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## Retreat to the Future

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Yesterday I unwrapped it from newsprint, a simple red *rebozo*, a color of earth good for corn, a solitude of red that sweeps unbroken until near the fringe at one end a white bird soars, one wing unfinished, its feathers raveling into the tassles, and from there into wind as it goes.

I put it on. I put it on and wept.

What is the power of a man and woman? Without opposites that tend towards each other, there's no will to live, no need to heal.

The oppressors have us.

### RETREAT TO THE FUTURE

As the Republic's last Cortes disbanded, and the stones of Figueras shook in the echo of bombs, our people, frantic, were shoved from the winter roads by our own troops, disregarded. They only watched as a national treasury—paintings huge in their gold frames—took their places, cradled in the last trucks going out. No one cried,

What have you done? What more can you give?

No theory marshalled the suffering of Spain to right order. I felt its weight as I watched in disgust. I felt love shudder from power and change to an endless debt. Offered a ride, I refused and walked the other way, to the Plaza. There, I sat at a cafe table to wait—for what?

The town was empty. A bit of sun,  
soured like the rind in the dirty glass on the dirty  
table, was left. It hung limp on an ancient oak,  
the city's center.

Through this Plaza men for the Brigades had passed.  
Overhead a black bird screamed—the jolted  
town its ambulance, stuck in a ditch.  
I watched the shadows of the old oak lengthen.  
My shadow stretched in the dust to sleep.  
I closed my eyes and saw the after-lines of branches  
turn blood in the cracks of crooked stones.  
I wanted to float in these—I knew  
where they went.  
But I drifted down  
to Udine, a day when Papa nailed wood at right angles.  
He built a frame, stood it on end as if to ask  
what next? what more? holding that window up to the sky,  
squaring off part, the air lens enough,  
the frame his telescope.  
Then I drifted, years,  
and in the darkroom this window of Papa's hovered,  
parting known from unknown as a human face,  
seen clear enough to honor, washed  
mutely into view—  
a beggar's gaunt face.  
She didn't move her lips, but I heard her say,  
"You will hang my sorrow on a wall?" She spat  
and turned away. "Don't pray to it."

Startled, I shook  
awake. I felt a sudden joy. I stood and felt  
the muscles in my thighs—they were strong. I breathed  
in, and in. I flung the dirty glass to the roots of the old  
oak, watched it flash and shatter. And I followed  
the people I loved across the border, a tatter of retreat,  
refugees by the thousands crossing from Catalonia

to the French camps, to bitter charges,  
counter-charges—to the scourge of our better  
natures, defeat.

When Carlos found me,  
he had words from Machado ready on his lips—  
*Y cuando llegue el día del último viaje . . .*  
When the day of my last journey arrives,  
and the ship, never to return, is set to leave,  
you will find me on board with few supplies . . .  
*casí desnudo*, almost naked, like the children  
of the sea. He smiled, looked mostly ahead,  
without reprisal, proud. “It is not our last  
battle,” he said.

Was he right?

Was there hope? I hoped. Arms limp at my sides  
as he held me, too tired then to say or be anything  
more than a bookmark closed in the book of his body,  
the future unread. It was a relief  
not to be dead—that strengthened me. Regret  
is one blindness I’ve refused. Without that,  
the least life is good.

I have seen light quicken  
across silent faces, *de repente*, sudden as lightning  
across a solid sea, then thunder stir deep passion,  
and the dead—I mean  
those who have lived without history, more silent  
than fossils—awaken,  
ready to live and die that their children might live  
and die in dignity. They fix their eyes on that.

With such men and women I live.  
And if it often seems we have the choice of fire  
or fire, and the cities burn, the children scream,  
and the war, a hired taxi with no driver, stalls  
between burning walls and burning trees

in whose roots real serpents crawl—  
I can grow still and wait  
until Papa's frame floats up, a focus. Then I see  
clear

    a simple human face.

I can follow that.