poēma

- for William Meredith

1

The Russian olive tree is dead.
All year its roots battled the maple's
and lost. I put it where I could see
it grow. Each doing its own thing
we would grow old together.

Today a silver heaviness is in my blood.
Gray leaves flutter,
gnarled trunks heave upwards to join
other things I have taken in
that are frail and cry,
which we run from or starve—
the old, rain, desire.

2

This morning I read about Sartre's last days—
of Simone de Beauvoir in the hospital room
with his corpse.
She wanted to be alone with him;
to lie beside him under the sheets.
"No," the nurse said, "the gangrene."
So she lay beside him on the sheets instead.

I have often been duped by the fragrance of death—
narcissus, gladioli—unmasked now
as love's true opposite;
its fraternal twin, monstrously continent
and strong against friendship, blood, ambition,
and—most fragile of all—desire.
In her small frame,
in her old age,
in her eyes so
much defiance struggling
for air . . . .

In the undertow, to think—

(given their faith:
without heaven and hell,
without God and Spinoza,
without pre-life and post-life,
sans change, sans magic, sans mercy,
or child of their loins to tell,
“My mother Simone, my father Jean Paul . . .”)

Le mort so absolut, all
that remains is to make
all of the hour and place in 1929;
all of a terrace at the Luxembourg Gardens
where she first saw Jean Paul
strolling beside the lake.

And if

there is room or need,
for blessing or for praise
to praise then her mourning dress,
the hands of the labourers who made
the window at the Sorbonne
where they first spoke; his first gift,
a drawing—‘Leibnitz bathing with the Monads’.

Praise to Leibnitz in August
and that sunlit corridor—the tiny
existences alone, to make,
complete a life . . . .

— Shreela Ray