

Language Acquisition

Sho Sugita

What happens to an erasure of the unwritten
damnatio memoriae of the unsculpted

or rongeurs gnawing at the undeveloped
tissues of record keeping the remains
now calcine, brittle

copies another copy
in the processing, corroded
halftones breaking up
a slowing cycle
granular pigments
with no means to reach
a zero-point.

The spectacle of a blind lust for collecting
fragments from a book of newspaper archives
a fragment of a fragment, never to be understood.
The worth of saving the dust is a personal note,
a eulogy.

December 27, 1945. Lesson 1.

The beginning of a language:
military glossary

兵士 ソルダット *soldat*

將校 オフィツエル *ofitser*

上官 ナチャニツク *nachal'nik*

tracing familiar phonetics

of those who had spoken the vernacular
sometime before

I *ya*

I am Nakamura

You *vih*

Who are you?

He *on*

He is a soldier named Mori

Who *kto*

Who is the officer? Who is the commander?

An equivalence, assimilated.
Unfurling leaves — *shredded umbrella plants* — a particular.
Something touchable. Ingestible.
No need for recognizable sounds
as all the new particulars become part of the body
with torn straws on the wall as real as ever.
Pechka, and outside — seeing breath
about 15 km from town
the workers come to Raichikhinsk.

December 27, 1945. Lesson 2.
The house is small.
The road is good.
The car is big.
Do you have tobacco and matches?
How old is Kanemoto?

What little is found outside of the surrounding
clusters of adjectives —
the grandiose, the hundred million of this for that
the blood and sweat, the scythe.

Between embellishments, a moment of clarity:
the sparrows are the same sparrows,
on the same snow covering the roofs.

Sections of this poem were appropriated from *Nippon Shimbun (Japan Times)*, a prison newspaper that was distributed in Siberian labour camps from 1945-1949, in addition to declassified CIA files on nearby regions from the same period. The author's grandfather was a detainee/prisoner of war in the Amur Oblast between 1945-1950.