Spring 1980

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CutBank

Spring/Summer 1980

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CutBank is now indexed in The Access Index to Little Magazines, and is available on microfilm from Gaylord Bros., Inc., P.O. Box 61, Syracuse, New York 13201. It is also listed in the Index to Periodical Fiction and the Index of Periodical Verse.

CutBank is published twice a year, in fall and spring, and is funded by the Associated Students of the University of Montana. Subscriptions: $4.00/year, $7.50/2 years. All correspondence should be sent to CutBank, c/o Department of English, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana 59812. Unsolicited manuscripts are encouraged, but must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

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Copies of back issues are still available. See back pages for further information. Numbers 1-13 are available in a set for $15.00.

Publication of this magazine has been made possible, in part, by a grant from the Associated Students Store Reserve Trust Fund Board.
This issue is dedicated to the memory of James Wright
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INTRODUCTION

The editors of CutBank are pleased to present this special issue of translations. During the difficult process of wading through submissions, we became aware of the demand for publication of poetry and fiction from other languages. As the world community continues to shrink it becomes necessary for all of us to familiarize ourselves with world literatures. However, we do not believe that the narrowing gap between cultures requires the adoption of a common language exclusively. On the contrary, English-speaking readers are now more than ever obliged to meet and understand the nature of literature around the world. For this reason we have tried to select those poems that retain as much as possible the tone and imagery of the original. We have also tried to select those poems that retain as much as possible the tone and imagery of the original. We have also tried to select poems that we feel are carefully conceived as works in English. This is not to deny any of the idioms, idiosyncrasies or subtleties of the original that might be lost in translation. Rather, it is to acknowledge the significant elements of the poem that are translatable. Otherwise, how do we explain the immeasurable influence of foreign prose and poetry on American writers?

This issue contains work from eighteen countries. The oldest poetry represented is from the seventeenth century; the most contemporary, written in the past few years. There is no one thematic stance, no single stylistic trait. The poems themselves range from the internal mysteries of Eugenio Montale to the political satire of Giuseppe Belli to the conceptual call-to-meaning of Octavio Paz to the pure imagery of Bashō.

We have awarded the $50 poetry prize to Daniel Simko for his translations of the two Slovak poets, Milan Rúfus and Štefan Strážay. We feel the clarity of image and precision of language evoke the best of what is never finally translatable: the meaning that resonates between the words and the emotional power that remains after the poem is read.

The $50 fiction prize was given to Cathy Tebbetts for her translation of three chapters from Ana Maria Matute's Celebration Toward the Northwest. The elements of the novel evident in these
chapters — tradition, religion, family, community, childhood, maturity, poverty, love and repulsion — express a sensitivity to the complexity of joy and pathos. We believe any good work of art illuminates the things that comprise and surround human experience.

We feel all the work in this issue satisfies this criterion, yet offers a variety of forms and sensibilities. In making our choices, personal taste also swayed us, as is inevitable. With these qualifications in mind, *Cut Bank* has officially jumped on the translation bandwagon in an attempt to offer our readers poetry and fiction that in every sense survives.

*Sara Miller*  
*Don Schofield*
TO GO HOME

No one welcomed you, only a pine hummed above the brown slate of roofs.
On the mountains, gray like the creator’s sleep, the first snow was seen.

On the path in the field, half frost, half dew.
The cattle waited until the pasture grew warm. From their sides rose the light steam of home, the stable.

Dumb is the animal, and can’t answer. Lay your hand on it.
It will stare at your coat with its large brown eyes. And how it licks your palms,
damply you remember the sound of forgotten tones and hasty tuning.
And confessing humbly you realize, that actually only the lost return home this way.

translated by
Daniel Simko
THE SHRUBBERY IS DARKENING

1.
A green forest jealously guards
its crevasses;

the uncombed light
waves a farewell to paleness
from a great height.

2.
It’s night in the green forest.
Lightning of dry twigs
cuts through the dark.

The legs of girls are beautiful.
All that rustles under the naked back:
leaves, light.

translated by
Daniel Simko
ABOUT LOVE

1.
You lie undressed
and summer is all around you.
It’s quiet in the depth of the eye

and after love
the hands grow calm,
the mouth grows calm and rough,
it is not raining.

2.
That longing, to be really
cruel,
to touch you forehead quite differently.

translated by
Daniel Simko
Death looks terrible only from the front. From the back everything suddenly becomes beautifully innocent like a carnival mask into which you gather water after midnight to drink, to wash off sweat.

You cover only the holes left by the eyes. And that is the last, the very last mistake.

translated by
Daniel Simko
THE DAY DEATH COMES

What will it be like, the day death comes?
Perhaps like the gift at the beginning of night,
the first kiss on the lips given unasked,
the kiss that opens the way to worlds of marvels
while, in the distance, a Spring of unknown flowers
agitates the heart of the moon.

Perhaps in this way: when the morning,
green with shimmering buds, begins to sway
in the bedroom of the beloved,
and the tinkle of stars as they rush to depart
can be heard on the silent windows.

What will it be like, the day death comes?
Perhaps like a vein screaming
with the premonition of pain
under the edge of a knife, as a shadow,
the assassin holding the knife,
spreads out with a wing span
from one end of the world to the other.

Whichever way death comes, whenever it comes,
there will be the same word of farewell to the heart:
"Thank God it is finished, the night of the broken-hearted.
Praise be to the meeting of lips,
the honeyed lips I have known."

translated by
Naomi Lazard
I LOOK AT MY HAND

I look
at my hand. The one I forget
so often,
leaving it among the most
vulgar objects.
Now it's like a bird
which has abruptly fallen
from my body to
this spot.
Another discovery: here is
my body. I live
in it without knowing
about it, almost without feeling it.
Sometimes it stumbles,
all of a sudden,
against another inevitable body.
And it is love. Surprised,
I then feel it isolated,
whole, different,
other times the sun
outlines its warm
profile, or the wind surrounds it
with a concrete and confining
boundary.
But now it is a cold
foreboding.
Tree, standing erect
in front of me, sudden body
of mine!
Blood runs through it. How
it descends! Listen to it:
this is the heart. Here sleeps
the pulse, like the water
of a quiet river.
There is the clean
white bone in its river-bed. The skin.
The long muscles, tough and concealed.
It is on the earth. On the earth:
tall spike of wheat,
young and green aspen, old
olive tree.
On the earth it is. It was.
I've seen it.
For only a moment.

... It stands tall
between me and those yellow fields.

translated by
Joel Hancock
REQUIEM

He tossed a life preserver to the young castaway in '55
a longish first translation job for the bedhopping ingenu
about this monster poem says he
it's an epic sh*tik you can live off it meanwhile
he'd remembered me as the precocious monkey

the years then
our years on earth
first shooting then silence is all it is
up close everything seems small-time
but seen from a distance
as though one thumbed through Revelations
between a bloodypimpled sky and burning houses
we both aged
a pair of family men

I have my notion of Resurrection
the angel reeling off the official text
took me for someone else when
he pinned the brass medal
to my rib

the afterlife 1964
raining windy
K's coming from the direction of the Tuileries
his sweater blooming as big as the Czar's Bell
its hem hanging on him like a skirt
he says let's sit down some place before we freeze

Sainted Trinity of paupers
he Julie and I
pooling our francs on payday
laughing as though we lived it up
and we are alive because we've invented immortality
(the kind we can afford)
a bottle of rosé

translated by
Jascha Kessler
Dino Campana

NIGHT CHARACTER

Florence below was an abyss of lights of trembling sordidness:
On wings of fire the faraway rangling
Of the tram faded: the enormous dull river
Flashed its serpent's scales.
Above the indefinite spirals the disquiet smirking faces
Of thieves, and I between two equal rows of cypresses like
sputtering torches

More bitter than cypress hedges
More bitter than trembling box-trees
As from my heart this love
As from my heart, the love a pimp breaks into song:
I love the old whores
Swollen with the fermentation of sperm
Who flop like toads on all fours on their red matresses
And wait and pant and gasp
Flaccid as bellows.

translated by
Frank Stewart
NOCTURNE OF SAINT ILDEFONSO

1
At my window the night invents another night, another space:
convulsive party
in a square meter of blackness. Fleeting
coolitions of fire, nomad geometries,
wandering numbers. From yellow to green to red
the spiral unwinds. Window!
magnetic sheet of calls and responses,
high-voltage calligraphy
deceiving sky/hell of industry
over skin that changes with each instant.

Sign-seeds:
night fires them,
they rise,
explode high above they precipitate,
burned out,
in a cone of shadows, reappear,
rambling fires,
cluster of syllables,
spinning conflagration,
disperses, once again small bits.
The city invents and annuls them.

I am at the tunnel's entrance.
These phrases perforate time.
Perhaps I am the one who waits at the tunnel’s end.
I speak with closed eyes.

On my eyelids,
someone has planted
a forest of magnetic needles,
someone guides the thread of these words.

The page has become an anthill.
Emptiness has settled in the pit of my stomach.
I fall through this emptiness interminably.

I fall without falling.

My hands are cold,
my feet are cold—but alphabets burn, burn.

Space becomes and is destroyed.
Night insists, instinctively night feels my forehead,
my thoughts.
What does it want?

2

Empty streets, crooked lights.

On a street corner
the specter of a dog.
Searches in the trash,
for a ghost of a bone.
Confused henhouse:
yard of a tenement and its commotion.

Mexico, toward 1931.

Loitering sparrows,
a flock of children
builds a nest
with newspapers they didn't sell.
The lanterns invent,  
in desolation  
make-believe puddles of yellowish light.

Apparitions,  
time exposes:  
   lugubrious, lascivious, heel-clapping:  
beneath a sky of soot  
the flame of a skirt.  
C'est la mort—ou la morte . . .

Indifferent breeze  
tears lascerated ads from the walls.

At this hour  
the red walls of Saint Ildefonso  
are black and they breathe  
sun become time,

time become stone  
stone become body.

These streets were once channels.  
In the sun  
houses were silver:  
city of lime and upright adobe  
fallen moon on the lake.

The Creoles erected,  
another city  
—not white: gold and rose  
over the blind channels and buried idols  
idea become space, tangible number.

They built it  
at the eight-direction crossroad,  
its doors  
open to the invisible:  
Heaven and hell.

Dormant ward.  
We travel through galleries of echoes,  
among broken images:  
our history.
Quiet nation of stones. Churches, vegetation of domes, their facades petrified gardens of symbols. Mired in the vengeful proliferation of dwarfish houses humiliated palaces, waterless fountains, disgraced frontages. Congeries insubstantial madrepore: they accumulated on the vast massivity, defeated not by the weight of the years, but by the disgrace of the present.

Square of the Zocalo, vast like a firmament: lucid space, court of echoes. There we invent, between Aliocha K. and Julian S., destinies of lightning facing centuries and its coteries. We are dragged by the wind of thought, the verbal wind, wind that plays with mirrors, master of reflections, constructor of cities of air, geometries suspended from the thread of reason.

Ideas,
fruit at arm's length.
    Fruit: suns.
    They burn.
Burn, tree of gunpowder,
    adolescent dialogue,
sudden    smitten framework.
12 times
the bronze fist of the towers pounds.
    Night
explodes into shreds,
    then gathers them and itself,
intact, it unites.
    We disperse,
not there in the plaza with its burnt trains,
    here,
on this page:    petrified letters.

3

The lad who walks through this poem,
between San Ildefonso and the Zocalo,
is the man who writes:
    this page
also is a nocturnal walk.
    here specter
friends incarnate,
    ideas dissipate.

Good, we wanted the good:
    to straighten the world.
We didn't lack integrity:
    we lacked humility.
We didn't want what we wanted with innocence.
Precepts and concepts,
    theologians pride:
to strike with the cross,
to found with blood,
erect the house with bricks of crime,
decree obligatory communion.

Some were
converted into secretaries of the secretaries
of the Secretary General of Hell.

Rabies
became philosophy,
its drivel has covered the planet.
Reason descended upon earth,
took the form of the gibbet
—and millions adore it.

Circular madness:
we have all been,
judge, jury, victim, witness
in the Grand Theater of Filth,
we have all
brought false witness
against others
and against ourselves.
And the most vile: we were
the audience that applauds or yawns in our seat.
The guilt that doesn't know its own guilt,
innocence,
was the major guilt.
Each year a mound of bones.

Conversions, recantations, excommunications,
reconciliations, apostasies, abjurations,
zig-zag of androlotries and demonolotries,
sorcery and deviations:
my history,
are these histories of error?
History is the error.
Truth is that which,
further than dates,
closer than names,
history scorns:
the uniqueness of each day
—anonymous beat of everyone,

beat

unique in each one—

the unrepetitive

single day identical to all days.

Truth

is the bottom of time without history.

Weight

of the weightless instant

a few stones with sun,

vistas seen long ago which return today,

stones of time that are of stone also

beneath this sun of time,

sun that comes from a dateless day,

sun

that illuminates these words,

sun of words

that is extinguished when spoken.

They burn and burn out

suns, words, stones:

the instant burns them

without scorching itself.

Hidden, immobile, untouchable,

the present—not its presence—is always.

Between the act of making and seeing,

action or contemplation,

I chose the act of words:

to make them, inhabit them,

to give language eyes.

Poetry is not truth:

it is the resurrection of presences,

history

transfigured into the truth of dateless time.

Poetry, like history, is made:

poetry,

like truth, is seen.

Poetry:
incarnation
of sun-over-stones in a name,
       dissolution
of the name in an over-yonder from the stones.

Poetry,
   hanging bridge between history and truth,
not a path toward this or that:
       to see
stillness in movement,
       motion
in stillness.

History is the path:
does not lead anywhere,
       all travel it,
truth is to walk through it.

We do not come or go:
we are in the hands of time.

Truth:

Brotherhood over the void.

4

Ideas dissipate,
       specters remain:
truth of what has been lived and suffered.
An almost empty after-taste remains:
       time
—shared fury—
       time
—shared oblivion—
finally transfigured
into memory and its incarnations.
              Time
become apportioned-body remains: language.

At the window

phantom warrior,

the commercial sky of neons

ignites and is quenched.

Behind,

barely visible,

the real constellations.

Among water tanks, antennas, roofs,

the moon:

liquid column, more mental than corporeal,
cascade of silence,
appears.

Neither phantom nor idea:
once goddess and today roving clarity.

My woman sleeps.

Moon also,

clarity that elapses

—not among cloud reefs
among crags and anguishes of dreams:
a soul also:

It flows beneath her closed eyelids,
silent torment,

precipitates headlong from her forehead,
to her feet,

she ravages from within
and she buds from within,

her beats sculpt her,
she invents herself with self-surveyance,
copies herself while
being invented,
between the islands of her breasts

she flows through her figure,
she is an arm of the sea,
her belly is the pond
where shade and its flora
vanish,
rises,
  descends,
    scatters within herself
      ties herself
to her flow,
    disperses in her figure:
also a body.

Truth
  is the surge of waves of a breath
  and the visions closed eyes see:
palpable mystery of a person.

Night is about to overflow.
  It dawns.
The horizon has become aquatic.
  To fling oneself
from the height of this hour:
  will dying be
falling or rising,
  sensation or cessation?
I close my eyes,
  I hear my blood's footsteps,
inside my skull,
  I hear
time pass through my temple.
  I am still alive.
The room is moon-sanded.
  Woman:
fountain at night.
  I entrust myself to her peaceful flow.

*translated by*
*Betina Escudero*
ON THE ORDER OF THINGS
To Octavio Paz

Even desperation requires a certain order. If I put a number up against the wall and machine gun it, I'm a responsible individual. I've freed reality of a dangerous element. I have nothing left but to take on what's left, the world with one less number.

Ordering creative material is no different. There are many ways to approach this problem, but in the long run they're all the same. I get into bed or lie in an open field, look up, and the machine is already functioning. A big ideal or a small intuition swoops down, its only purpose is to fill the natural sky, or the false one. First you'll see shadows, and with luck, a sparkle here and there, a premonition of light, to be more exact. Color is a different story, it's a matter of knowing your work and persevering.

Putting a cloud in working order isn't difficult, children do it all the time. The problem is making sure it can't get away, so that it's ready to play as soon as you whistle.

There are people who, at given moments, are able to put it all up there, or all down here, but can they keep it like that? This is the problem.

You must learn to lose with order, this is the first step. The ABC. You'll have gained a solid footing, feet up in the air, or feet on the ground, what's important, I repeat, is
that it's solid and permanent.

Back to desperation, real desperation doesn't develop from one day to the next. Some people need a whole lifetime to get it. We're not talking about that small desperation that flashes on and off like a lightning bug, all it needs is stronger light, noise, or a bit of wind to make it go away.

Now we're getting somewhere. We've learned to lose without changing our solid position, we believe in the efficiency of permanent desperation.

Let's start over: lying face up, (as a matter of fact the perfect position for creating is a drowned man's position half-buried in the sand.) we call that nothing, sky, the nothing we've already found. Let's put up the first spot. Stare at it steadily. Blinking could be fatal. This is an intentional and straightforward act, there's no room for doubts. If we can get the spot spinning, changing into a moving point, contact will be made. Repeat: desperation, assuming a position of failure and faith. Faith is the new and conclusive element.

Someone's knocking at the door. Don't worry, we can't lose hope. Naturally, the first little spots were erased, and the light over us went out. But we've got to answer, desperately, holding the correct position, (face up, etc.) and full of faith: Who is it?

Of course, the intruder will have left without waiting for us to answer. It's always
that way. There's nothing we can do but start over in the given order.

translated by
Elisabeth Hamilton-LaCoste
FIRST DANCE

I'm a monkey, just a monkey climbing up and down this gigantic red flower. Each one of my dark bristles is a wing, a being steeped in desire and happiness. I have twenty supple black toes, all of which respond to my wishes.

Maybe I'm the only living being who moves, breathes and complains. The only one spinning round and around the snake and the mire, Elephant trunk, human sunflower fuzzy and clean, soloist, hermit, the plague. I am, undoubtedly, the one you hear breathing, spinning to catch the testimony, the act bristling off tongues and eyes while they're still trembling, and can still remember.

Why are we whining and groveling? Courage! There's more than enough time, on with the feast! The guests generously show off their skulls, dirty beetles hitched to their memory. Should I tell them, just to see them turn white, that more powerful hands won't throw them into the void, that they'll have to do it alone, throw themselves into what's black, into what has no other side, no echo, not even a beginning or an end?

I love this red flower, it's not innocent.

translated by
Elisabeth Hamilton-LaCoste
Blanca Varela

FINDING

Never looked.
When I hear a bird-song, it's my habit
to say (to no one), "Well what do you know, a bird!"
or "What color was it?"
The color really isn't important
moves without a name
the space full of a nameless radiance,
and my eyes, steady, unnamed.

translated by

Elisabeth Hamilton-LaCoste
Nothing can keep that star from rising over sloping sands. The dark sweetness overcomes the archer, reduces him to the faint smile on his blue lips, scrutinizes him, inert and aching on his throne of snow. The rain loves her son, between the cliffs and the changing colors of the cloud, he throws up a hand to cede his gardens and his fire.

translated by
Elisabeth Hamilton-LaCoste
FAMILY SECRET

I dreamed about a dog
a skinned dog
his body singing his red body whistling
I asked the other
the one who turns out the butcher’s light
what happened
why are we in the dark

it’s a dream you’re alone
there is no other
light doesn’t exist
you are the dog you are the flower that howls
softly sharpen your tongue
your sweet black tongue on four paws

the burning you feel in dreams
is the human hide disappearing
only this dog’s red pulp is clean
the real light’s in the crust
of the dog’s eye
you are the dog
everynight you are the skinned dog
you dream of yourself and that’s all

translated by
Elisabeth Hamilton-LaCoste
The day’s gone,  
dream scales whirl.

Everything drops,  
night is boredom.

In the desert, in the dark  
afraid of love  
the oyster is crying alone.  
Purple leaves drop from your forehead  
you turn away, black bubble  
with nowhere to go.

Suddenly a thousand streets open  
burning reefs  
hold your icy body back, tear  
that nothing hurts,  
coral digs its claw into your shadow,  
your blood slips loose,  
drenching fields,  
a red sound jumping out windows  
and all this is nothing but Fall.

II

Give me your hands,  
this is our last light,  
don’t leave me here, forgotten  
on the top of a wave.

Get out of here.

Shave those cypresses off the cold landscape,
sweep those drowning people away,
they're cluttering the horizon.

Did you hear about life?
It's very moving.

Crossing the desert
where the sky collapsed
there's a terrifying feast
I'm almost forgetting.

III

The perfume of the sun's rays in
our house. Ferocious!
We're thirsty, in a hurry to knock
on complete darkness with a flower's bone.
There's a tree stump in this story.
We look to the sky, no signs.
Is it night? day?
The spider that measured time died.
There's nothing but an old wall and a new family of shadows.

IV

Desires, stones, strips of sky,
not a bird,
I'm running.
A new mountain,
young river, no anger.

This is the world I love.
I want a fast sky,
a different morning, without colors,
to put my angels in,
my streets where there's still smoke and surprise.

translated by
Elisabeth Hamilton-LaCoste
Strange violin, is that you?
In how many distant cities now
has your lonely night spoken to mine?
Do hundreds play you—, or one?

Are all of the great cities occupied
by somebody who, but for you,
would have long disappeared in the rivers?
And why does this constantly happen to me,

why am I always the neighbor of those
who out of their own fear compel you to sing
and say: this life is heavier
than the heaviness of all things.

translated by
Franz Wright
SUMMONS CHANT

Phoebus, red-crashing bank of clouds
Swim
Under his eyelid mingle
with my hair
Bind him so he doesn’t know
If it is Monday or Friday and
What century, if he read Ovid
Or saw him, if I
Am his spoon, his wife or
A cloud animal rapidly
Cutting across sky

translated by
Elizabeth Weber
THE NIGHT SPREADS OUT ITS FINGERS

The night spreads out its fingers
They find me in my house
They place themselves under my table
They crawl growing larger they coil themselves

And the smoke floats through the room
Growing into a beautiful tree
That I can easily destroy—
I smoke once again then

I count off all my loves
Friends on these fingers
There are too many fingers I
Am dead to easy friends

The night spreads out its fingers
They find me in my house
Smoke swims through the empty room
Growing into a tree

That was completely covered with leaves with words
Words that immediately withered
Little boats swim through the branches
That today I can no longer climb

translated by
Rich Ives
THE DSHWARI CLOISTER RUINS

The brown monks march like geese
They are very old, only their voices
Are beautiful a band bursting forth
They chant at the drop of a button they are still.

Here they wait, feet motionless lifted
Until the peasant lets their mouths sing again
Hands inserted in sleeves
They go like swallows through the eighth nest

Until evening comes, the time of wine
They sleep in drunk spools
The abbot on his high stool
Counts kopeks in the hollow of a stone.

translated by
Elizabeth Weber
TRANSLATION OF POETRY AS SACRILEGE

What passes for translation of poetry is a convention of approximate analogies, a rough-cast similitude, just tolerable when two relevant languages or cultures are cognate, but altogether spurious when remote languages and far removed sensibilities are in question. 
—George Steiner

After Babel

Recently I read that because poetry is so altered by translation the translator commits a sacrilege, an offense against the poem and poet. What happens to the meaning and form of the poem is a crime against the spirit. Translation of poetry is in the words of George Steiner, possible yet impossible. To translate poetry is to serve two masters: not only form and meaning, but also two languages, two cultures.

When I first read Rilke in English, after hearing so much about him, I was disappointed. But when I read those same poems in German, I realized the fault was not in Rilke, but in the translation. The subtleties of the language had been lost, and with it the beauty.

Many say that language is not the vehicle for thought, but its determining medium. We think and feel as our particular language allows us. Every language has a definite rhythm all its own.

When thinking about translation of poetry, I am always reminded of Tess Gallagher’s “Poem on Translation”:

In the new language, you are awkward,
you don't agree with yourself,
these versions of what you meant
to say. Like a journalist, one has written
"throat" where you have said
"throat." Another uses his ears
as mouth; he writes like an orator
in a bathroom, not "tears"
But "sobbing".

This excerpt expresses quite well the hazards of translating poetry:
even equivalent words have different meanings—and different shades of meaning—in different languages. The best translations are rarely good enough. Music and meaning are frequently lost: all those beautiful gaps and silences gone. In trying to get all the shades of meaning and mood the translator has to be careful not to go too far. He must not embellish on the poem to the point of ridiculousness and make the poem over-emotional, forgetting the intentions of the poet. A translator translated a line from a poem by Eugenio Montale as “a snappy refrain/ of castanets”. There was no “snappy” in the original. The rhythm implied it. But the translator wanted to make the sound of castanets as clear to us as it was to him in the original.

Later in Gallagher’s poem, she writes of the hazard of knowing the language “too well/to say anything simply.” Rigid adherence to the literal meaning and form is perhaps the worst error a translator of poetry can make. What comes out is not poetry. Once I was asked by a professor to translate some lines from Goethe. After I did he said “you got all the words right, but killed the poem.” Exact translation and formal syntax sometimes must get left behind. A poem by East German poet, Sarah Kirsch, begins:

Nachmittags nehme ich ein Buch in die Hand
Nachmittags lege ich ein Buch aus der Hand

Translated literally this means:

Afternoons take I a book in the hand
Afternoons lay I a book out of the hand

This is an exaggeration, but it shows that a translator has to step back from the original. And if necessary, transpose. Dudley Fitts states that what he tries to do “is state in my own idiom what the verse meant to me.” The translation must be given an equivalent beauty. Free translation of poetry is often not an indulgence, but a duty.

To translate is to replace one view of the universe with another as equivalent as possible. The translator must have feeling for what to sacrifice and what to preserve.

In his fourth volume of Haiku, R. H. Byth writes briefly about the problem of translating haiku, one of the most stylized forms of poetry. He gives three versions of a haiku by Basho he translated:

The old pond;
A frog jumps in,—
Here is the essential problem with translating poetry: it seems simple and each one of these translations seems close, to one who doesn't know the original in Japanese. Yet with each Blyth finds fault.

The first lacks continuity and a feeling of the whole when dealing with parts. The second makes the sound the most important element when perhaps it wasn't in the original. The last is too exact, too definite. What these translations lack are the spaces and fragmentary nature of the original haiku. They lack something that Blyth, no matter how hard he tries, cannot give them.

Schopenhauer said that one can't translate poems but only transpose them. Once, when translating a German poem, I had to find an equivalent word for the German "Becken." The first word that came to me was "basin." But I found it also could mean "pelvis" or "vortex." All these meanings were present in the original poem. I never resolved the problem to my satisfaction.

Another problem I frequently come across in translating German poetry is exclamation points. German poets love them. American poets do not. They look silly. Take them out, my fellow poets tell me. Leave them in, say those who have the German language as their first love. They are essential to the meaning.

So why do I bother to continue to translate given these inadequacies and problems? One reason is because when I translate I slip into the clothes of the poet I am translating. I lose myself. It is almost as good an escape as reading a detective novel, except I have to use my craft as a poet.

But more seriously, translating is a great discipline for a poet, especially when going through a dry period of writing. It is, as Kenneth Rexroth wrote, "a way of keeping your tools sharp until the great job, the great moment comes along. . . ." The writer "who can project himself into the exaltation of another learns more than the craft of words. He learns the stuff of poetry. He keeps his heart alert."
Identifying strongly with another person and taking that person's utterance and making it my own is an act of sympathy. This not only enriches me as a person, but as a poet. Making sense out of the thoughts of others—going beneath the exterior differences of two languages and cultures to bring out the beauty and absolute meaning of a poem is very much like writing my own poems. When I am successful, it is a transcendence of boundaries.

Despite the inadequacies of translating poetry, to recreate that poem in a new language, to give it an equivalent beauty, power and truth is an answer to isolation. Something passes over and translation becomes a courier for the human spirit. To dismiss the validity of it, because it is not always possible and never perfect, is absurd. The art of poetry is not always possible and hardly ever perfect, but there is that essential need for communication in all of us.
Giuseppe Gioachino Belli

RELIGION EXPLAINED AND DEFENDED

If I were a priest or a friar and had a tongue worthy of spiritual exercises, a voice to preach with until I split a lung, all for the greater glory of the cross,

I'd do some ferocious preaching. If I were able, I'd explain how living the one Good and True Religion is like making a table of oak or mahogany or cherry wood.

We have our long arms and sturdy backs. We plane and plane until it's smooth enough for a king to see, as if we'd used a wax.

Except a single knot—after we've found it, we all decide that it's a little tough, commend it to the Faith and work around it.

translated by
Miller Williams
GOOD WEATHER

What a morning! We haven't had a day like this one since I don't remember when. It opens your heart, like coming out of a cave. You feel yourself starting to breathe again.

There's a touch of balsam on the breeze. The wide sky is one delicious blue. Get yourself together, is what it says. Get out and get going, it says. There are things to do.

We've had some bad days, but this one looks like spring if I ever saw it. Everywhere all sorts of things are changing—even the rocks are splitting open. As soon as I poked my face outside the window this morning, I knew for sure—What a perfect day! What crystal! What paradise!

translated by
Miller Williams
THE GROWNUP SONS

These are your sons? Now, surely you can’t mean these two young devils! It seems like yesterday when you lived over past the Appian Way, one was an anchovy, one a sardine.

There are only two ways to go; it sure appears that we have everything we need—the belts, the jackets, caps, guns and everything else—to give the pope two lovely grenadiers.

But how time flies! ten years seems like a day, a puff of smoke—but no, it’s ten years; the children are chasing the big people away.

And here we are now with Goliath and Samson; to touch their noses you have to climb the stairs. Do you know what the world is? A great meditation.

translated by
Miller Williams
DEATH WITH A CODA

Either we're liberals or we truly do
Believe in the law of the Lord. We can't have both.
If we do believe, red-blooded or blue,
The heart freezes when it comes to death.

You go to taverns, run to a theatre, dash
From party to party, take somebody to bed,
Make your deals, pile up a little cash,
Grab everything you can—and then you're dead.

And then what? And then the soul swaps
The world we have a while for the world to come,
One that goes forever and never stops.

The word is never and it's so damned final.
Floating or sunk to the bottom, it's all the same.
The bitch eternity is going to be eternal.

translated by
Miller Williams
KEYS FOR AN UNWRITTEN POEM

You have to know certain things
to understand history. The city
you see at the start is not Bergamo,
it's Cremona (see also the allusion
to 1751, year of the Transfer). Then: the old
woman, robust but a bit weak in the head,
who threatens her daughter with a cane—taunts her,
widowed at forty,
she married the apprentice at the mill: which explains,
among other things, that business of surnames. The assistant
opposite
is the man who supervises the masons
on behalf of the customer in contrast
to the flunkie of the contractor. The war
that was about to break out
was the war of '15-'18 . . .

translated by
Vinio Rossi and Stuart Friebert
WOMAN'S SONG

When it rains they're just disgusting
those covered with grease the stove
sending smoke into the corners and in the kitchen
the salt that's stopped up the oilcloth
sticking . . . but feeling good
or feeling bad, that's something else.
The children going up and down
the little balcony outside, snapping dry branches
with the sides of their bodies, frightened, somewhat gnome-like
judging from their eyes: they seem about to fly
over the roof. But I say that from here,
wanting to return to where I was, thin
from hunger, worn out by lice,
there's a great difference.

translated by
Vinio Rossi and Stuart Friebert
ONE TIME

Of people become rich only
on silkworms and reeling-mills, I believe
there are no longer any: but once upon a time
in the Comasco or at Bergamo, where
my people come from,
many fortunes were counted in mulberries,
or how many girls would come to reel
the cocoons scorched to kill the moths
in the cold shops. If I think
who the rich are now, what
capital costs them, of the effort
they’ve made to arrive, believing
they’re way up high on the ladder,
I’m convinced everything’s complicated, even evil.
The faults of the owners
were so simple once: whoever exploits
his neighbor and pays him too little
can do no worse. But now, who will it be
who’s at fault? Who wants too much,
who profits from the poor?
Perhaps each thing must, precisely taken,
be done over and over again,
injustice is in the air, the boss
today, the board of directors
or the stock brokers are all sinners
and it bit too sui generis for me.

translated by
Vinio Rossi and Stuart Friebert
FRAGMENTS OF TEN POEMS

First Lines

On the ground floor of the sinking apartment house
It can be found in none of Oxford’s 13 sections
The universe expanding inch by inch
What, O fog-wreathed Ossian, have I to do here
Fight the fight, Man, wait for the answer
Comes back the croak of this nuncio extraordinary
They’re corporeal, all those guests eating out of that platter
In the dungeons of the underground palace of lava
Maybe it’s in the flesh that the soul lives
Still and all, one fine morning the king declares me his son

Second Lines

Sipping their wine, they don’t even know it’s sinking
The absolutely perfect synonym
According to the vague definition of verminkind
The Celts grow mistier in the mists
Happy are they who gave birth to their god on the green hill
Spelling out revelation
And rapping it along to the continents next door
The sinews of Atlas are trembling
Somewhere the ocean is spilled
Twin-tongued flame erupts from the peony

Last Lines, Presumably

Crammed with Riesling, dead men lie stacked in the cellar
So we’re better off moving to Cambridge
What a drag, what with all these personal effects
The only thing needed on Naxos was a Shirt of Nessus
Every feeling here is shivering in its sealskin with the cold
O, what it must have been like up in that divine aspic
It’s growing like some explosion in the silent flicks
Nothingness dropping away from under the sole
A face helpless in the rubble
Letter and spirit

translated by
Jascha Kessler
GRADUALLY

Gradually the pictures disappear and rheumatic hands lay hold of whatever they still can. This place has been snapped to death and nothing shines over the details anymore. What’s the point in distinguishing? I read something or other: half a page long or as far as I get, arrive at zero, a slot machine that’s quiet now, or something like a craze that’s been hushed. All I still feel is the pressure of shoes on my feet. That’s acceptable, I think, and realize: desire comes from the brain and not from a body that fits you badly, just happens to stand straight as a candle or leans over a table. There are still some of us who understand that: life’s off somewhere and we just smile like a wind-up doll and think to ourselves: the others know this too. An insect’s appetite for the unknown is poison for the metabolic system. And there’s burning in our eyes that try to follow our own transparent fingers spreading into the air.

translated by
Stuart Friebert
WALK

One flight
heavier than music
One child who eats dust
and one water
dealing out the bones
of the dead
and upending stairways
One man with an unearthed eye
reading frailty
approaching the heart
like a just god
One spiteful saint
white saint
like white linen sheets
One death
cackling at all the open doors
and everything laboring like a pious woman
One earth
black earth
at which three moons
and an impish dog are baying.

translated by
Bryce Conrad
DECEMBER SONNET

In the evening, imposters move through the woods with strange wagons, small horses.
In the clouds, a locked treasure shines golden,
in the shadowy plans, towns can be seen.

The red wind blows linens cold and black.
A dog rots, a bush, sprinkled with blood, smokes.
The reeds are flowing with a yellow chill
and a funeral procession slowly makes its way to the churchyard.

The old man’s hut nearly disappears in the gray.
In the pond, a light shines from old treasures.
The farmers sit down to wine.

A youth slips timidly to a married woman.
A monk pales tender and sad in the dark.
An empty tree is the sleeper’s sexton.

translated by
Rich Ives
RADIANT AUTUMN

The year ends plentiful
with golden wine and crops from gardens.
Plump silent forests, wonderful
and dangerous to a man alone.

The farmer says: it is good.
Your evening bells, long and soft,
leave happy moods to the end.
A flock of birds dips in salute as they migrate.

It is love’s soft season.
Down the blue river in a boat,
beautiful mountain upon mountain—
sinking in silence and peace.

translated by
Rich Ives
Autumn sun, weak and hesitant,  
and fruit falls from the trees.  
Silence lives in blue rooms,  
a long afternoon.

Death tones of metal  
and a white animal collapses.  
Coarse songs of brown girls  
are scattered in falling leaves.

The forehead of God dreams colors,  
feels the soft wings of madness.  
Shadows swirl on the hill,  
darkly surrounded by decay.

Twilight filled with sleep and wine;  
the flow of sad guitars.  
And as if in a dream  
you turn to the quiet lamp within.
IN BRITTANY

Where have they gone, your clouds, your flocks of birds?
Cold blows along this year’s road
where once the field
was warm with hatching partridge.

O Marguerite,
cold blows your hair,
you lay the dark cloth under your chin
on your pilgrimage through Morbihan,
draw water from the fountain.

Wet, leafless broom. And its shell
locked the snail within chalky walls.
The subdued light in the rain’s weir-basket.
And rocks and voices in the heathland.

O Marguerite,
sweep your hand over
the ashes from the fireplace glow.
It shines from the old blood
in the fire of legends.

translated by
Rich Ives
A flame tongues
here on the ground at night,
it whirs white leaves.
And at noon shatters
the sickle of light.
The rustling of sand
divides the heart.

Do not lift up the stone,
that warehouse of silence.
Beneath it
sleeps the centipede
of time.

Over the pass,
notched with horses’ hooves,
blows a mane of snow.
With the smokeless shadows
of numerous fires
evening fills the canyon.

A knife
skins away the fog,
the battering-ram of the mountains.
Across the river
live the dead.
This speech
is their ferry.

translated by
Rich Ives
PHASES

To whom nothing remained,
they see in the roundest moon
only the curve of the sickle,
the two-faced sign
of the unavoidable reaper,
who strikes with either hand.

But the merciful pause
between the alternation of hands
remains granted for the wonder
of pure uselessness:

Because the fruitless blossom of snow
grows beautiful on black roofs,
the ghostly voices of birds
of our defoliated summers
turn homeward in hearing,
the pale silk of poppies
again reddens the skin,
in the plexus of affectionate letters
we copy once more
the old illegible
landscape of the heart.

We place lamps in the window
for the starless swimmers
and know, how small the bowl is,
how exhaustible the oil
against the night and the sea.

With a single ear
we penetrate into the wild
hordes of thistles
and stew the grains in the weeds.
Between the uneven aristae
the blackish ergot
conceals itself for us,
poisoning and soothing. And again
the moon tests its sharpness
on the silent Cross.
THE GORING AND DEATH

At five in the afternoon.
it was exactly five in the afternoon.
A child had fetched the stark white sheet
at five in the afternoon.
A basket of lime already at hand
at five in the afternoon
The rest was death and only death
at five in the afternoon.

The wind ran away with the cotton-gauze
and the oxide left splinters of tin and crystal
at five in the afternoon.
The leopard and the dove are struggling now
at five in the afternoon.
And a thigh with a ravaging horn
at five in the afternoon.
The resounding of the bass string began
at five in the afternoon,
and the bells of arsenic and the smoke
at five in the afternoon.
On the corners there were groups of silence
at five in the afternoon.
Horns held high, the bull alone
at five in the afternoon.
Just as the sweat of snow broke out
at five in the afternoon,
when the ring was covered with iodine
at five in the afternoon,
death laid her eggs in his wound
at five in the afternoon.
at five in the afternoon.
At five in the afternoon.
At five exactly in the afternoon.
Federico García Lorca

A coffin on wheels is his bed at five in the afternoon.
Flutes and bones sound in his ears at five in the afternoon.
Even now the bull roars near his head at five in the afternoon.
The chamber was pulsing with agony at five in the afternoon.
In the distance the gangrene is coming at five in the afternoon.
His wounds were blazing like suns at five in the afternoon,
and the milling mass smashed the windows at five in the afternoon.
At five in the afternoon.
Ay, how bitter the hour of five!
It was five by all men’s clocks.
It was five in the shadow of the afternoon.

translated by
David K. Loughran
Dingo’s whip cracked dryly like a flash of black lightning. It had been raining since dawn and it was nearly six-thirty already, three days before Ash Wednesday. The water matted down the old horse’s mane and the puppetman’s cart murmured its ten thousand complaints. Smiles of masks and wigs, yawns of trick dogs, and long, very long voiceless wailings.

Dingo felt it all from the driver’s seat like a tickling on the back of his neck. Behind him, inside the kaleidoscope-colored wagon, lay his old trunk of masks, the mute who played the drum, and the three trick dogs, all asleep under the tick-trickling of the rain.

They had just entered the district of Artamila at the height of Lent that hung over the defenseless earth. Artamila was none too thankful for their arrival, its ground and sky were hostile to living creatures. The district consisted of three villages, each sullen and distant from one another: Upper, Lower, and Central Artamilla. In this last one—also referred to as Big Artamila—were the town hall and the parish church. Dingo looked out over the deep valley of Lower Artamila, the most wretched of the three villages. He had fled from there when he was still a boy, following a troupe of travelling play-actors. Dingo’s real name was Domingo. He had been born on a Sunday and he tried to make his whole life a continuous holiday. Now, after the passing of years, or hours—who could tell the difference?—his own play-actor’s wagon was stopped right on the edge of the steep hill, over that wide road that descended, like inevitable fate, toward the first of the three villages. It was an abrupt and violent road, not meant for leisurely travel.

He forced himself to look; his eyes would have preferred to retreat into the back of his head. Dingo looked at the valley again after not having seen it for so long. It seemed so deep, pimpled with gray rocks. How deep, with its shacks made nearly indistinguishable by dirty fingers of hunger. There again were the oak woods on the slope, the proud tapered green poplars. In groups, yet each drawn up in arrogant solitude, like men. Those men of Artamila, their dark skin and big hands. Dingo sat quietly in the driver’s seat of his wagon with
Ana Maria Matute

his arm raised, as if warding off disaster. Dingo's eyes were wide-set, as if he travelled through the world peering out from his temples in order to avoid facing life squarely. Drops of rain clinked like frozen sparks from the edges of his waterproof cape and the axles of the wagonwheels. Dingo spit and flicked at the horse with his whip.

He heard every groan of each piece of the wooden wagon. He had started downward with a strong urge to pass on through Artamila, to pass through it in one breath like a swordslice of contempt; he felt his bile rise at the thought of old unforgotten insults. Flee from there, climb again toward the top of the facing hill on the other side of the valley and leave the red puddle of Artamila behind forever, beneath its rains and relentless skies. Red with mud, the wheels shrieked through their patches, each in a different tone, with a different complaint, thoughtlessly yoked together like a human couple. Right then Dingo felt as though he wore those wheels nailed to the sides of his own body.

The dogs began to bark, falling all over each other inside the wagon, and for a moment Dingo delightedly imagined the smiles of his masks loosing their stiffness under the wigs.

Lightning lit up the earth, only to pass hurriedly through Artamila where the people weren't the kind for dramas in verse. Once on the other side, as soon as he reached the distant blue mountain, Dingo would be able to resume his holiday. He did pantomimes of ten characters. He, one man, with ten different masks, ten voices, and ten different ways of thinking. The mute's drum would resound again, like a prayer in a cave. The mute and the three dogs, their ribcages trembling beneath the whip, waiting for the blow and the bread on the other side of Dingo's laughter, Dingo the play-actor. Dingo knew perfectly well that his wretched companions would die on him. Perhaps one by one in the gutters or against the lampposts at the side of the road. On that day, he and his ten ghosts would travel alone through the world, earning their bread and invaluable wine.

What a day that would be when alone, with his trunk full of gilt ribbons that he had robbed from country chapels, he would continue along the road with his ten voices and his ten reasons to live. He supposed they would allow him to go on always, always, with the right to ten deaths, one by one.

And that was how the whipped wagon, an enormous seven-colored laugh stained underneath with mud, hauled along its burlesques and old hurts.
It is possible that Dingo saw the boy who appeared suddenly around the bend. He was a skinny, hopeless little creature, unexpected, slow, very much in contrast to Dingo. Certainly, though, he could not have avoided knocking him down. He ran over him by accident, his whole life a poor and faded painting.

The clouds were very dark above their heads. He braked as best he could, straining with the whining of the wagon. Mud spattered into his beard, as if seeking the mouth that swore. Dingo felt a tender, fresh crunch of bones through the wheels.

Then silence fell over them. It was as if a wide, open hand had descended from the sky, pressing him hard against the land from which he wished to flee. He had known it. There were voices in the valley that had warned him, “You won’t pass through Artamila.” He had just run over one of the waifs that brought food to the pastor. Some feet away lay the small open basket, its silent desolation scattered under the falling of the rain.

Everything that had shouted before – wind, axles, dogs – was now silent, piercing him with a hundred steel-sharpened eyes. Jumping down, Dingo sank into the mud up to his ankles, cursing. He looked at the boy. He was a gray child with a single rope sandal; he was already very still, as if caught by surprise.

Dingo couldn’t help but to shout at him with his whip raised high. But his curses died in his throat. He stooped down, hushed, drilled by eyes, by silence, by the distant haughtiness of the poplars that watched him from their slope. Dingo tried to talk to the still, skinny little face. The rain kept on falling, indifferent. Softly, he touched the shining hairs on the child’s forehead, his eyelashes, his closed lips. In that instant, Dingo thought he saw the clouds reflected in the child’s eyes. But they crossed overhead and moved slowly away towards other lands.

It was still another half an hour to the village. The dogs and the mute appeared at the windows. Their wet nostrils trembled and they stared at him with their yellow, glassy eyes. Dingo put both his hands under the child’s back. He locked his wide fingers together in the muck and lifted the small body that felt as if it would break in two. He felt the skin. Sticky coldness. The dogs began to howl. Dingo looked at them, shrunken.

“He’s broken,” he started to say.

But the mute, with a thread of saliva hanging from the corner of his
mouth, didn't understand him. The child's eyes were now definitely black.

Against his will, Dingo looked down and across at the other end of the town. Far away there, at the beginning of the upward slope of the mountain, was a square of reddish earth outlined by a cracked wall. It was the Northwest Graveyard, where the men of Artamila hid their dead amongst the fallen crosses. At one time someone had planted twelve poplars in a line against the wall. They had grown into a black and empty smile, like the teeth of a comb.

Dingo hesitated. He could still leave the boy on the ground and gallop on through the town without stopping until he reached a land that didn't oppress him, a land without rotted dreams, without blood of its own. Get there, perhaps, before the next sunrise. The mute and the dogs had jumped out of the wagon and stood around him expectantly.

Then the mute had an attack of fright. He was a poor imbecile, his soul corrupted by pantomimes. He uttered a hoarse noise and began to wave his arms around, only the whites of his eyes showing, "Boy - dead," he said, "dead . . . They'll hang you and they'll . . ." The idiot suddenly jerked, arms open, and fell to the ground. He had lifted the drum from his neck and when he fell it let out a resonant poom! - as if it kept the voice of its owner hidden in its hollowness.

Undoubtedly it was the drum that startled the old horse. But Dingo was ready to believe in the malicious spirit of Artamila, the spirit that had embittered his childhood, the spirit which, that very morning when he had again stepped onto its territory, grimaced a perverse welcome.

He was cold. He pressed the small, bloodied body against his own. Maybe it was that vicious spirit that made the cart and crazed horse go hurtling downward. Dingo did not even have time to shout anything. He saw his wagon moving again, without brakes or driver this time, with the loosened awning trembling dangerously and the red curtains waving a desperate good-bye. The steep road ended in the central square of lower Artamila. The wagon didn't stop. It wouldn't stop until it reached the very heart of the village which was encircled by gray houses and high hills. Dingo saw it disappear into the ravine, disjointed, swallowed up into the gullet of the valley. He remained still among the dogs, his beard matted from the rain and his boots sunk in mud.
He stayed like that for a short time, resisting. But he shook off his hesitancy. Artamila was waiting below, as deep and as black as he remembered it in his soul.

The sky had grown darker when he began his descent with the boy in his arms. The three dogs followed him and, some paces behind, the mute, with his drum around his neck, stumbled along with a serious expression like a bird of bad omen. They walked in a line, like the poplars. Under the rain. Without light.

There was the village square that Dingo knew so well. Circular, red as blood, its hard, rough dirt firmly packed.

The actor paused at the edge of the village in the same fearful pose as all the houses huddled together around it. There was something tragic there, as in all hearts. He was in the very center of Artamila, in the deepest part of the valley. How the wind used to speak to Dingo up there on top of the hills! Almost as if he were an equal. But now he was sunk in reality, without a mask. There, again, as if time had never passed. Swallowed by that earth, naked, completely alone. His holiday had died from a single blow.

He looked upwards and was almost sorry for his desire for freedom. The disdainful mountains had grown larger. There he was, a man with ten lies who could do very little right now. His ten ways of thinking tumbled away and he remained, like a black tree, whipped by the cold. He used to go burying in those same woods every afternoon of his childhood. He remembered those times as a child, edging around the trees, maybe limping because he had stepped on a thorn. How useless it all was after all. Those who fled, those who stayed, those who painted their faces. Oh, if only then, when he was young and barefoot, a colorful wagon would have rolled into his life! If the ground would only open beneath him now. His body, his face, his mouth, were caked with red mud. He was thirsty. Perhaps the child he carried was himself. How could he avoid his own burial?... Nobody. Nobody can. "The children who don't die, where are they?"

So there was his countryside. Unchangeable and hard, surrounding all his masks, ridiculing their seven colors.

The wagon had turned over in the center of the square, overturned and broken. One of the wheels had cracked. The horse was on the ground, legs folded, maybe crippled, his foaming lips shiny from the rain. The animal's eyes looked at him like moons, perhaps crying silently. The little boy felt heavier and heavier in Sonny's arms.
A clamor, like crows in flight, arose from the windows of the wagon. Dingo realized that the village children had jumped aboard what remained of his roving home. “All the children of Artamila who appear around the sharp corners of the town, barefoot, beltless, and hushed.” Even with his eyes closed, Dingo saw them running, appearing from around the workers’ shacks. The children of Artamila, under the moon with their long shadows and short names. Just like he had turned those same corners, feeling the fire of the earth calling out from far away, entangled in the treetops, the false echo of some bell heard a year ago when they took him to Communion at the parish church. The church was in Central Artamila, eight kilometers from his village and the children of Lower Artamila grew up without bells. Dingo stared at the face of his departed child. The same. All the same. Almost thirty years had passed and they were the same children with the same footsteps and the same thirst. The same wretched houses, the same plowed earth under the skies, the same death in the Northwest. Thirty years, for what? .  .  .  “The children of Artamila, children without toys who laugh behind their hands and go down to the river to drown kittens.” When he was very little, Dingo had made a mask by smearing clay onto his face until the sun had dried it and by nighttime it fell off in pieces.

Now, a whirlwind of colors had come crashing into the lives of the children of Artamila, smashed to pieces in the heart of their town. They had come closer to him, little by little, one by one. They had been thinking, in the silence of the village, about taking that big, incarnate wheel. They watched it turning, turning, in the direction of the river, toward the ghosts of drowned dogs and cats. In the middle of a turn, it broke, falling over on its axle, but it kept turning, turning slower and slower.

“I have no choice,” thought Dingo, “I have no choice but to find Juan Medinao .  .  .”

Just like thirty years ago.
His name was Juan Medinao, just like his father and his father’s father. His grandfather’s loan sharking of the past had made Juan Medinao nearly absolute master of Lower Artamila. From his earliest memories he had realized that he was the lord and master of something that he hadn’t earned. Although the house and the land seemed vast to him, the house especially impressed him. He called it the House of the Juans. It was ugly; three large lumps of nearly garnet-colored earth and a flagstone patio on the center. At sunset the windows were red, and at dawn, navy blue. It was situated a distance from town, as if it had taken a long step back from the village, and squarely faced the Northwest Graveyard. From the window of his bedroom, Juan Medinao could watch every funeral.

That Lent Sunday evening, Juan Medinao was praying. Since childhood he had known that these were days of atonement and holy vindication. Perhaps his supplications were an inventory, an account and balance of the everyday humiliations to which his heart was exposed. It was almost dark, the flames were dying in the fireplace, his hands were entwined like roots.

Night had entered his house and rain fell incessantly against the balcony. When it rained like that, Juan Medinao felt the lash of water against all the windows, almost physically, like a desolate drumroll.

He heard them calling him. The human voice that drilled through the thin walls fell upon him. They called again. Everyone in the house, down to the lowliest servant, knew that Juan Medinao prayed at that hour and that he was not to be disturbed. They were insistent. His heart swelled with anger. He shouted and hurled a shoe at the door. “Open the door, Juan Medinao,” they said, “it’s the mayor who’s calling you. He’s here with a guard from the military post.”

He saw the shoe on the floor with its mouth gaping, deformed. He felt terribly alien from the walls, the floor, the ceiling. It was as if the whole room were spitting him toward God. He got up and slid open the bolt on the door. A maid was there, her hands hidden under her apron.

“I’m coming,” he said.

He immediately regretted his tone of voice. He tried to make up for it explaining softly, “You interrupted me. I was surrounded by angels.”
The girl turned her head and, covering her mouth, ran down the stairs. Young girls found Juan Medinao either frightening or comical.

He descended the staircase slowly. The entrance hall was dark.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

The men were black stains and their faces, less dark, seemed to float in the air. The guard explained that they had arrested a play-actor for having cut Pedro Cruz’s son in two. It had been an accident and his wagon was in pieces in the middle of the town square. The clown was asking to see Juan Medinao.

“What does he want of me?”

The mayor and the guard did not answer.

“I’ll go.”

He walked to the window. He peered through the glass and saw only blackness. That window looked out onto the central patio of the house and Juan imagined the shine of the wide flagstone under the storm. Suddenly he remembered that his house had electricity. Maybe he had forgotten because his childhood had been lived in red brilliancy. Even the walls missed the big, trembling silhouettes, growing and shrinking to the beat of footsteps that came and went. Juan felt for the lightswitch and flipped it on. Then the men appeared clearer and smaller, squinting their eyes from the sudden light.

Juan went to get his coat. As he put it on he noticed that his shirt was badly torn over his heart. His coat, too, was dirty and frayed. A lock of hair hung down over his forehead. He had a very large, disproportionate head. Looking at him, it seemed as if it would topple over onto his shoulders. On the other hand, his body was rickety, his chest sunken in and his legs bowed.

They went downstairs in silence. On the patio the raindrops stuck like pins between the flagstones. They opened the big wooden door which creaked from the humidity, and left for town.

The jail was right on the town square in an old barn with a window way up high. From the center of the square arose the din of children mixed with the smell of freshly tilled earth. Usually, the village breeding pig was kept in the jail. Next to the door, the reflection from the guards’ tricornered hats under the rain was almost exotic. They opened the door and he was given permission to order.

By the light of the lantern he saw the man. He was older than himself, aged, with wide-set eyes that held a professional and mature
gaze. Juan Medinao’s heart stopped for a moment.

“Hello, Juan Medinao,” said the clown, “I’m Dingo, the one who stole those silver coins from your . . .”

Dingo. Yes, it was him; his eyes were like arms spread on a cross. It was Dingo, the traitor of hopes and dreams. A flash from his childhood made him speechless, suppressing any protest or greeting. It was Dingo, little Dingo, the forestkeeper’s son who had a cat with red stripes on its back that made it look like it had been grilled. Together they had saved and buried the coins at the foot of a solitary poplar, at the edge of that road that could take one far, far away. The two of them were going to escape from the village with the green of spring, when it seemed they could no longer tolerate their tormented, rotten childhood lives. His memory was crystal clear. He remembered the countryside in his mind’s eye: that arduous morning when he discovered the betrayal. His whole soul trembled, feeling frighteningly like a child. In that fire-land where a shadow was too much luxury. And there was the shadow of the poplar, stretching straight on the ground, eternally marking the flight of the hypocritical friend, the thief, the lying traveller. They had wanted to journey to the sea together but he remained alone with his unquenchable thirst, next to the lost and hard shadow. That morning, his anxious hands had raked through the stirred-up earth and he didn’t even find a letter, not even a teasing letter that would have moistened his dry desolation. Dingo had left, thirty years ago already, with a troupe of comedians and trick dogs. And he, Juan, remained in the middle of the black-stain people who moved as if they were flying in circles over his legacy in a floating, grim flight of a rapacious bird. In the center of hate and hunger remained Juan Medinao, heir, master of Lower Artamila, with his crucified God and his oversized head that was the object of the other boys’ teasing. He stayed there forever, on the exasperated land, within the dreams of its trees, rocks, road. With a sky that searched for the bite of the peaks, and their enormous disdain of life, remained Juan Medinao, without the only boy who never teased him about his big head nor threw in his face, like clods of dirt, the fact that his brothers were starving. When he was just twelve and everything was hostile towards him—from his father to the very earth—Dingo betrayed him, too. Dingo, who told lies and wove images of impossible flight. It was so pleasant to listen to Dingo talk about escaping! Flee from the earth, from the
men, the sky, and oneself! Dingo, the vagabond, the liar, the thief, the merciful . . .

"I killed the boy, I couldn’t help it,” he was explaining, after thirty years, with the same expression, the same voice, “And I lost my wagon and my horse. I don’t have a cent. It’s the honest truth. Listen, Juan Medinao, if you even remember me, help me out of this mess and lend me something to start over again.”

Silver coins. Juan Medinao couldn’t remember if there had been thirty like the price of Christ or more than forty, like his age. Silver coins. He thought, “Now we don’t even use silver coins. Everything’s so far away.”

Suddenly, he jumped at Dingo, embracing him like a leaden cross. It was an attempt at friendly cordiality or, perhaps, a desire to crush him with all the rancor of his childhood memories. Thirty years didn’t mean anything. Dingo, surprised by the gesture, stopped talking.

Juan Medinao hugged him with the same desolate friendship of his early years.

“Dingo,” he said, “I would have recognized you even if I were dead.”

When he left the jail, Juan Medinao looked like he had been crying. A servant awaited him outside with a black umbrella. The mute was there, leaning against the wet wall with his hands sunk in the pockets of his jacket and trembling from fright and cold.

“Take him home,” he said to the servant.

As for the dogs, there was no way to get rid of them. They barked and whined sorrowfully, scratching at the door. Dingo observed the scene, standing on the straw bed and peering out through the little window. He had a smile on his lips, half mischievous and half sad. The three men continued on up the street. The umbrella had a broken rib and looked like an old crow with a broken wing that it held over their heads.

Juan Medinao stopped when he arrived at the square.

“Go on home,” he told the servant, “and give him something to eat and let him sleep in the stable.”

The servant did not answer. He simply handed over the umbrella and, followed by the mute, continued on his way home. Juan Medinao stood, indecisive. Pedro Cruz was one of his shepherds. As master, he should go to the child’s wake, and thus give a good example of piety. He didn’t know which one was Pedro Cruz’s shack.
In the square the children were yelling, fighting for the colorful rags and golden ribbons that Dingo pinned on to old priests’ robes, pretending to be a devout choirboy. Tough little fists defended a ribbon or some little piece of cloth. And over there, farther away, the fallen wheel was, miraculously, still turning. One child jumped down, trailing a long yellow tail. The small, bare feet left no footprints of noise on the broken wood. The trunk, its lid unfastened and gaping, displayed its weightless treasures. There was so much laughter painted on the box! There was only one mask that cried. It was a white mask, painted with green moles that pointed toward the ground and a blue mouth. Inside the wagon a little girl with burlap hair pressed it to her face and peered out of the window. The night was dark and yet Juan Medinao observed it all in detail: the colors, the quick footsteps, the eager little hands. The children were dragging the costumes in the mud. They didn’t know anything about Lent, a time when Juan Medinao prayed and pounded his chest in his bedroom. Lent, that made him protect those who teased him about his big head and stole his childhood savings, Lent, that made him go to the wake of the shepherd’s boy. They knew nothing about Lent, nor about him. The rain continued to whip everything without mercy for the colors. Without pity for that long green feather, that beautiful green feather that was being dragged through the mud. The rain was spoiling Dingo’s holiday, leaving everything soaked and ruined. All the masks had tears running down their noses. Perhaps they were taking their revenge on him for the silver coins.

As Juan Medinao approached the broken wagon, the children ran away like a wild tribe. He grabbed the wrist of the girl with the burlap hair. The little thing held the mask together against her face with a stubborn desire to run.

“Tell me where Pedro Cruz lives,” he asked her. The child’s wrist was as slippery as a snake. Maybe she hadn’t understood him. So he repeated, “Tell me where the dead boy lives.”

The little girl took him there. She walked in front of him, barefoot, small and slender, splashing quickly through the puddles. They stopped in front of a hut of red stone and earth. On the wall was one of those posters that encouraged wolf hunting parties. It was torn and peeling from the dampness. Apathetically, Juan Medinao recalled the recent wolf attacks on his flocks. Pedro Cruz had fled from the wolves last winter. Perhaps at this very moment, they were also
spying on him. There was only one large window in the shack, and a
door. Inside, he saw the flickering of fire, hot licks of flame. Even
from outside he could hear the lament of the women gathered
indoors. Juan and the little girl looked through the window that also
seemed to be crying. Juan Medina o noticed a board that hung from
two ropes. The little girl pointed to it and said something
incomprehensible.

Juan Medina o pushed the door open. In the kitchen, next to the
fire, they had laid the boy out on a stretcher; now that the blood had
been washed off, he looked combed and white. The mother and
neighboring women were gathered together, grieving. When he
entered they suddenly became silent. Only the swing kept moving,
plaything of time, as if pushed by invisible and cruelly childish hands.

Suddenly, rage began to choke him again. Again he was looking at
his eyes, black pinheads, sullen, and arrogant. The master had
entered. Orations, humiliation, knees on the ground were powerless
against those eyes. His presence was worthless. Were they also going
to blame him for the child’s death? He began to play with the button
on his vest. Again his anger swelled, rose to his throat, choked him
with its turbulent red wine. It smelled bad there, it smelled of poverty,
dirt. Suddenly, all those things were accusing him, accusing him,
Juan Medina o the master. Surely at night the rats gnawed the swing’s
ropes and the soles of the rope sandals – those wet sandals that had
been set near the fire and exuded a nauseous odor.

“Pray,” he told them. And his voice held all the sour dryness of an
order. But nobody seemed to have heard him.

“Pray, woman,” Juan Medina o repeated, clasping his own hands,
soft and hot. Without the slightest intention of irony, somebody had
put a flower in the dead boy’s mouth. It must have been a paper
flower because the countryside was dry during that month. And so it
remained there, wire stem between his lips, unaware that they had
saved him forever from the word “thirst.” The mother sighed deeply.

“Are you going to stay?” asked one of the women. There was
neither timidity nor a fect in her voice. Not even courtesy. At times
the women of the earth talked as if time were talking, beyond
indifference. It was as if all those women suddenly lacked eyes and
mouths. He only saw the withered bulk of their bodies and their
course, tangled hair. He went down on his knees on the floor and felt
for the rosary in his pocket. Through the window he saw the face of
the girl with burlap hair who put on the mask and took it off. She put
the mask on and she took it off... on the other side of the swing, the
rain, and the red brilliance of the fire.

The mother stood up next to the boy. With tears still running down
her cheeks, she began to grind a handful of coffee beans that she had
been saving in a can since the last funeral.

Chapter III

Juan Medinao bowed his head and began to pray. His oration was
completely detached from his voice. His oration was a return to
adolescence, to childhood. To loneliness.

The burlap-headed girl had vanished from the window, had again
withdrawn into the night, leaving the forgotten mask on the window
ledge. The paint, all fallen lines, cried hypocritically in the rain. They
were in the height of Lent. (And it was always like that: all the men
and women who approached their closed windows later retreated
into the denseness of the night from which they had come. Maybe
they left a mask leaning against the windowpane. The night. Black,
surrounding their actions and their thoughts. He, blind, throughout
the night.)

He had been born during Lent forty-two years ago, on a stormy
afternoon. The wind whipped around corners, plastered clothing
against bodies and hair to foreheads. The trees in the Northwest bent
and trembled, and a dog barked on the patio. His mother was that
black-waisted woman who often hurled herself face down on the bed
moaning and crying; when he was barely three years old, she told him
about that Lent afternoon when he came into the world:

“It was almost nighttime,” his mother’s hands, bony and feverish,
grabbed his head, “I saw the sky from my bed. I saw it turn green, just
like a man does when he’s going to vomit. And I thought I was going
to die and I couldn’t stand it. Juan Sr. was absent and the doctor
arrived drunk, as usual, slumped over his horse and spattered with
mud. Your father had brought me from far away, from my land
where there was a church and stores. I felt buried here and as lonely as
a cadaver.”
In the village they said his mother was crazy, crazy and bedevilled in the red house with constant shadows in the corners. Shadows from which he now tried to bare childhood memories with electric light. He spent his childhood terrorized by shadowy corners, terrorized by the big stairs that creaked in the darkness, by the bats that hung on the cold and rough bedroom wall. His first memories of his father were atrocious. His father was brutality, fear, enslaving and distant force, and blows on his back that burned like humiliations. Above all, his father was laughter. Foreign language to his ears, to his unstable life of an ugly child. "That cruel and impossible laughter that one could never imitate."

One day his father was in the middle of the patio. His legs were like tree trunks, encased up to the knees in leather boots. He seemed to have sprung from the ground, vibrant son of the earth, with that cascade of black curls that was his beard tumbling over his chest. His head shook when he laughed, and the sound of his throat was always laughter, always laughter, even when he swore or threatened. And there in the center of the patio, whip in his hand, he was watching while they skinned a bull that had been killed in the ravine. Suddenly he raised an arm and cracked the whip over the dead animal. Two servant girls who were there laughed noisily. Juan Jr., who didn’t know how to play, saw the white line turn red, redder, and then, trembling, fuse itself into a burning foam that fell to the ground in drops like sparks. They were flowers. Flowers of an impossible force, of a living aroma that made his skin crawl. Juan Jr. had an oversized head for his body. He covered his ears with his hands and fled from the patio where Juan Sr. liked the servant girls to laugh.

Juan Jr. was four innocent years old, without refuge or horizon. The parish priest of Central Artamila came one day to visit them and to eat cookies with walnuts in the middle. His mother and he listened respectfully to his words. His mother kept her head lowered, her long eyelashes trembling on her cheeks, and tugged at a corner of her shawl. The priest patted Juan Jr.’s shoulders and told him that one day, dressed in white, he would be able to swallow the host. “And ask Him for favors,” his mother added timidly. It was then that Juan Jr. knew he must beg for the salvation of Juan Sr. throughout his life. For him and for all other sinning men, ignorant and strong, who whip raw flesh. And also for the pale and eternally hurt women who cry face down on their beds. And for the old priests who suffer from
asthma and have to walk eight kilometers swallowing incarnate dust
in order to carry God’s voice to forgetful and stubborn children. Soon
he came to understand that Juan Sr. was a gambler; he was generous,
cruel and disbelieving. His powerful voice made the silver medallion
on Juan Jr.’s chest tremble. Juan Sr.’s eyes were clear, hunter’s eyes,
brilliant, passionate and smiling. Eyes of frost and wine, of a
poisonous flower. That flower that grew next to the river among the
willows and when cut, stained his fingers with a venomous juice. All
the miserliness and avarice of Grandfather Juan became destruction
and was squandered with Juan Sr. He was a waster, a show-off, and a
drunkard. He hadn’t wanted to marry a country girl and that was
why, one day, he brought from across the mountains, from a town
where there were display windows with colorful ribbons, gold
rosaries and colognes, a woman with manicured hands, tearful and
frightened, whom he did not love. Juan Sr. abandoned her in the big
house and went farther away than the most distant Artamila. He
forgot about them and the land and brought things from distant cities
that became moldy piles in her bedroom. Juan Sr. drank more and
more. One, an amber wine and another, the color of a harvest moon.
And he was everything, like the cold wind that slams doors shut and
sends the leaves scurrying in October. And he went away, he always
went away. And Juan Jr. watched him mount his horse on the patio,
cross through the gate and the big wooden door close behind him.
And Juan Sr. was gone a long time, he was always gone a long time.
He went like all men and all women, like the sweet humble tone of our
winter and like the time of the grapes and like the leaves. And when he
returned, one cried where one had smiled, and smiled where before
one had cried. But one was always the same. And one al­
ways remained so alone. With the offended silence of his
mother and the pranks of the laborers’ sons who laughed at his
big head and twisted legs. In the big house, where there was a dry
yellowed portrait of Grandfather Juan on the dining room wall,
closer to them and their tears, one looked at the mirror marvelling at
the activity of the land, of the land that shelters water and mice,
flowers like suns and blue snakes. Everything was going to be his one
day. The work of the laborers and the sons of the laborers belonged to
him. Almost all of Lower Artamila, from that boggy, dying vineyard
whose late fruit killed the winter, to the high gold of the summer. “Oh,
gloomy land, dark land that gives and takes away like God!” He was
so different from everything around him! His mother was the right corner of the room, dark and carelessly cleaned by the maids, the center of blackness, of scary stories, superstitions and candles lit to St. Anthony. She was the little black beads of the rosary like ants en route to the soul on business, entangled in a black caravan around her wrist where the blood beats irregularly.

Outside, on the patio, under another rare and bluer sky, there were workers and servants celebrating the August festival behind the piles of wheat. The flagstones of the central patio shone from a golden dust like butterfly wings and there was straw gleaming between the flagstones. One of the servants knew how to play the fiddle. Accompanied by guitar, he played strange and mournful tunes, moving and languidly rhythmic, of a heavy sweetness that entered one’s veins and made one toss and turn in bed. One night, lying in his little bed, Juan Jr. could not resist any longer. The hot, attractive cadence made the white curtains in his bedroom flutter. He descended barefoot, hiding behind one of the columns of the central patio. He watched them dancing and drinking. They laughed in a low and sinister tone like water that runs within the bowels of the fields. It was then that he noticed the unexpected splendor of that servant girl, Salomé. Until that moment, she had only been one of the others, burnt skin and white blouse. But now someone had brought her silver earrings and an unusual dress from far away. She was almost an insult, her entire being, amidst the beastly sameness of the Artamilian women. It was a green and pink striped dress. All of a sudden she looked like a big exotic insect, celebrating the harvest amidst the music, on the golden dust of the flagstones. Her shadow, under the quick turns of her bare brown feet, was a blue and elastic stain that made one reach out one’s hands and submerge them in it like a cold, cold pool. Her pale child’s hands, with their bitten nails and ardent wrists. Without anyone telling him, Juan Jr., four years old, knew. He knew it without knowing anything, without ever having seen them together. And, next to Salomé, not the three imposing wings of the house, nor the high mountains, nor the rain and black butterflies, nor the crows’ screeches or the whip of the wind from the Northwest could drown out the green and pink and that music from her silver earrings.

From that night on Juan Sr. and Salomé terrified him and attracted him, made him want to flee and find refuge in God or the
Northwest. His mother said that Salomé was a bad woman but could not send her away because of Juan Sr., growing from the ground, violent and alive like an implacable bonfire. Nobody could throw her out into the street. Her existence remained a fascination even when, one day in spring, the dress was torn up to use to scare the birds away, even when she continued to wear the coarse white blouse, and even when he saw her in the vegetable patch, eating with her fingers. She laughed above the straw and lifted her arms toward the sun, revealing large sweat stains in her armpits. Juan Sr. and Salomé, they were like the swollen river, like the red and fiery earth that the wind hurled against Juan Jr.’s closed window. After a while his mother became an exasperated little demon, her eyes ghastly and her lips white with pride. Ah, when Juan Jr. was born, it was for a good reason that the dogs barked on the butterfly patio. “That bad woman,” his mother would say, holding back her tears, “will roast in the black flames of Hell.” Nevertheless, it seemed to him that he heard the unexpected laughter of his mother, ranting fantasies of what would happen to Salomé in the next life. At that time, Juan Jr.’s heart lay in God. In that God that had bells in Central Artamila. And he loved him and he hoped because he could not love or hope for anything from the fiery fields nor the lashes of whips nor the men and women who lost themselves in the plowed furrows growing smaller and smaller toward the horizon. Even though he didn’t know who nor why God was, he had faith in Him. His faith was like the salt of the sea which he had never smelled. He still had not read any of the Catechism and when, one day, he had it in his hands for the first time he was frightened. “It’s going to hurt me,” he felt intuitively. It made him think about God and God should be left as He was, within the heart, pure and primary. He was five years old, so alone for five years and yet he knew all this. He knew it like he knew autumn would inflame living things. Like he knew that lovely vineyard that Grandfather Juan had planted would not be wine in hard and frugal Artamila where bread and water were enough through the torment and fire of summer. He knew everything so early, he had in his heart from so young an age, the yeast of life that rose against him, that sickened him like a curse throughout his entire existence.

One day, even though he was very small, his mother sent him to school asking that he only be taught to pray. The school was quite a distance down the road that led far away, with brown walls and a roof
full of holes that held clinging empty nests. Without a playground. The windows were like cuts and when it rained, the whole building moaned—the wooden benches and the chrome of the Gospel. A little book came to his hands. It was small, diminutive, between Geography and Arithmetic. It had pictures and the first page read ‘YOU WILL BE BLESSED’. Scratching his ear with a toothpick, the teacher explained it to him because Juan Jr. didn’t even know how to read. He had to press his dirty, inky thumb on his lips. No, no. God was bigger and more serious. Perhaps only the bells could pray to him. The teacher was bald and he gave the Catechism a tired tone amidst his cigarette smoke. He spoke of the love of God through nicotine-stained teeth. Juan Jr. did not want to go to school anymore, he did not want to see the teacher or the other children again.

It was about that time when that key event occurred in his life. Pablo, Salomé’s son, was born. It was in August, burnt and violent time, greenness long dead, when the wet holes of the path become black smoke.

The light that was Salomé went out. It was as if only the tinkling of the silver earrings remained on each side of her inexistent face. As if the imaginary music of the jewelry sang to a woman who had never been born. Salomé’s walk was like a duck’s and the bulk of her stomach devoured the grace of her fifteen years. Juan Sr. was away again.

One pre-dawn morning, Juan Jr. awoke to the sound of footsteps on the patio. Next to his room slept an old servant woman who acted as midwife for calves and men. Sitting up, Juan Jr. listened, his heart pounding. He felt the proximity of his brother in his bones. Excited, he jumped from the bed. He put on his shirt and pants and went down barefoot to the patio.

Outside, the mosquitoes buzzed and glittered, forming part of the heat. He saw the silhouette of the old servant woman, cursing the interruption of her sleep, running behind Salomé’s older sister who was fastening all her innumerable skirts. Otherwise, everything remained quiet and indifferent under the pinkness of the moon. The other servants were exhausted, asleep. The big gate squeaked. The two women ran toward the laborers’ shacks. A honey-colored luminosity made the ground glow where the shadows of the picket fence stretched out like arms towards Juan Jr. Overcoming his fear, he followed them to where Salomé lived with her sister and little Agustín.
The women entered and closed the door. Breathless from his run, Juan Jr. sat down on the ground with his back glued to the wall of the shack.

Then, everything was hushed. He could only hear the vibrating silence of blood in his temples and the incessant hum of insects, bluish in the darkness that pressed down upon him. Suddenly he heard Rosa, Salomé’s older sistern, shouting at Agustín to get up and go outside. A cat escaped through the yellow crack of the door and fled to the fields. On the corner of the hut a pipe ended in a wooden box. This was the only shack with a little water reservoir, invention of little Agustín, whose rare mechanical ability remained a mystery to all. It began to drip. Each droplet of water, rhythmic and musical, was like a luminous recount, sparkling under the moon. The door opened rudely and Agustín came out, already dirty from Juan Sr.'s earth. The dawn glow made a halo around his head. Juan Jr. pressed himself harder against the wall and held his breath. Agustín hesitated a moment. He was half dressed and carried two boxes under his skinny rigid arms that hung along the sides of his body. Then he disappeared behind the other shacks, toward the river. His small reservoir was empty. Juan Jr. slipped in through the door that Agustín had left open. To the right, next to the kitchen, was a dark hollow where they kept the work tools and a leather whip whose nearness hurt him. Juan Jr. squatted down among the rakes and scythes. He sensed, rather than heard, a long scream. And he saw the steam from water boiling on the stove. A man was being born there behind the bedroom door. Maybe he would look like him? . . . No. No. Nobody would be like him. He was different from everyone else. Why had he been born? Tears, long and slow, fell hot on his hand. His five years seemed shaken by the knowledge of his solitude. He was marked, perhaps. But his God would save him from men. He still had to hope for who knows how long! And if he died? The thought occurred to him that, with the birth of his brother, he should die. Yes. They would find him the next day among the hoes and the axes like a crumpled doll. But he did not die. And that long wait was the introduction to that wait that he still dragged over the earth today.

A thought occurred to Juan Jr., “Maybe if this one’s born, I won’t be alone anymore.” But a son of Juan Sr. and Salomé would be like a river flowing through parched plains beneath a burning sun. On a board a skinny candle was still burning. Two flies circled the flame
and Juan Jr. heard the melted wax fall onto the wooden floor. He loved fire and always carried matches in his pocket to light twigs and straw in a corner of the patio when everyone was in the fields and nobody, except the dogs and his mother, could see him. A violent desire began to burn in him. Set fire to the shack and die together with his unborn brother. The two of them, die, and let the wind sweep them together and throw them to the horizon where nobody would know anything any longer. But almost at once he realized that it would be a crime and would stain the whiteness of his soul. It was only then that he wanted to see how men were born. They had made Agustín jump out of his bed and go to the fields. Maybe they had sent him away because it was so ugly. His mother had used the word, “Horrible” when she told him about the day he was born. Now, neither the wind nor the dogs howled. The silence and the heat soaked his hair and forehead. The candle burned out and the wick glowed blue like a dying worm.

The bedroom door in front of him began to move like a black cutting force. It was a door of old wood, the planks were ill-fitted and allowed yellow slashes of light to escape. Slowly, he drew near and pressed his face against it, peeping through one of the cracks. At first he did not see anything, and then only a piece of moisture-stained wall. A smell of dust and mold enveloped him and he felt sweat glue his forehead to the wood. Thus posed, he noticed a very black spider crawling slowly toward the ceiling. He was very still until it disappeared from his limited span of vision. He heard footfalls and voices. But nobody was crying, nobody was moaning. Clearly, he understood, Salomé would no longer be the queen of the harvest. Her green and pink dress was already ashes. Oh, he did not want to see anything! His heart beat hard. Turning around, he began to run.

On the threshold he tripped on the step and fell to the ground. Flat on his face he felt the live flame of the ground in all its cruelty. Painfully, he sat up and looked at his knees that were beginning to ooze dark red blood. One large, nearly black drop slithered down the length of his leg. At that moment she came out of the bedroom and saw him. It was Rosa. She walked over to him with her wet hands on her hips. He raised his head and their eyes met, silent, still. Juan Jr. had stopped crying already. But his neck seemed to tremble gently from childish hiccups. She was thirty, perhaps, and around her eyelids were fine lines, slashes of time. A thin lock of hair fell over her
shoulder and she was half-dressed with her skin stained in two colors; pale where the sun never touched. Everything in her was tired, with early harvests and worn out lines. She did not pity Juan Jr., nor Salomé, nor the one who was being born. But she bent over, took the arm of the master’s son and brought him into the kitchen. She always worked for things that did not matter to her or even belong to her.

The kitchen fire was new, the logs were even fresh. The steam from the water blurred the window and made breathing difficult. Without speaking, she washed his knees. Then she pushed him toward the door to the street and closed it behind him.

Outside, Juan Jr. dried his tears on his sleeve. From across the mountains a fiery day was breaking. Stunned by an uncertain power, he set out for the first hill where the threshing-floors were. He couldn’t, he simply could not go home and sleep. His brother had been born. On the first threshing-floor was a pile of half cleaned wheat. The heat was heavy in an irritating silence. The flagstones of the threshing-floor were still warm and he lay down on his stomach, burying his face in his arms. He was only five and yet he was already experiencing the weight of countless, ages-old sufferings as he lay stretched out and hurting. He had heard much silence and many words. He was one of those people who go around on tiptoe and listen through keyholes. Juan Jr. abandoned himself completely to the ground and slowly, sensuously, both hate and love for his brother were born in him. “Maybe he’s handsome and strong,” whispered an angel in his ear. He looked at his pale and dirty hands. A wave of blood surged through him, a blood flower, so intense that he felt nauseous. Its aroma sprung up from himself and reddened his brain and the inside of his eyelids. Then, not knowing how, he slept.

The clamor of the peasants woke him as they rode up to the threshing-floor on their horses. Juan Jr. began to run again. He did not want them to see him. He could not stand the thought of them seeing him and thinking, “How handsome and strong his brother is!” Childishly, he believed his brother was a man, not a weak, red baby like any other newborn.

A voice called him for a long time from below. It was a servant from his house that was looking for him, surely because his mother had noticed his absence. He ran downriver toward the mountain. He turned his head back a moment, panting, and looked toward the threshing-floor with a childish fear of all people. A girl was seated on
a little stool at the foot of a great pile of hay all alight from the sun. She did not work yet, she was probably only three or four, and she had the stiff body of a doll on her lap. A toy was something extraordinary and unheard of in the village! The doll had long yellow hair that fell straight to the ground and the little girl caressed it with her precociously slim hands. Juan Jr. continued his race, faster. Everything hurt him so much! He followed the edge of the river through the reeds. He met up with the face of a sheepdog and came upon a shepherd who was tending some sheep. It was his own flock, he was not one of the Juans’ employees. He was old. He was seated on a rock with his hands on his knees. It had been a long time since he had cut his hair and it fell in white locks on his shoulders. He appeared mute and indifferent, with his squinting eyes staring out into space. Juan Jr. approached him, pushed by the same feeling that had made him lie down on the stones of the threshing-floor. He sat down at the old man’s feet. He needed so much peace! He was very small and the shade of that old age sank him into a sweet dream, like a lullaby. He did not want to know so much, feel so much. His bones were still like green rushes, his hands were barely sketched. He noticed the smell of leather which came from the shepherd and all the awakening of the countryside, with seedlings pushing each other happily like children as the sheepdog darted about. In contrast, the old man seemed made of stone, less human than the oaks and the clouds.

Juan Jr. raised his head and said in his high little voice, “He’s been born.”

The shepherd remained indifferent. Juan Jr. added, “In the Zácaro’s shack . . . Salomé’s.”

“Whore,” said the shepherd.

Juan Jr. fell asleep again. When he reawakened, pebbles from the ground were stuck to his cheek. The shepherd was still up there, cutting little pieces of bread. One he would give to the dog and the next one he would eat. Juan Jr. moved toward him and ate, too. Suddenly the old man pressed the point of the knife against the boy’s chest. As if he had been chewing his words until then and had to spit them out violently, he said uncontrollably, “Look at him . . .” and it was as if he were explaining to the dog, “What’s this one going to do with Artamila? I saw how his grandfather earned it, the devil. I don’t owe them anything but, oh the others! Since then, who in the village
doesn’t owe the Juans? . . . I remember, when my children were dying the year the flu epidemic broke out, the old man came knocking at my door with the loan deal. But I looked him in the eye and I said to him, ‘Get out of here, son of the devil, you won’t drink my blood, even if the sun fries us all.’ Okay, he was only given one child, a bad and stupid son. And from that one, came this other one, rickety and big-headed. What a good line, long-nailed race! You, little guy, if you don’t rot beforehand, with dirt between your teeth, who knows if that one they let be born won’t give you a fight!”

He spat and put the bread in his leather pouch. Juan Jr. followed him around silently and spent the day at his side.

When they returned to the village together, the evening shadows were tagging at their heels. Juan Jr. made his way past the shacks. The night swallowed them up, drank up shades and colors, leaving big whitewashed skeletons under the moon. The little girl’s stool next to the hay was vacant. The mosquitoes, so alone in sparkling clouds, continued their torrid song.

Juan Jr. did not feel his body. That day of fasting had made him feel light. Changed into a little flame, he crackled in a red pulsation. He advanced slowly toward the house in a straight line, like a zombie. The whole sky was dying from thirst.

Now, if he had returned, Juan Sr. would whip him, naked. If not, his mother would hold his head in her two hands and cry about his absence. She would say that little boys shouldn’t run away from home.

Something strange had happened in the village. The portal gate was open. The moon was perched on top of the roof. On the patio three women were seated in a row on the ground resting on their knees. Peasant hands, lazy, on their black skirts. It gave him an uncomfortable feeling of abnormality. Juan Jr.’s feet stopped. Then he realized how the women, the stableboy, and the moon were all looking at him. Oh, still moon! Nobody had told Juan Jr. the story of the old man who brought kindling to the moon but it lit up his eyes just like those of every other child in the world. A maid appeared in a doorway of the house. When she saw him, she covered her face as if she were going to cry. Juan Jr. understood that he should keep moving forward, advance until an outside and superior force stopped him. He crossed the patio and climbed the stairs. There was light in his mother’s room and the yellow square of the door was shortened.
on the ground. It was a special light, a light with smell, taste, and touch. It contained nothing violent or dazzling. Glassy and dense, it left a blot on the darkness like a breath. He continued to advance, slight and solemn with his arms hanging straight at his side. Crossing the threshold, his shadow barely made a black wink on the floor. He was trembling all over, like grass blown in the wind.

He stopped finally, next to the short, iron bedframe. Lying rigidly, with her face covered, was the dead mistress of the house. There, the short, black waist and the yellow hands that would no longer touch his head. The room seemed filled with buzzing flies. Then all the heat of the night vanished at once. Through fingernails and eyes, winter entered him and it felt like his blood flowed out of him like a river. To be a little boy, to be only five! Suddenly, he found himself hugging her frantically, with his heart in his throat. It was as if his life had stopped and he would never breathe again. He yanked away the cloth covering her face and saw her, swollen, purplish and blood-colored. She had hung herself.

Then, when the animal-like cry of his own voice surprised him, the servants entered and pried him away from the body. They came out from behind doors and corners like a startled covey of birds. But nobody could ever erase the vision he had of her open eyes. From then on, whenever he remembered that night, he saw a pair of eyes with many living, blue ribbons flying like banners in the wind. He cried for her like a dog, sprawled out on the small floor mat, overcome by loneliness, his green and sour boyhood love betrayed and broken. Dead mother. Dead mother. The two words stabbed him like blades of ice. How pale the moon became. They could not get him out of the room, he clung to the floor ferociously. His throat filled with fire, hoarse from sobbing and at dawn, amidst the whispering of the two praying maids, he slept.

The sound of horse hooves startled him awake. They had told Juan Sr. The light of the rising sun made the room red and gold and the cotton curtains seemed afire. A deaf desperation still shook his shoulders so profoundly that not even he understood it well. He was hurt, covered with mucus and spittle. In the window a bee tried to pierce a fold of the curtain.

The horse’s hooves clattered on the flagstones of the patio. Then, those familiar and feared footsteps that made the stairs creak, approached.
Slowly, Juan Jr. pulled himself together. He looked like a little waxen saint. Juan Sr. entered. He had never seemed so big and red. A strong aroma penetrated the room, as if all the forest had begun to blow through the cracks. The smell of resin and fresh leather replaced the mist of buzzing and death. Juan Sr., motionless, stood there looking at him. His eyes were filled with terror.

The man bent over suddenly. He looked at him closely, shaken by hurt and fear. He grabbed him in his arms and sat him on his lap. He cried without tears and there was painful surprise in that grief, a child-like surprise that cleared him of guilt. And then, beside the dry grief of the man, Juan Jr. miraculously sensed something in his father for the first time. He realized that he was not really bad. He was only stupid, that was all. His crying was very similar to his laughter. It was his laughter of always.

Something fell away before Juan Jr. His father had lost his distance, lost strength. He was just another sinner, one of those sinners for whom he had been taught to pray. A common sinner like someone who did not go to mass or robbed fruit. Juan Jr. remained stiff on his father’s lap. Close to his cheeks the rough lips of the man emitted a harsh noise, profoundly earthy, almost tangible. Juan Jr. began to feel white, cold, and distant like an angel.

At that moment, Juan Sr. grabbed his hands and kissed them awkwardly as he said, “It’s all my fault, my fault. It’s all my fault. She was crazier than hell, damn her, but . . . what an idiot your mother was and because of me, because of me, because of me you don’t have her anymore! How could I think she wasn’t cracked enough to do this? My poor son, forgive me.”

The bee had stayed still and silent, caught in the curtain like a golden button. The feeling of weakness left him. Juan Jr. was the strong one now. His strength was thick and could strangle slowly and sweetly like a honey poison. The last words of his father took form: Forgive me. Forgive me. Even his pain stopped and he understood him. A burning wine entered his veins and pounded in his head. Juan Jr. reached out a hand and, without shyness, patted his father’s head. He did not love him. He would never love him. But he had just found the sword that would always be heavy in his right hand. The sword he should never throw away. It was the forgiveness of others, the forgiveness forged from the lead of the weak.

“Poor son . . .!” that brutal man kept saying.

But all this had already happened nearly forty years ago.

translated by Cathy Tebbetts
THE SUMMER MOON

Throughout the town:
smells of things
and the summer moon.

“It’s hot! So hot!”
Voices from the open gates.

With the second weeding
not yet done,
already the ripening grain.

Scraping ashes
from a broiled dried fish.

Hereabouts, a silver coin is
unknown.
What a bother!

The sword he carries
is long indeed.

Startled by a frog
leaping from the thicket.
Ah! The shadows of dusk.

Off picking butterbur,
a lantern goes out.
On the threshold 
of the priesthood, 
like a flower barely budding. 

Kyorai

Nanao in the Noto winter: 
life is less than easy. 

Bonchō

Gnawing fish 
to the bone: He is 
so old in years. 

Bashō

He lets his lady’s lover in, 
using the side door key. 

Kyorai

Leaning against the screen, 
they pushed it over: 
the chambermaids. 

Bonchō

A bamboo-slatted bath floor. 
How forlorn it seems! 

Bashō

Fennel seeds 
all blown away. 
The evening windstorm. 

Kyorai

Looking chilly — the lone priest, 
perhaps returning to the temple. 

Bonchō

A monkey showman 
and his monkey-man’s life. 
The autumn moon. 

Bashō
Figuring up the land tax: a quart and a half per year.  

Kyorai

Five or six pieces of raw brushwood, stretching across the puddle.  

Bonchō

Fine white socks, soiled by the muddy path.  

Bashō

The pace of his master's steed makes the sword-bearer run.  

Kyorai

An apprentice, spilling the water he bears.  

Bonchō

Doors and paper-paneled screens covered in matting: the estate for sale.  

Bashō

Ah, the pepper pods. When did they turn red?  

Kyorai

A night of almost furtive sandal making in the moonlight.  

Bonchō

Waking to brush off the fleas; early autumn.  

Bashō
Empty as ever, 
the mouse box-trap 
fallen to the floor.  

Kyorai

The warped lid 
won’t fit the old coffer.  

Bonchô

A short time spent in the hut. 
Give it up; 
move on.  

Bashô

Worth the lifetime; news of 
my poem in the Imperial Collection.  

Kyorai

Like trying out different 
sizes and styles: 
attempts at love.  

Bonchô

At the end of the Floating World, 
each of us like Komachi.  

Bashô

What’s it that’s wrong? 
Even while eating the gruel 
your eyes fill with tears.  

Kyorai

The master’s not at home: 
spacious wooden floors.  

Bonchô

Let the spring lice 
crawl in your palm, 
in the shade of flowers.  

Bashô
Unmoving mists.
Such a drowsy day!

Kyorai

translated by
Etsuko Terasaki
IN A VOID

The sun’s crest had twisted
among the garden trellises and on the shore
any rowboat lay half asleep.
No sound had come from the day
under the clear arch,
not the pine cones’
skip or ball snapping
outside the walls.

The silence swallowed everything.
Our boat hadn’t come to a standstill,
it drew a mark on the sand, a sign
long suspended high up, dropped.

Now the ground was a rim overflowing,
weight loose in the dazzle,
the glare a foam on the darkness;
the ditch grew larger, much too deep
for the anchor and for us

until suddenly
something happened around us, the valley
closed its sides, nothing and the everything were lost,
I awoke at the sound from your lips—
mute before—and locked fast,
both of us in the vein of crystal,
invisible, that waits for its day.

translated by
David Keller and Donald Sheehan
I 'Arsenio' (she writes me), 'I here “taking the air” among my somber cypresses think that it’s time to suspend the so much by-you-for-me desired suspension of all worldly illusions; that it’s time to set sail and hang up the *epoche*.

Don’t tell me the weather’s foul, that even turtle-doves have flown south with a flicker of wings. I cannot live on memories any more. Better the bite of ice than your torpor of sleepwalking, O late awakened.'

II Scarcely out of adolescence I was thrown for half my life into the Augean stables.

I didn’t find the two thousand oxen, I didn’t even see a single animal; yet in the runways forever thickening with manure I stumbled on gasping for breath. But day by day crescendoed lowings that were wholly human. He wasn’t seen, even once, though the hinds still waited for the call to arms: overjammed funnels, pitchforks, kitchen-spits, and a rotting row of saltimbocca. And not once did He show a royal robe’s hem or diadem’s tip above the ebony bastions, excremental.
Then year by year—and who kept count of that dark night’s seasons?—some hand that probed for invisible fissures finally insinuated its memento: a curl of Gerti’s, a cricket in a cage, final trace of Liuba’s trek, the microfilm of a too-too-elaborate sonnet slipped from the fingers of Clizia numb with sleep, a click-clack of wooden shoes (the crippled maid from Monghidoro) until from the cracks the machineguns’ cross-fire cut us down—exhausted workmen caught in the act by magistrates of the mud.

And finally it fell with a thud: the inconceivable.

To free us, to stop up the tangle of tunnels in a lake, was a moment’s work for the churning Alpheus. Who awaited Him now? What deep meaning had that new quagmire? and the breathing of other, yet equal stenches? and the turning and turning on rafts of dung? and was that obscene slug from the sewers sunshine of the chimneys, were they men perhaps, actual living men, those giant ants on the docks?

(I think that you’ve probably stopped reading this. But now you know everything about me, about my imprisonment and afterwards; now you know the eagle cannot be born from the rat.)
I WILL SLEEP

Flowers for teeth, dew for your cowl,
herbs as hands, excellent nurse,
smooth your earthy sheets for me
and a quilt of wool moss.

Nurse, I'll sleep, bed me down.
Put a lamp above my head,
a constellation: you choose one;
any one; dim it a little.

Leave: can it be I hear the buds . . .
a seraph's foot rocks my cradle
and a bird drugs me by tracing compasses
on the sky. . . . Thanks. Oh, yes:
if he telephones again tell him, won't you,
it's pointless, that I have just left. . . .
ELEGY

The way the hell-bent years consume my pleasure
Numbs me like a hangover—a vague pressure
My mind wakes with. Time is like wine, in fact:
The older it gets, the stronger its effect,
And age is like a sea I’m pledged to drinking—
Or I’m a damned swimmer, forever sinking.

Is this a toast to death? Oh no, my friends.
I need to live; my suffering depends
On it. Distilled from all the hours of wasting
Are bound to be some moments worth the tasting:
A few sweet songs, a story told to pass
The time, a tear or two shed in my glass—
And perhaps by the time I’ve drunk life dry
Even love will drop around to smile goodbye.

translated by
Robley Wilson, Jr.
WET GRAPES . . .

Wet grapes, vacation air,
across the palm of the hand, like a top twirling
washed, pure and black heart of night.

How in tune with us its beat in time
and how we felt happiness sometimes, strong
thick, almost tangible
no one knew from where.

Putting the cloth on the table,
we noticed it was made of white cloth
or it was glass and pottery
and during supper it flew
from one side to the other, over
the light of the glances
of a glass at a table, of bread and water.

One heard its beat
in the conversations
in the comfortable silence, in greetings
in the: see you tomorrow!

Now
everyone has gone off to bed
and as if the smiling glance
would never get up again,

the December nights flew away and the shine
of unwashed fruits
the quick steps on the path flew away
and the one who was coming
—who knows from where—
happiness, dark gust
on the skin of the face.

translated by
Patsy Boyer and Mary Crow
A WIND WILL COME FROM THE SOUTH

A wind will come from the south with unleashed rain
to beat on closed doors and on the windows
to beat on faces with bitter expressions.

Happy noisy waves will come
climbing paths and silent streets
through the port district.

Let the hardened city wash its face
its stones and dusty wood, worn out
its heart sombre.

Let there be surprise at least in the opaque
taciturn glances.
And let many people be frightened, and the children laugh
and the greenness of the water’s light wake us
bathe us, follow us.

Let it make us run and embrace each other
and let the doors of all the houses open
and the people come out
down the stairs, from the balconies,
calling to each other . . .

translated by
Patsy Boyer and Mary Crow
QUESTION

Greetings, fish—greetings, fish!
Greetings! red ones, green ones, gold ones
In your crystal room, cold as the pupil
in the eyes of a corpse, shut
and empty as the city's nights,
tell me, have you heard the sound of a reed flute
coming into the brick solidity
of bedrooms, with their lullabies
of wound-up clocks and glassbeaded lights,
out of the land of the genies
called loneliness and fear

And as it comes
tinsel stars dropping from heaven to earth
carefree little hearts
crumbling in tears

translated by
Jascha Kessler and Amin Banani
MY VOICE

I was born one summer night
between two pauses. Speak to me: I hear you.
I was born. If only you could see what agony
is in the easy moon.
I was born. Your name was joy;
under a radiance a hope, a bird.
Arriving, arriving. The sea was a throb,
the hollow of a hand, a lukewarm medal.
And now lights are finally possible: caresses, flesh,
    horizon,
meaningless talk
turning like ears, snails,
like an open lobe that wakens
(listen, listen!) in the trampled light.

translated by
Willis Barnstone
LETTER TO LIGHT

The morning’s paper is huge folded out
on the earth, it is a new day
and a tractor is already out with its lumpy fist
writing a letter to the light; it grumbles
each letter out loud to itself, because it matters so much
that everything is included, the thunder and the bees,
the ant-road that has stretched out its tiny
silk-foot in the grass, our peace
and our restlessness about everything, has to be included.

Large moist lines and a slow hand
that shakes a lot, but now everything is said,
the page is full and everything is exposed
like a letter to no one, the plow’s letter
to light that whoever wants to can read.

translated by
Olav Grinde
I think table and say chair.
I buy bread and leave it.
What I learn I forget.
All this happens because I love you.
The red mullet on the counter says it all,
and the beggar under the eaves.
The fish flies through the livingroom.
The bull snorts in the arena.
A river passes between Santander and Asturias,
and a deer, and a whole flock
of women saints, and a certain heaviness.
Between my bleeding and my crying
there's a very small bridge –
and nothing crosses over that.
All this happens because I love you.

translated by
L. H. Laurence
and E. G. Laurence
Improvisation by Pilual Juud
of the Nuer people

I WAS AS FULL OF AIR AS AN OLD BULLFROG

My oxen are scattered like grain on a skin.
They were taken by Arabs, taken by the grain of Wanding.
I was left with nothing, so people push me around
like they do Biny from LCak.
A man who is no one does not talk in his village.

Last winter, in the month of “jump for god,”
I danced at Longtai until my sweat flowed,
danced in the dawn like the “Gong.”

I used to spend all day swimming with my rival.
I was as full of air as an old bullfrog.
Ah, the flirting goes on but the seduction gets harder.

My Bull’s testicles swing, they swing
like the waterskin carried on a small man’s head.
(I have seen the stomach’s importance,
when people who cannot work for themselves
do these odd jobs.)

The black and white one holds himself back.
His distended belly is stuffed with grass.
You are satisfied and your testicles are like mallets
pounding as you walk, big as the Buruns
who, with their swollen testicles,
must walk leaving room for them.
Cross of the Winds, here I am
in the emerald locket
of your very heart.

I am the center of all creation.
Wherever I may ever go
I am the world’s hope.
Wherever fate tosses me
I turn in green.

I am your rejoicing, Life:
my dancing, hopeful festival
at the hub of the four roads,
sings out the color I turn in
with the jade’s happy voice
and the lucky lizard,
the maize jewel.
My dance wavers with the green rhythm
of the quetzal-snake,
soul of maize.

The juices of my being,
precious liquors,
are tears out of the God of the Cross
in whose center, green heart of the world,
the emerald cottonwood
raises up her mother-being
and I make myself at one with her.

Coati, come on, climb on my shoulders
and tango along the cross of my arms
while I whirl in the green.
And come on, you monkeys, germinal ancestors,
 tootle your woodflutes
 and dance along with me.
REVIEWS

From the Rivers
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University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa
$2.50, paper

Johannes Bobrowski: Poetry from East Germany

Johannes Bobrowski is probably the best known East German poet in this country and his recognition here is due in large part to the carefully evocative translations of Ruth and Mathew Mead. With the addition of From the Rivers (International Writing Program, University of Iowa) to the earlier volume, Shadowland (published in the United States by Alan Swallow and included in the Penguin volume Johannes Bobrowski: Selected Poems) English readers now have nearly all of Bobrowski's poems available to them. Other translators have also published translations of Bobrowski in magazines and anthologies, and I would hope there might be an eventual gathering of these into a "Collected Poems" volume with Shadowland and From the Rivers.

Much of Bobrowski's poetry bears a superficial relationship to the earlier German poetry of nature, but unlike much of that vein's shallow description of idyllic settings, Bobrowski is supremely concerned with the people in his landscapes and demonstrates a facility with technique that makes the poems seem at once spare and vibrating with covert meaning. Take, for example, "Night Swallows":

Cold,
the pierced air,
the black and the white, light, speaking
on routes of birds. The evening, its
bull-horn
as slant in the fire-smoke on the
horizon. You saw
the fish rise, as the waters
clashed, you took your hand
from my eyes, blackness flew
round us and without wing
and without cry.

II
We breathed,
the roof on my shoulder
was light and like a rain
skyless
the needles strewn in the sand,
night-swallows, souls,
where shadow was,
thick on the earth,
cold.

"Night Swallows" is, as well, a good example of the translator's art in handling implication. By leaving out strategic verbs and connectives and allowing juxtaposition of images and phrases to build meaning in a subtler, yet larger, accumulation than would be possible if implied connectives had been written into the translation (as they often should be), the translators allowed the poem to open with a scattergun pattern of detail that defines a landscape by selective elements.

The poem then turns to the human "you" in the landscape and with "... you took your hand/ from my eyes..." adds the implication that the original viewer of this scene was seeing it with a limited perspective and the opening of that perspective lets blackness fly, wingless and silent.

Part II opens by breaking the dark quiet with the two human elements (the original viewer of the scene and the "you" that steps in, the poet and the reader) joined in breathing and the landscape in an expanded, more personalized view ("... the roof on my shoulder ...") is now heaven and earth ("... the needles strewn in the sand ...") and the swallows are now souls instead of shadows.

The final four lines of the poem again leave out connectives that allow the important implication that "souls" as well as "shadows" and "night-swallows" are "thick on the earth" and closely related in many ways already developed by the more personal middle of the poem which now expands and completes a circular return to "cold."

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This ability to present implication in a clear, yet not overly simplified, manner is one of the more difficult and important aspects of a translator’s work. Without it we are left with a skeleton of the original or a translation which is really an essay on the original, not a re-creation of the art.

There are similarities in Bobrowski’s poems to both Georg Trakl and Peter Huchel. Compare these passages from Trakl (my translations)

The red wind blows linens cold and black.
A dog rots, a bush, sprinkled with blood, smokes.
The reeds are flowing with a yellow chill
and a funeral procession slowly makes its way to the churchyard.

(December Sonnet)

A breath of decay chills me.
Blackbirds complain in bare branches.
It shivers the red wine hanging from rusted gratings,

while like the death dances of pale children
around the edges of decaying fountains,
shivering blue asters bend in the wind.

(Decline)

Autumn sun, weak and hesitant,
and fruit falls from the trees.
Silence lives in blue rooms,
a long afternoon.

Death tones of metal
and a white animal collapses.
Coarse songs of brown girls
are scattered in falling leaves.

(Whispered in the Afternoon)

to these passages from Bobrowski (translated by Ruth and Mathew Mead)

Let us sleep each
other’s sleep and not
hear the stars and all the
voices in the darkness, the blood
only as it falls and sinks back
with red-edged, blackish leaves under the heart.

(Midnight Village)

Cold. On the tip of a grass-blade the emptiness, white, reaching to the sky. But the tree old, there is a shore, mists with thin bones move on the river.

Darkness, whoever lives here speaks with the bird’s voice. Lanterns have glided above the forests. No breath has moved them.

(Shadow Land)

Lonely he will sing: across the steppe wolves travel, the hunter found a yellow stone, it flared in the moonlight.

(Call)

Plains—the lost villages, the forests’ edge. And a thin smoke in the air . . .

(Recall)

The mood and tenor of the imagery in both poets is dark, autumnal, with death lurking nearby. The death theme pushes to the point of obsession in Trakl’s poems, so often solitary and inhabited only by birds, bats, and children who are metaphors of natural decay. The poems are not weaker for this obsession, but neither should one expect to come away whistling bright tunes from a Trakl poem. Bobrowski too is a dark poet, but his darkness is a more personal darkness and there are individual people with more active roles in his poems. Where Trakl’s concern is the landscape of human suffering, Bobrowski places the individual into that landscape.

Trakl was immersed in the Impressionist movement, and its effects are everywhere evident. An extensive pattern of symbology based on the use of color exists in his poems, and one can see even in these brief
examples that both poets rely on the implications of color words. Trakl's use of color is extensive enough to give larger tonal effects to his landscapes, while Bobrowski's landscapes are less impressionistic, more realistic. They are not, however, always literally real, though based heavily on Bobrowski's homeland in Tilsit (East Prussia) on the Lithuanian border. They are visual and tactile, but steeped in folklore, and his accumulations of suggestive detail are both physically grounded and spiritually loaded with implications.

Bobrowski has acknowledged an even more direct influence from the poetry of Peter Huchel. "In March 1965, six months before his sudden, unexpected death at the age of forty-eight, Johannes Bobrowski was asked in an interview in East Berlin whether any living poets served as models for him in his own writing. His immediate answer was, 'Peter Huchel, of course. I first read a poem of his in Soviet prison camp, in a newspaper, and it impressed me immensely. That's where I came to see people in a landscape—to such an extent that to this day I do not care for an unpeopled natural setting. I am no longer charmed by the elemental forces of a landscape, but by nature only when seen in connection with, and as a field of, the effective activity of man.'"

Compare, for example, Peter Huchel's "Fog" (my translation)

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Greengolden leaching
of the marsh.
Bittern reeds.
The coils of the evening
trace the sky.
Pale yellow they lick
the tops of the alders.

In the morning
an odor of calamus
rises on the fog.
And on the water
the wind sweeps
the shadows
of the leaves
together.
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to Bobrowski's "Calamus" (translated by Ruth and Mathew Mead)
The water-wind, a howl,  
flies around  
with sails of rain.  
A blue dove  
has spread its wings  
across the wood.  
Lovely in the broken iron  
of the fern  
the light moves  
with the head of a pheasant.

Breath,  
I send you out,  
find a roof,  
enter through a window, regard  
yourself in the white mirror,  
turn without sound,  
a green sword.

Although the example here of Peter Huchel’s poetry is not the individual in a landscape as one might expect from Bobrowski’s comments, it does serve to point out other similarities of mood, style, and approach to imagery that the two poets share.

Bobrowski’s accumulations of suggestive detail add up beyond the individual poems to a larger landscape as well, a landscape Bobrowski called “Sarmatia,” which roughly corresponds to the area of central and southern Russia between the Vistula River and the Caspian Sea. Little is known about the Sarmatian people beyond the fact of their mixed ethnic origins and that legend plays a large part in their history. The real “Sarmatia” may not be very different from Bobrowski’s mythic vision of it.

Some of Bobrowski’s poems can be seen as mythic re-creations of neglected history, or in their more somber moods, historical elegy. Here is “Village Church 1942.”

Smoke  
around log-wall and snowy roof.  
Tracks of crows  
down the slope. But the river  
in the ice.
There
dazzle, broken
stone, debris, the arch,
sundered the wall,

where the village stood
against the hill, the river
sprang in the early year,
a lamb, before the door,
a round bay
lay open to the wind,

which blows round the heights,
sombre, its own
shadow, it calls, rough-voiced
the crow
cries back.

Bobrowski's more personalized landscapes, though distinctly and
clearly presented, do sometimes suggest a more dreamlike view of the
scene, and in this, he may have been influenced by his admiration for
Chagall (one of Bobrowski's poems is written to Chagall). Here is
"The Latvian Autumn."

The thicket of deadly nightshade
is open, he steps
into the clearing, the dance
of the hens round the birch-stumps is forgotten, he walks
past the tree round which the herons flew, he has sung
in the meadows.

Oh that the swath of hay,
where he lay in the bright night,
might fly scattered by winds
on the banks—

when the river is no longer awake,
the clouds above it, voices
of birds, calls:
We shall come no more.

Then I light you your light,
which I cannot see, I placed
my hands above it, close
round the flame, it stood still,
reddish in nothing but night

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like the castle which fell
in ruins over the slope,
like the little winged snake
of light through the river, like the hair
of the Jewish child)
and did not burn me.

It is unfortunate that poets of the stature and talents (any human being of creative intelligence for that matter) of Johannes Bobrowski and Peter Huchel have been treated with the kind of neglect and repression that the East German government has routinely subjected its best poets to, often forcing them to leave their homeland or resign themselves to a droll existence as one of the “party-line” writers whose politics have swallowed their art.

Fortunately for all of us, Bobrowski’s poetry is faring much better in the hands of the world community of poets, translators, critics and readers than it did in his own country, and with translators as careful and capable as Ruth and Mathew Mead to clear away the boundaries of language, Bobrowski’s poetry may yet find its place in world literature.

Notes

1John Flores, *Poetry in East Germany*, Yale University Press, 1971. Also develops Bobrowski’s “Sarmatia” and view of history.
2A variety of reed.

Rich Ives
CONTRIBUTORS

VICENTE ALEIXANDRE (1898- ) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1977. He is one of the last living poets of Spain's Generation of '27, a group of poets whose styles are reminiscent of the baroque poet Luis de Góngora. WILLIS BARNSTONE is Professor of Comparative Literature at Indiana University. He has published more than twenty-five books, including translations and original poems. His work has appeared in the Yale Review, The New Yorker and The Nation, among others. He also edited the excellent anthology Modern European Poetry. We would like to thank DAVID GARRISON for his help in obtaining this translation.

BASHÔ (1644-94) is the celebrated seventeenth-century Japanese haiku poet whose poem "Summer Moon" is an example of haikai, a series of haiku verses linked by association. The three speakers in the poem are Bashô and two of his disciples. ETSUKO TERASAKI lives in Ithaca, New York.

GUISEPPE GIOACHINO BELLI (1791-1863) wrote over 3,000 sonnets depicting Roman life in the mid-nineteenth century. MILLER WILLIAMS works in the Creative Writing and Translation Programs at the University of Arkansas.

CHRISTINE BUSTA (1915- ) won the Austrian state prize for poetry in 1950. Among her many books are Der Regebaum and Das andere Schaf. ROBERT HAUPTMAN holds a doctorate in comparative literature and has taught at Ohio University and SUNY at Albany. His reviews, essays and translations have appeared in several journals. He has also published a volume of original poems. We would like to thank OTTO MÜLLER VERLAG for permission to publish this translation.

DINO CAMPANA (1885-1932), considered an "outsider" by the literary society of his time, was largely responsible for the sense of freedom and possibility in much contemporary Italian poetry. He spent the last fourteen years of his life in an asylum outside of Florence. FRANK STEWART's first book of poems is due out later this year. His translations have appeared in various journals, including Paintbrush and Thunder Mountain Review. His own poetry has been published in Ironwood and Epoch, among others. He currently teaches at the University of Hawaii.

FAIZ AHMED FAIZ is considered the most significant poet in Urdu after Iqbal. He has published six books of poetry and was first chairman of the Pakistan National Council of Arts and editor of The Pakistan Times. His poems have been translated into many languages and some have been set to music by Pakistan's most eminent composers. In 1970 he was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize. NAOMI LAZARD is Visiting Poet at the University of Montana. She is the author of three books of poetry. This spring a bilingual French/English edition of two books was published in Paris. She has been the recipient of grants and prizes for her work, and currently serves as president of The Poetry Society of America.

FARUGH FARROKHZAD (1934-1967) is considered one of the leading innovators in Persian poetry in the last 400 years. In 1967 she was killed in an automobile accident in Tehran. AMIN BANANI is Professor of Persian History at UCLA. JASCHA KESSLER won a translation award in 1978 from the Translation Center at Columbia University for her translation of twenty-four stories from the
Hungarian of Geza Csath. She is the author of Bearing Gifts: 2 Mythologems and will soon publish a novel, a translation of Hungarian poet Miklos Radnoti's Selected Poems, and a second volume of stories. She currently teaches at UCLA.

GLORIA FUERTES (1918- ) was born in Madrid and is the only poet of the Generation of 1950 to have lived through the Spanish Civil War. She has worked as a secretary and editor of children’s literature. She has published eight books of poetry and written several children’s books, poems, plays and stories. She is known locally in Madrid for her frequent and spirited readings in a few of that city’s anti-government bars. L. H. LAURENCE works in the Poets-in-the-Schools program in Seattle, Washington, and has been published in such journals as Ironwood and Westigan Review. E. G. LAURENCE currently teaches in the San Diego area.

ANGEL GONZÁLEZ (1925- ) is one of the best known living Spanish poets. He has published numerous volumes of poetry and is included in several anthologies of Spanish poetry. He is currently Writer-in-Residence at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. JOEL HANCOCK has published translations of Spanish and Spanish-American writers, as well as a book on Latin American modernist poetry. He is Associate Professor of Spanish and Spanish-American Literature at the University of Utah.

GÁBOR GÖRGEY (1929- ) is a native of Budapest, Hungary who has published four volumes of poetry and a collection of verse translations from several languages. He has also published numerous essays and reviews. He has written plays for stage and television as well as popular song lyrics.

PETER HUCHEL (1903- ) is an East German poet who at one time published a number of other East German poets in the magazine Sinn und Form. “Thrace” and “In Brittany” are from Chauseen, Chauseen (1963). The translations of these two poems are printed here by permission of the publisher, S. Fisher. RICH IVES has published translations in Chariton Review, Denver Quarterly, CutBank, Seneca Review, Porch and others. His first book, Notes from the Water Journals, is available through confluence press.

ROLF JACOBSEN lives in Hamar, Norway. OLAV GRINDE lives in Davis, California.

SARAH KIRSCH (1945- ) lives in East Berlin and has published four books of poetry. ELIZABETH WEBER is an editor of Gilt Edge, New Series, and lives in Missoula, Montana. She has published in various small magazines, and most recently in Columbia.

JOVAN KOTESKI (1932- ) has published four books of poetry written in the Macedonian language. He now lives and works in Skopje, Yugoslavia. BRYCE CONRAD teaches English at California State University in Chico. He received a translation grant from Skopje University last year. The second of his translations from the Macedonian will appear in the fall issue of Chariton Review.

KARL KROLOW (1915- ) is one of the best known living German poets. He is the author of several volumes of poetry and a critical work entitled Aspects of Contemporary German Poetry. He has served as president of the German Academy of the Arts and Sciences and now lives and works in Darmstadt, Federal Republic of Germany. STUART FRIEBERT is director of the Creative Writing Program at Oberlin College and editor of Field magazine. His new book of poems

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is entitled *Uncertain Health*. The editors of *CutBank* appreciate his suggestions for and contributions to this issue. Cheers.

**Federico García Lorca** (1898-1936) is considered one of the most important lyrical voices of twentieth-century Spain. He was born in the Andalusian village of Fuenteaqueros and died during the early days of the Spanish Civil War. “Goring and Death” is from a four-part elegy entitled “Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejías.” **David K. Loughran** is Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Montana and the author of *Federico García Lorca: The Poetry of Limits*.

**Circe Maia** is a Uruguayan poet. **Patsy Boyer** and **Mary Crow** live in Fort Collins, Colorado.

**Ana María Matute** (1926- ) began her “official” career in 1948, with the publication of her novel *Los Abel*. She was awarded the prestigious Premio Café Gijón in 1952 for the novel excerpted here, *Fiesta al noroeste*. She has been a visiting professor at the University of Oklahoma and Indiana University. She currently resides in Barcelona. **Cathy Tebbetts** received a B.A. in Spanish from Indiana University in 1977. She is currently working toward an M.A. in Intercultural Communications at the Monterey Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California. *CutBank* is pleased to be the first journal to publish her work.

**Leslie Van Stavern Millar II** is a professional artist residing in Missoula, Montana. She likes hats, gloves, masks and shadows. Her art work is in a period of transition. Doors and what lies behind them are one of her developing interests.

**Eugenio Montale** (1896- ) has published eight books of poetry since 1925. He was born in Genoa and served as an infantry officer in World War I. Over the years his poems, criticisms and translations have appeared in various periodicals. “Repartee” and “In a Void” are from the collection *Satura*, first published in 1963. “In a Void” was written in 1924. **David Keller**’s poems have appeared in *Pequod*, *Ploghshares* and the *Denver Quarterly*, among others. This year he received a writing grant from the New Jersey Council on the Arts. **Donald Sheehan** has taught at the University of Chicago and other colleges. He is currently director of the Institute for Archaic Studies in New Hampshire.

**The Nuer** are an African people living along the Nile in the Sudan, where they raise cattle. **Terese SvoBoda** lives in New York City and has translated from the Nuer with the aid of a P.E.N.-Translation Center fellowship and an N.E.H. research grant.

**Otto Orbán** (1936- ) was orphaned during the Second World War. He has published seven volumes of poetry and translations.

**Octavio Paz** (1914- ) has published numerous volumes of poetry since 1933. He has founded two magazines and served in the diplomatic corps. *Libertad bajo palabra*, a collection of most of his work, was published in 1960. **Bettina Escudero** recently moved from Juárez, Mexico to Missoula, Montana to complete an MFA. She received the Tappan Literary Award for translation and has work forthcoming in *Willow Springs*.

**Aleksandr Pushkin** (1799-1837), the great Russian romantic, is known primarily for his poems and short stories. His work inspired great Russian composers such as Tschaikovsky and Moussorgsky. **Robley Wilson** lives in Cedar Falls, Iowa.
GIOVANI RABONI, though virtually unknown in this country, has published several books in Italy. A few of his poems have been translated in *Field* and *Quarterly West* magazines. He lives and works in Milan.

RAINER MARIA RILKE (1875-1926) is generally considered the greatest German poet of the past 100 years. Among his best known works are the *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*. FRANZ WRIGHT’s poems have been recently published in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, the *Antioch Review* and *Ironwood*. He has also published a translation of Rilke’s *Das Marien-Leben (The Life of Mary)*, and a small collection of his own poems is due out later this year. The friends and editors of *CutBank* extend their condolences on the loss of Mr. Wright’s father.

MILAN RÚFUS (1928--) is from Závažná Poruba, Czechoslovakia. He has published numerous books and criticism. His work was first translated by DANIEL SIMKO. Mr. Simko was born in Czechoslovakia and now lives in New York. The four poems translated here are from his book of Slovak translations entitled *The Earth Underfoot*. He is the author of *A Small Ceremony*, a play in nine acts, and is currently at work on a collection of his own poems entitled *Knifing Trees*.

ALFONSINA STORNI was part of Argentina’s literary circle during the first half of this century. She published seven volumes of poems and was an editor of a Buenos Aires newspaper. “I Will Sleep” was composed just before she drowned herself in 1938, and appeared in the Buenos Aires papers the morning after her death. VINNI-MARIE D’AMBROSIO currently lives in Brooklyn and is working on a volume of Storni translations as well as an essay on the poet’s life.

STEFAN STRÁZAY (1940--) is from Igram, Czechoslovakia. From 1970-72 he edited *Slovenskich Pohladov*. He is presently senior editor for the publishing company Slovenský Spisovatel.

GEORG TRAKL (1887-1914), whose lyric poetry first received widespread recognition five years after his death, is now considered a profound influence on contemporary German poetry. He was born in Salzburg, Austria, and died in Cracow, Poland of an intentional drug overdose.

BLANCA VARELA lives in Lima, Peru and directs that city’s Fondo de Cultura Economica bookstore. Among her books are *Ese Puerto Existe* and *Canto Villano*. ELISABETH HAMILTON-LACOSTE is a student at Oberlin College where she studies writing and translating.

ALFREDO BARRERA VÁSQUEZ lives in Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico. He was awarded the Eligio Ancona medal in 1964. MARCEL SMITH lives in Alabama.
BOOKS RECEIVED

Beach Glass, John Gabel, poems, Cleveland State University Poetry Center, $2.50.
Before I Go Out On the Road, Grace Butcher, poems, Cleveland State University Poetry Center, $3.50.
A Change in the Weather, Mekeel McBride, poems, Chowder Chapbooks, $2.00.
Dear Blood, Leonard Nathan, poems, University of Pittsburgh Press, $4.50.
Detail from an American Landscape, Merry Speece, poems, Bits Press.
The Fire in Oil Drums, James Cervantes, poems, San Pedro Press, $2.00.
Lighting the Furnace Pilot, Paul Ruffin, poems, Spoon River Poetry Press, $4.00.
Meditations in an Anatomy Laboratory, Irving I. Edgar, M.D., Philosophical Library, Inc., $7.95.
The Narrows, Valery Nash, poems, Cleveland State University Poetry Center, $3.50.
Peripheral Vision, Elton Glaser, poems, Bits Press, $2.50.
Portable Shelter, Joe Napora, poems, Wolfsong Publications, $2.50.
Portable Shelter, Joe Napora, poems, Wolfsong Publications, $2.50.
You Can Tell The Players, Barton R. Friedman, poems, Cleveland State University Poetry Center, $3.50.

MAGAZINES RECEIVED

Abraxas (Issues 18-19), Warren Woessner and David Hilton, eds., 2322 Rugby Row, Madison, WI 53705, $5/three issues.
The Agni Review (No. 12), Sharon Dunn and Norman Dukes, eds., P.O. Box 349, Cambridge, MA 02138, $5/year.
The Barat Review (Vol. 7, No. 1), Laurie S. Lee, ed., Barat College, Lake Forest, IL 60045, $/year.
Beyond Baroque (Vol. 10, Nos. 3-4), George Drury Smith and Alexandra Garrett, eds., P.O. Box 806, Venice, CA 90291, membership by donation.
Bits (No. 11), Dennis Dooley, Nicholas Ranson, Lee Abbot and Robert Wallace, eds., Dept. of English, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH 44106.
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<td>Tar River Poetry (Vol. 18, No. 1)</td>
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