

**MARJORIE STELMACH**  
**The Divestments of Autumn**

**i. As above, so below**

*We must love life before loving its meaning.*  
—Fyodor Dostoevsky

Late twilight, early autumn.  
High, distressing winds in the cottonwoods and locusts.  
Scores of the dying drift from the branches  
to lodge in the understory.  
*As above, so below.*

How did I learn  
this discontent? Not from the cottonwoods and locusts,  
calm as ever in their autumn losses. Nor from  
the Rose of Sharon, bearing her crown  
of the seasonal dead.

A barred owl dips  
and crosses my vision in a ghost-gray hush  
with death in its talons, its shadow-wings  
staining the tangle of bushes  
where mute birds huddle,

black and knotted  
and smaller than their voices, smaller than their heartbeats.  
An alchemist, Earth, tending transparencies—  
banked fires, coiled waters—intent on  
transfiguring light.

*Humble down, I tell myself.*  
*Love this.*

**ii. Twenty-nine Bones**

*It's about the people, who have stopped believing,  
because the cup of evil has run over.*

—Dmitri Shostakovich, speaking of his *Eleventh Symphony*  
subtitled *1905*

It happened the year before he was born,  
but he knew the story, how the Tsar's soldiers

had dragged a sled burdened with massacred children  
through St. Petersburg's streets, children

who'd climbed the trees for a glimpse of the soldiers,  
their uniforms and guns.

The soldiers—laughing—shot them.  
The children, too, laughing, their corpses smiling.

Twenty-nine bones in a human face.  
Smiling.



Nineteen-nineteen. *Petrograd* now. A prodigy  
starving in a shattered city, his family, too, starving.

Dmitri plays nightly for the silent films. His job  
asks nothing commensurate with his genius:

to sight-read a music scored in the huge  
faces above him, faces of light encoded

with suffering—*noble* suffering, always for love.  
*Love* in the lit bones of the faces.

Night after night, the theater packed,  
the audience hopeless, starving.

*Humble down*, he tells himself. *Love this,*  
*like everybody else.*

**iii. A Language Incomprehensible**

*Chaos instead of Music*

—headline in *Pravda*, January 1936

It opened to awe, to ovations, all of St. Petersburg  
lauding his *Lady Macbeth of Minsk*

until Stalin himself attended, and the show closed  
that night. Had he seen himself in the predatory Lady?

No surprise that night the NKVD arrived at Dmitri's door.  
No surprise either that in a heartbeat the artist recanted.

But how to recant an opera? *I'd begun to speak,*  
he confessed, *a language incomprehensible*

*to the People.* Witnesses claim he was pale,  
he stuttered, again and again adjusted his glasses.

He bowed to the humbling for the sake  
of the uncomprehending People. And soon, it was

*Come home, Dmitri, all is forgiven.*  
*Stalin*

Soon he became a Soviet Hero for works exalting  
the proletariat. Other works, secret, began filling the dark

of a locked desk drawer—death in the scoring,  
terror in the strings, never performed.

**iv. Atonement**

*Shame is the feeling that saves mankind.*

—Andrei Tarkovsky, speaking of Shostokovich

In the glass: my face  
with leaves falling through it—dusk's familiar  
cellophane self. In the darkening yard,  
branches and small birds  
emerge,

tangling my hair,  
complicating my vision. By small shifts  
of focus, I cast and erase my face  
and its fleeting  
components,

peeling the tissues  
again from a wound on the verge  
of healing. Soon I'll abandon  
this game, snap the light,  
and disperse.

**v. As above, so below: Reprise**

*Seek His face,*  
the Psalmist advises. Early winter has a face  
lean as an oboe—bony brow, haggard gaze.  
If God's face were to peel  
from this sky,

peer down upon us  
in our own image, it would be—nothing like this, but this  
is the best I can say: *as if from an unsuspected  
dimension curled inside a caesura,*  
*we could*

*just barely discern*  
*the tones of a solo viola, rising from nowhere's ruins*  
*bearing unbearable sweetness.* Instead,  
this cosmic drone, its chords intoned  
ceaselessly,

*becomes the caesura—*  
an absence suggesting Divine recantation—  
a confession so terrible, so intimate,  
it must not be heard: God's apology  
(too late) for Time.

*Seek His face.*  
But if God bent His brooding countenance even once  
into our winter and lingered—a perfect continuity,  
perfectly remote—would we see or somehow  
know

in our marrow?  
In the stirred hair of our napes? Taste a sweetness,  
a leafiness, perhaps, or sense a chlorophyll-ing—  
the skin's heightened affinity  
for light?

**vi. Humble down. Love this.**

Full dark now.

Walking in the suburb's chill air, my eyes are drawn  
to a woman's face cut by rectangular panes of glass,  
a mosaic above a sink where  
an aloe plant spikes

from one pane to another.

Shoulders unmoving, she gazes over her lawn, eyes lifted  
from the work—hands immersed in filmy water,  
stilled wrists broken at the waterline.  
Or so I imagine.

An alchemist, Time—

stirring, stirring—as the Earth turns us into our dispersal.  
The woman in the light won't see me pass.  
She's watching, I imagine, the other side  
of her face.

**vii. Atonement: Reprise**

I set my CD on continual replay. Each time it rises—  
the great *dies irae* of the *Tenth* with its *ostinato*

buried beneath his elaborate scorings—  
it lifts the hair at my nape: the same four notes

again and again, a Cyrillic encrypting of his name.

*D E-flat C B.*                      *D E-flat C B.*

Who first understood, when the broken  
elegist rose, ghostly, from orchestral depths?

Who first deciphered the code, when the notes emerged  
from his *ostinato*, spoke his name, and dispersed into hush?

Even decoded and long after everyone's death, it remains  
an incomprehensible presence. A brutal re-wounding, plea

for forgiveness, act of feeble defiance? Again tonight  
I try to summon some measure of healing

from the past's silent screen, but no code breaks through  
history's flickering black and white. Nothing but *complicity*.

■

Who first  
understood the divestments of autumn, saw  
chlorophyll's crazed after-burn as *thirst*,  
heard this lushest of all Earth's scores—  
briefness, brittleness, ghost—

as *grief*?

How to recant an age? Early autumn:  
the gorgeous sear of the air, but always beneath  
the crescendo of beauty, the drone  
of atonement.

**Material concerning the life of Dmitri Shostakovich, including the direct quotations in part iii, was taken from Stephen Jackson's 1997 book, *Dmitri Shostakovich: An Essential Guide to His Life and Works*.**