
 come booming closer, closer. They howl: Not here.
 There's no-one close and no-one to call friend.

You sometimes turned to strangers. Those now sleep
 in other lands. The mill grinds with no intake.
 The sheer rockface and rubble bed fade steep
 down into the darkness of the riffled lake.

Amidst its wrack, there is the grasp and flash
of speechless fishes' silence, which then just goes.
And the water mirrors hills and woods awash
in murmurs of the overflying crows.

A cuprous tree lit up the earth, a fireball.
I went to wet my lips with rain, and yes,
you once said: "We are speechless, speechless all."
So listen to my Song of Speechlessness.

2

The plain spreads out from you when you've gone by
the cemetery wall where greensward quietly glistens.
Bang on it desperately and your reply
is a startled bird which flies off in the distance.

And startled through the sky he loops and pegs
(who danced on graves and sang the dead his jokes).
Regret draws tighter, tighter, till it chokes.
You watch his flight, lead clipped onto his leg.

You watch his flight and how he lightly wheels,
a wound upon the sky that gradually heals
above the meadows, cradled by a beck.
That silver furrow . . . groove . . . that thread . . . a speck.

3

If you came with me, you'd see what I like.
A church, a bridge, a ditch—this countryside
so ordinary and beautiful beside
a river, the chestnut's fragrant shade, its look.

So water from the well clears off the dust
that settled on a face ruddy and tanned,
and falls on books and letters from a friend,
and covers paintings, quietly drapes a bust.

It was July and I was coming back.
You at the window, you nodded from afar,
the swifts just risen like some airborne bazaar,
the flare of roosters, the castle's glassy stack.

And near the earth the sky was set ablaze
by wooded hills, then darkened from the top.
I heard a cry above the goldsmith's shop.
For breakfast I had strawberries. Such days.

4

Above the wooded quarry are cement-works.
I went up there to cut a rose-hip wand.
The city faded and the river panned
beneath the hill, dragging its sluggish murks.

With nothing in me I could only write,
and with it weeks flowed off along the bed.
A black train trundled by and left a thread
of rails that glinted in the rainy light.

And through the land, this wicked cold progressed
though beauty rose and rose amazingly.
Its fluent glow: a building, yards and alley.
Pickaxes rang. My eyes looked toward the west.

Sundown poured on blackened plots, on car
after clanging car, on bottle-glass immured
in the splayed city. In all that din I heard
the cows go wailing to the abattoir.

Up from canteens, loud drunken songs turned scannel,
steps squelching by, the dark spread up the hill,
the clink of glass and hoarse refrains went still,
and shadows crowded from the railway tunnel.

Then everything faded in the woods near Brno
where mushroom scent and mint go floating slow,
and smoke dispersed in clearings near the river.
Amidst the grasses, blood-red florets quiver.
But we push on, push on, which is our will.
No. No joy. And hurt by it. And still.

Translated from the Czech by Justin Quinn