

AFTER LIFE

Libretto by David Mason

Darkness. A sound of no knowable place. Before lights rise, we hear Gertrude Stein singing, elongating words as if giving birth to them:

[1] GERTRUDE

Hey. He. Ah. Oh. Who?
Oh, conjure me.
Question me, conjure me.

Light illuminates her searching face, almost the mask of Picasso's famous portrait of her.

GERTRUDE

Baby Precious? Is it you?
Baby, long, how long, is it who?

Sound of a sigh... I.
I was the cover of TIME. I.
Everyone loved me. I

want you, Mr. Cuddle-Wuddle.
Oh what a muddle!
How is it I is it who?

She is entirely illuminated now, but suspended in dark.

GERTRUDE

Conjure me. Question me. Conjure me.
I nearly lost myself,
but genius never lies
and genius never dies.

I was the cover of TIME. I.
Genius, the look in the eye.
Genius of no place, I

suppose I repose. Repose
is a rose is a rose is a rose.

Out of the dark, another voice sings. It is Pablo Picasso, not yet illuminated.

PICASSO

Genius? Genius?
(he laughs)
Did somebody say my name?

GERTRUDE

Is it you, Baby Precious?

She turns away, searching the dark. Picasso emerges in light, his face and form instantly familiar to us. He does not yet see Stein.

PICASSO

Some lover has conjured me!

GERTRUDE

Someone is near, but who?
Someone can hear – is it you?
Come, please come. Come here.

PICASSO

This is the body I love,
the bull, so full of life.
My limbs, my torso, my loins.
What sort of night-fishing is this?
What sort of flesh?

Gertrude, still searching and not seeing Picasso, sings:

GERTRUDE

Un-life. Every place no place.
Every face no face.
No Baby Precious. No Alice.

Picasso tries to conjure all the women he has loved:

[2] PICASSO

Fernande, have you brought me here?
Marcelle, is it you?
My body is yours. Is it you?

Gaby, Olga, Marie Thérèse? Fernande?
Or Dora, is it you, my love?
Françoise? Genevieve? Jacqueline?

Your bull is back! *El toro. El rey!*
Come out, all my darlings.
Come out and play!

Turning, Stein sees Picasso.

GERTRUDE

Pablo!

PICASSO

(shocked)
Trudy?

GERTRUDE

Not Baby Precious!

PICASSO

Not... what I wanted.

GERTRUDE

I see it now. How and who.
I see it had to be, had to be you.

PICASSO

You, my friend, are the last one on earth
I wanted to see. You with your ego,
you with your need.
Telling the world you invented me!

GERTRUDE

I abstracted you,
watched from the cover of TIME.

PICASSO

Why are we here? Isn't this death?

GERTRUDE

Genius never dies.
A question conjured us.
A question hangs in the dark.

I see it now. How and who.
It had to be, had to be, had to be you.

I wanted a genius. Someone like me.
Someone to answer me. Set me free.

PICASSO

I grew to hate you. Didn't you know?
You wanted to own me,
create me, perversely to mother me.

[3] But Picasso gave birth to himself.
I took my mother's name for my own.
I made my art. I made Picasso,
the picador. Not you!

She nods, but her face shows that she does not really accept what he avers.

GERTRUDE
It takes some time to be seen.
A question I wanted to ask –
the question that conjured me
conjuring you.

Stay with me now, for old times' sake.
Think of our work, what we did for the world.
You had more time on the earth
and will have seen my afterlife.

What do they make of me now?
What life did I leave to the living?
Do they remember my work?
Have they continued to love me?

PICASSO
The afterlife, you say. I was always
after life, after love. I bathed in the sun!
My friend who killed himself
covered me in blue.
I was sad, so sad, it's true.
The love of a woman
brought rose to my life.
I was leading the horse of my art,
letting it drink. Letting the animal love.
A bull and a woman
can make a new world.
El toro, el rey!
All those dinners with you
on the Rue de Fleurus –
they were nothing compared
to the clown in my heart.
These hands and these eyes,
they made my art.
Life! After life. Art is for life!

Gertrude joins him:

DUET:
These hands, these eyes,
they made my art.
Life! After life. Art is for life!

They look at each other, acknowledging the years of friendship. But Stein can't help prodding him.

GERTRUDE
Alice and I – we cooked for you.
We bought your paintings.
Then you got rich.

The hint of resentment sours them both.

PICASSO
Money? What's money?
An artist is after life.
You wanted to mother me,
or was it father me?
I cut the cord. I was free.

GERTRUDE
Not in the war. No one was free in the war.

PICASSO
Which war?
I was an artist of war.
My art was a war against war.

GERTRUDE
Any war. But of course you know which war I mean.
The one that hurt us the most.
The one that pushed us apart.
I never thought it would come.

We were frightened,
Alice and I. Our friends were far.
Was it safe, was it not?
How could we be sure?

We decided to stay.
We were Jews who decided to stay.
That's what I wanted to say:
what did we leave for the living?
What do they think of us now?
Do they know what a genius I was?
Do they know how we lived?

PICASSO
We lived. Many did not.
Desnos did not. I remember him, Robert.
He was funny, my friend.
I remember his laugh.
I remember
he died at Terezin.

He looks firmly at Gertrude.

PICASSO
And you. You were a Jew.
How did you do it? How did you live?

GERTRUDE
I was famous.

PICASSO
Fame was not enough.

GERTRUDE
The cover of TIME.

PICASSO
Time ran out. The Germans came.

[4] I resisted in my art.
Art makes life out of death.

GERTRUDE
Imagination is resistance.
Why were we any safer than you?
I keep wondering,
have they learned to read me?
Both of us now – what did we leave
for the living?

PICASSO
The world has always known who I am.
Guernica!
Night Fishing at Antibes!
I found my own way to scream.
Even a casserole can scream.

I screamed in *The Charnal House*.
You were in your country house,
translating Pétain – is it true?
His anti-Semitic drivel?
Who were you trying to please?
Your friends in high places,
in the Bibliothèque –
is it true they protected you?

GERTRUDE
You, up in the city. What did you know?

PICASSO
I had them storming my studio!
Gestapo inspections. I had to watch
their dead hands on my paintings.

They came to the bank.
They opened my vault.
The Germans were lovers of art.

GERTRUDE
We were frightened, Alice and I.
But Geneva and safety were not far away.
We decided to stay.

PICASSO
You asked me what did we do.
I'm telling you, you did nothing.

GERTRUDE
I wrote. I loved.

PICASSO
I painted my heart out for a dove.
I changed the world of art.

GERTRUDE
You were ungrateful.

PICASSO
(*enraged*)
So full of yourself!

A third voice rises in the darkness. A girl in her late teens, piercing at first, stopping both artists in mid-argument.

GIRL
Why? Why? Why?
Why did we...?

GERTRUDE
Who is it now?

PICASSO
Why do you care?

GERTRUDE
I don't like being interrupted.
It's impolite.

GIRL
Why did we live
only to...?

PICASSO
(*to Stein*)
Is this one of your conjurings
as you imagine me?

GERTRUDE
No one I know.

PICASSO
You pretend not to know.

The Girl emerges in light.

PICASSO
(*looking from the Girl to Stein*)
A friend of yours?

GERTRUDE
(*to the Girl*)
Have we met?

[5] GIRL
Miss Stein, I remember.
Do you remember me?

GERTRUDE
A rose?
Why do I remember that?
A rose is a rose is a rose.

GIRL
I sold you a rose on the roadside,
near the village of Izieu.
You came by in your car
with the lady, your friend.

GERTRUDE
Alice. My Alice.

GIRL
She said you were famous.
A famous American writer.
You bought her a rose –

GIRL and GERTRUDE
"A rose from a genius,"

GIRL
I remember you said.

GERTRUDE
A rose is a rose...

GIRL and GERTRUDE
is a rose.

GERTRUDE
I'm sorry, I barely remember.
Tell me your name.

GIRL
No one remembers my name.
I don't remember myself.

PICASSO
I had a friend who looked like you,
almost like a girl.
I painted him many times.
My paintings were blue.

GIRL
It wasn't I.
Why did I die?

GERTRUDE

I'm sorry, young lady.
I can't have known why.

GIRL

I was an orphan, just seventeen
the day they came.
They took us in transports
far, far away.
I remember the weather that day.
April, with buds on the trees.
But cold, still cold, a chill in the air.

PICASSO

I was in Paris. So far away.
April in Paris. Somehow familiar...

GERTRUDE

I couldn't have known.

PICASSO AND GERTRUDE

We tried to resist.
We made art. Art is life.
These hands and these eyes,
they made my art.
Life! After life. Art is for life!

GIRL

You were saved.

GIRL

And I died.

[6] It wasn't the gas. It was fever. The camp.
I worked at building a road
until I fell sick.
And then I couldn't eat.
And then there was nothing to eat.

And the Russians came
and they looked at me
and shook their heads.
"I'm afraid she's already dead" –
that's what they said with their eyes.

I remembered the rose.
I remembered the car on the road,
a summer day near Izieu.
Two ladies, and one was a genius, she said.

And I was a rose selling roses.
I had such color in my cheeks,
such laughter in my eyes.
I could have stood selling roses
for the rest of my life.

The orphanage took me in
and winter came, and April.
And the Germans came like bad weather.
And then how cold it was in the camp.
How hungry I was.
How I tried to stand up.
And I died. Just like that.
It wasn't hard.
My breath went out,
a rose of mist,
then I was gone.

*Both Picasso and Stein step back from the Girl as if trying to keep
memory at bay.*

[7] PICASSO

So many died.
There was a house or there was not a house.
There was a friend or there was not a friend.
Like that.
(he snaps his fingers)
A bullet or not a bullet.

GERTRUDE

Some things are important.
I brought the cubist mode
to modern writing.
I gave birth to the new.

PICASSO

(snaps his fingers)
Like that.

GIRL

She turns to Picasso and Stein with a hurt expression.

GIRL

What is after life?

GERTRUDE

The cover of TIME, I suppose.

GIRL

What is a rose?
Who will remember me?

PICASSO

The seed of the bull,
the odor of woman,
the painter's hand.

TRIO:

(the three begin in a sort of round before singing together)

GIRL

I woke in the camp.
I looked at the sky.
I worked with my hands.
Why did I live, why did I die?

GERTRUDE

I was an I,
the cover of TIME,
the genius of letters.
I gave a rose to my Baby and I died.

PICASSO

I made my mark.
I made in my hands
a light for the world.
I loved and I lived and I laughed and I died.

Now they sing the same words, looking from one to the other:

ALL THREE

What we wanted was more life.
I wish I could remember more.
What do the living think of us
as war begets another war?

The light is very slowly fading on the Girl.

GIRL
I'm dying more than you.
See? I'm leaving now.
Can you remember me?

PICASSO
(*shaking his head regretfully*)
Lo siento.

GERTRUDE
I remember the rose
because I wrote the rose.

PICASSO
I had a rose period too.
I was in love. I was always in love.

GIRL
I wanted life, like you.
You don't know death as I know death.
Now watch me go.

PICASSO
I seem to remember I died at dinner.
The food was delicious,
but I could no longer drink.
What a pity.

GERTRUDE
Cancer. I was happy after the war,
talking to American soldier boys.
But cancer was always there.
My mother was cancer too.
You have to believe me –
I never knew.
I never knew!

GIRL
I never read your books.
I never saw your art,
but I was alive.
I looked at the stars,
I walked on the earth.

GERTRUDE
I couldn't have known.

GIRL
Can you die now as I did?

GERTRUDE
(*feeling the light fading from her*)
I'm afraid we are really dying now

PICASSO
(*also feeling the light fade*)
So we are. And I was just getting warm.

GERTRUDE
and I will never know...
My question is dying too.
I'm losing. I'm loosening. Who?

GIRL
The cover of time is gone.

PICASSO
Eye of the bull. Woman. Love.

GIRL
The dark is waiting for us all.
That's what I came to tell you.

Now light fades on all three of them equally.

PICASSO
There was a friend. There was not a friend.
Like that.

[8] GIRL
Did I once have a name?
Who was it fathered me?
Was I a child of love?
Questions remember me.

In the crime of life
I was planted, a rose.
A car came down the road.
The road turned into a wire
that sang a cold song in the wind.
My breath went out in a cloud.
I remember – what do I remember?
That April was cold.

BLACKOUT

IN SLEEP THE WORLD IS YOURS

Poems by Selma Meerbaum-Eisinger

English translation from the German by Jerry Glenn and Florian Birkmayer, with Helene Silverblatt and Irene Silverblatt. *Harvest of Blossoms: Poems from a Life Cut Short*, copyright 2008, Northwest University Press. Used by permission.

[9] Lullaby
Sleep, my child, just fall asleep,
please sleep and don't cry anymore.
Just look, in sleep the world is yours,
please sleep and don't cry so hard.

Close your eyes and fall asleep,
listen, the forest is rustling.
In sleep there is no hate and no scorn,
and in sleep you are not cold.

Sleep, my darling, and smile, my child,
listen, the river is singing.
Sleep, then the wind will sing of joy
and sing of the blossoming spring.

Sleep my child and forget your ails,
for you the day is dark.
Bright is the night when a dream cuddles you,
so sleep my child, so sleep.

– January 1941

[10] Yes

You are so distant.
As distant as a star I thought I'd grasped.
And yet you are near –
just a little dusty
like time that's past.
Yes.

You are so huge.
As huge as the shadow of that tree.

And still you're just here too –
just pale like a dream
in my bosom.
Yes.

– 6th July, 1941

[11] Tragedy

This is the hardest: to give yourself away
and then to see that no one needs you,
to give all of yourself and realize
you'll fade like smoke and leave no trace.

– 23rd December, 1941