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Three Poems by Antanas Škėma

The Lie

They ordered him to shoot a man.
The gun shone with fresh oil.
The doomed head shone with drops of sweat.
He aimed at the head of the doomed man.
A space divided them, then suddenly,
in the space, a dove fluttered.
He fired and the dove flew off, afraid.
The beating wings were white as the man
he shot and frightened to death.
Tall grass, touched by soft wind, rustled, wild.
"I'm hungry," he said. That was a lie.
He lied until he died.

He woke in the night. The only light,
the luminous hands and numbers of his watch.
He picked up a cigarette.
His matches were in the other room. The door was closed.
He could not get up.
He saw a phosphorescent head that gaped
with false teeth. He could see the rubber gums.
The next day as he walked to work
he hummed an ancient waltz:
"Some matches, some matches, some matches... "
Several passersby turned and looked.
One of them was a young girl with blue eyes.
She was fatally ill with cancer of the lung.
They took her to the hospital soon after.

He turned the handle and the door opened.
Beyond it was another door.
He turned the handle and the other door
stood wide. He opened doors, a hundred and twenty-four.
Then he grew tired, and he collapsed.
**Beyond the hundred and twenty-fifth
door, there is a garden where the roses
have just opened,** he thought, drowsily dying.
Beyond that door was another door.

(Translated by Aldona and Robert Page)

First Request

As one star falls, others remain aloft.
They soar and await their fall.

A man dies, and the others say:
"Thank God! It isn't I."
A frog croaks in a marsh, her head thrown back
— the dog lowers his own.
(He cannot seize the frog.)
When oranges ripen in the south, the Arctic boulders
feel naked without moss.
And in a glass a woman gazes at herself:
"What color should I dye my hair, now it is gray?"
she asks her wrinkles.
Stars, people, frogs, dogs, oranges,
moss, perhaps you will explain the sense of things to me.

(Translated by Mariejo Fonsale)

Second Request

I grew in the north.
Summers are short there.
I never saw a winter.
As a child, every Sunday,
I assisted in the Mass.
I never heard an organ.
My last love was in my youth.
I never loved a woman.
I never committed suicide.
Once I wanted to jump from the fifth floor.
A pregnant woman walked along the pavement.
How could I frighten her?
Write me letters. Write to me.
How shall we live?

(Translated by Aldona and Robert Page)