The Flight from Meaning

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STEPHEN HAVEN

The Flight from Meaning

poems

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THE FLIGHT FROM MEANING
Poems

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For Sarah and Jonah

Nothingness was a wind that changed direction.

—Pier Paolo Pasolini

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*Poems with a line (or lines) from Pier Paolo Pasolini's poetry are indicated above with an asterisk. In five poems, a single line from Pasolini appears as the title. "Lines After Pasolini" begins with three lines from Pasolini's poetry in the body of the poem. All lines from Pasolini, whether in the title or in the body of these six poems, appear in italics. See Acknowledgments for publisher and translator credits.

I

WHITE WOLF

ROPE TIED TO A SONG: APRIL 30, 1975

The moment the war ends, my father, my mother have gone
To gather their old friends. They have driven to the other side
Of my old town in the Volkswagen. From front porches,
From the rough and tumble of mill yards, American flags
Renounce the colors of love. Somewhere in Saigon
There is singing, there is a monk who does not immolate
Himself in the streets. The killing still goes on.

They will pull the church bell then walk into the silence
Of the chancel. No peace, ever, since 1941.
I am many miles from that place, and yet I feel it
As a kind of home, the thick hemp tied to a song
That lifts me bodily, white surplice over black,
My winged childhood a full foot off the varnished floor,

The basement's trap door. The war goes on.
And yet this moment, the rung cup of other steeples,
No psalm, no sermon, no word for the liturgical hush
Of that shudder, not quite sound, not quite its absence,
In the moment just after. Some blood between them too

But not in this quietude, all their children grown out
From that space. This is the place I choose to lift
A ceremonial glass. The body remembers water, wine,
Music or something like it, the near stillness
Of love as it was and always now will be:
Over the rooftops, each flogged day,
The bell an otter in water, the still black bullet of its clapper.

SOLO

Now it seems your life has been
Nights on late-night dialup, solo in
A communist bloc city.
The television sporting a language
You could never quite fathom
Despite your years of tutelage.
You gather yourself into weekends
With books you've read twice.
So strange to sit at home in Paradise!
But once you sent a cab
To the right Chongqing gate.
Queen Sea Big Shark! Saturday night.
You slipped your key into the wrong

Lock in Dresden, wandered around
Looking for a Wi-Fi connection
Then slept in Niš, rented a four
On the floor jalopy at Constantine
The Great. Then 300 miles south
Where each pristine beach
Was the life you could never keep.
So you ordered another in Macedonia,
Cabbed it in Ubud to the local clinic
Patched your sorry gut gone belly up.
You barely caught the flight, Sita and Rama
On strings, hitching a ride in your one
Zipped bag. (You threw away your clothes

To carry them). In New York Customs
They poked for drugs and parasites.
The wood came clean. Sure enough

You were a gamelan, a puppet man.
But mostly it has been for you
Home seasoning where you tithed
Your yearly dues, did what the locals do,
Soccer, track meets, Sunday school.
Leaned heavily on a mother
Married to a farmer. She taught
Solos to your son, your daughter.
You traveled when your children were grown.
Everywhere you went, you went alone. . . .

LINES AFTER PASOLINI

The birds were singing in the sunbeams
In an intricate uncertain weft
Deafening, vulnerable to existence:

They did not carp of their own demise
Relative to the sweep of land and sky,
How on a peripheral, stubborn perch

No language other than music dwarfed
Their ascent from Mesozoic forests.
The nothing they did not lack

They did not need to own, not one lament
In those hollow bones, swaying in the whorls
Of a single tree like the wind through their

Lost chances. They did not tone
Of the first hard light, first night,
Silence like shards of colored glass

Hanging from a string, metal leavening
A porch beam, or pentatonic
Carved bamboo, clacking where no

Cedar waxwings wobble
In the knit of a tree, almost bundled by these
Burdens of little Being blossoming on Being

Asking of the clouds only a little rain.
Not one had gained so could not lose
A sacramental hue. Everywhere

Around them the one song they knew,
Not one kernel clinging to a cob,
Night nowhere near, night coming on.