Elegy to History

At first I thought they were only shadows: 
repetitive, imitative, 
the whole enterprise meaningless.

I was young, arrogant. I only trusted things 
I could feel and touch. 
Art, beauty, spirit? Outdated ideas. 
We bragged 
we had even 
dismantled Time. 
It was 
a new epoch.

I wasn’t prepared 
when Grandfather summoned 
in a dream, 
called this place hsin— 
the meeting of mind and heart.

I sat on a bench tapping my foot 
as if at a bad movie. 
I lit a cigarette. Mist kept 
rolling off the mountain. 
Everything was golden, 
the color of ripe corn.

I didn’t realize 
I had deluded myself. 
I’d never escaped. 
I was composed 
of history.

Memories in the familiar vernacular 
of my father and grandfather and his father 
before him 
stormed my mind.

I began to shake 
with a violence I’d never encountered. 
I remembered how they had forced my father from his classroom. 
He had been teaching 
Baudelaire.

In the alley— lashes, rifle butts and boot kicks. 
Rain fusing an alchemy

(no stanza break)
of mud and blood.
My father slipping from this world.
My mother’s helpless eyes.

I lit another cigarette.
All this had happened many years ago.
The Revolution was over.
We had proclaimed
a new age.

I had to ask myself: Why
in this place of serenity
did I still feel torment?

I reached out to touch a pine.
Its needles crumbled to dust in my fingers.
The scent of resin rose in my nostrils
and became the odor
of my mother’s heavy hair.
A thought of childhood
entered my head. I chased it away.
The footbridge was empty. Not a single bird
in the vast, impenetrable sky.

My father was gone, mother, gone.
The others eaten
by sorrow.
My slender fingers
so helpless in my lap.

I fell on my knees and begged
their forgiveness. The earth
was neither warm or cold. The silence
a mockery to the chaos in my heart.

The dream was ending and
I did not want it to end.
I promised to return, I promised to remember,
but already the images were fading.
They were only shadows,
to be replaced by newer shadows.

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