

Tendresses

Poetry from the European Languages



Translated by A.S.Kline

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Introduction

This book is a set of translations of lyric poetry in the European languages. The choice is personal. The poems have been selected to reflect the stream of tender, secular, humane thought and feeling, that permeates the European tradition but is rarely explicitly commented on or understood. Life affirming, and therefore sometimes subversive, it flows from the roots of the Greek and Roman experience. When poetry loses sight of it, in the end it suffers for it.

Its main subject is love, but not merely sexual love. There is also love of relation and place, of thought and things. It is love of landscape and person, of creatures and skies, of brother for brother, and friend for friend. Its origin is in that common humanity expressed by the Paleolithic peoples in their painted caves, and the Neolithic peoples in their figurines. It is love, beyond and before any way of thought. It has in it sadness at transience, and delight in the flux of existence. It

affirms at dangerous times and in the most difficult of places. It has no labels, except that of ‘being human’. Its concerns are core to us and therefore they last, and they speak across the centuries.

Here there are a number of great writers represented by a few poems. The author hopes that the reader either knows or will search out the deeper richness of the writers’ works, and all the other poetry of our common tradition. I have included only minimal biographies, but every writer translated here is fascinating as a person and worthy of greater investigation. Many of them lived at critical moments in Western Civilisation. Some of them bore witness to the worst of times.

Translation is a remaking in an alien language of something perfect in its own sweet native tongue its ‘*douce langue natale*’ as Baudelaire has it. Its deficiencies are obvious, its merit is that it makes accessible what we must know, and teases us into acquaintance with the original. What counts is the outcome. If it sings, it sings. If it dies on the page, no retelling the painfulness of its creation will matter a jot. I have changed metre, word order

and rhyme, and in a very few cases changed content in order to aid sense. Where metre did not work I have accepted it and produced a free verse alternative.

Sappho c.600 BC

Little is known of Sappho's life, and her work survives only in fragments. She lived on the Greek island of Lesbos off the coast of Asia Minor, probably in its main city Mytilene. She had a brother, and a daughter Kleis. Famous for her love of women (hence 'Lesbian', 'Sapphic') she is the first, great, individual lyric voice of Europe, recognised as such in ancient times. At the beginning of the European poetic tradition, a woman speaks for herself, and with an experience subtly different from the male experience.

Sappho

I

'The Muses have filled my life'

The Muses have filled my life
with delight.
And when I die I shall not be forgotten.

II

'Stand up and look at me, face to face'

Stand up and look at me, face to face
friend to friend,
unloose the beauty of your eyes.....

III

'And then Love shook my heart'

And then Love shook my heart,
like the wind on the mountain,
troubling the oak-trees.

IV

'He's up there with the Gods'

He's up there with the Gods,
that one, that sits across from you,
face to face, close enough,
to sip your voice's sweetness,
and, what excites my mind,
your laughter, glittering.

When I see you, just for a moment,
my voice goes, my tongue freezes.
Fires, refining fires, in the flesh.
Blind, stunned, the sound

of thunder, in the ears.

Shivering with sweat, cold,
tremors over the skin,
I turn the colours of dead grass,
and I'm an inch from dying.

V

'I have a daughter, golden'

I have a daughter, golden,
beautiful, like a flower -
Kleis, my love -
and I would not exchange her for
all the richness of Lydia.....

VI

‘Hesperus, you bring back to us’

Hesperus, you bring back to us
what the daylight scatters,
the sheep to the fold, the kid to the flock
and the child home to its mother.

VII

‘The Moon is down: the Pleiades are gone’

The Moon is down: the Pleiades are gone:
Midnight is done: these hours, alone.

Catullus ?84-54 BC

Gaius Valerius Catullus was the son of a wealthy citizen of Verona. His father owned a villa at Sirmio on Lake Garda. He lived in Rome and was a friend of Cicero, and lover of Clodia Metellia (Lesbia). Little more is known of him, other than that he travelled to Bithynia in the Black Sea region as one of Caius Memmius Gemellus's suite. There he visited the grave of his drowned brother, in the Troad.

Catullus

Sirmio

Sirmio, you jewel of all peninsulas
and all the islands of the crystal lakes
and the great oceans Neptune circles,
how delightedly, how gladly, I return,
hardly believing myself I've safely left
Thynia and those Black Sea shores behind.

What is better than to be free from care
when the mind throws off its load and, at last,
from foreign journeys, we reach our own home,
sink back to rest on the one bed we longed for?
This is reward enough for all our efforts.
You, welcome sight, O lovely Sirmio, be happy,
and you too, Lydian Lake Garda's waters,
laugh, with whatever gleaming laughter you have.

'Ave atque Vale'

Through many countries and over many seas
I have come, Brother, to these melancholy rites,
to show this final honour to the dead,
and speak (to what purpose?) to your silent ashes,
since now fate takes you, even you, from me.
Oh, Brother, ripped away from me so cruelly,
now at least take these last offerings, blessed
by the tradition of our parents, gifts to the dead.
Accept, by custom, what a brother's tears drown,
and, for eternity, Brother, 'Hail and Farewell'.

Lesbia's Sparrow

All you Loves and Cupids cry
and all you men of feeling
my girl's sparrow is dead,
my girl's beloved sparrow.
She loved him more than herself.
He was sweeter than honey, and he
knew her, as she knows her mother.
He never flew out of her lap,
but, hopping about here and there,
just chirped to his lady, alone.
Now he is flying the dark
no one ever returns from.
Evil to you, evil Shades
of Orcus, destroyers of beauty.
You have stolen the beautiful sparrow from me.
Oh sad day! Oh poor little sparrow!
Because of you my sweet girl's eyes
are red with weeping, and swollen.

Dante 1265-1321AD

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence of a noble but impoverished family. At twenty he married Gemma Donati and by her had five children. He met Bice Portinari, his Beatrice, as a child in 1274. She died in 1290. Exiled with the White Guelfs in 1302 he travelled to Verona, and Paris, and finally settled in Ravenna. There he completed the Divine Comedy begun in 1308, immortalising Beatrice, and expressing his vision of the spiritual life and afterlife.

Dante

Sestina

I have come, alas, to the great circle of shadow,
to the short day and to the whitening hills,
when the colour is all lost from the grass,
though my desire will not lose its green,
so rooted is it in this hardest stone,
that speaks and feels as though it were a woman.

And likewise this heaven-born woman
stays frozen, like the snow in shadow,
and is unmoved, or moved like a stone,
by the sweet season that warms all the hills,
and makes them alter from pure white to green,
so as to clothe them with the flowers and grass.

When her head wears a crown of grass
she draws the mind from any other woman,

because she blends her gold hair with the green
so well that Amor lingers in their shadow,
he who fastens me in these low hills,
more certainly than lime fastens stone.

Her beauty has more virtue than rare stone.
The wound she gives cannot be healed with grass,
since I have travelled, through the plains and hills,
to find my release from such a woman,
yet from her light had never a shadow
thrown on me, by hill, wall, or leaves' green.

I have seen her walk all dressed in green,
so formed she would have sparked love in a stone,
that love I bear for her very shadow,
so that I wished her, in those fields of grass,
as much in love as ever yet was woman,
closed around by all the highest hills.

The rivers will flow upwards to the hills
before this wood, that is so soft and green,
takes fire, as might ever lovely woman,
for me, who would choose to sleep on stone,

all my life, and go eating grass,
only to gaze at where her clothes cast shadow.

Whenever the hills cast blackest shadow,
with her sweet green, the lovely woman
hides it, as a man hides stone in grass.

(The sestina is a 'closed' verse form where the six words ending the lines of each verse cycle in a pre-determined order. The line-end words 1,2,3,4,5,6 of each verse become the line endings of the next verse, in the order 6,1,5,2,4,3, and so on through the six main verses. The final seventh, three-line verse contains all six words, in the order 1,6,2,3,4,5 relative to the preceding sixth verse.)

Two Sonnets from the Vita Nuova

I

'Love and the Gentle Heart'

Love and the gentle heart are one thing,
just as the poet says in his verse,
each from the other one as well divorced
as reason from the mind's reasoning.

Nature craves love, and then creates love king,
and makes the heart a palace where he'll stay,
perhaps a shorter or a longer day,
breathing quietly, gently slumbering.

Then beauty in a virtuous woman's face
makes the eyes yearn, and strikes the heart,
so that the eyes' desire's reborn again,
and often, rooting there with longing, stays,

Till love, at last, out of its dreaming starts.
Woman's moved likewise by a virtuous man.

(The poet: Dante refers to Guido Guinicelli's poem
'Of the Gentle Heart' - 'No love, in Nature, before
the gentle heart, nor the gentle heart before Love')

II

'There is a Gentle Thought'

There is a gentle thought that often springs
to life in me, because it speaks of you.
Its reasoning about love's so sweet and true,
the heart is conquered, and accepts these things.
'Who is this' the mind enquires of the heart,
'who comes here to seduce our intellect?
Is his power so great we must reject
every other intellectual art?
The heart replies 'O, meditative mind
this is love's messenger and newly sent
to bring me all Love's words and desires.
His life, and all the strength that he can find,
from her sweet eyes are mercifully lent,
who feels compassion for our inner fires.'

Petrarch 1304-1374

Francesco Petrarca was born in Arezzo of a family exiled from Florence in 1301. His father was a notary. He studied at Montpellier University and at law school, and became chaplain to Cardinal Colonna. He travelled in France, Flanders and Germany. He met his idealized woman, Laura, in 1327. She died of the Black Death in 1348. His series of love sonnets and other poems strongly influenced subsequent European poetry, for example Wyatt and Sidney in England. He settled at Vaucluse near Avignon, but, after the plague of 1362, moved to Padua and then Arquà, in the Euganean Hills, where he died, in July 1374, on or near his birthday, at the age of seventy.

Petrarch

I

'Diana was never more pleasing to her lover'

Diana was never more pleasing to her lover,
when, by a stroke of fate, he saw her naked,
shown in the deep pool of icy water,
than I was by the mountain shepherdess,
standing there to wash her delightful veil,
that keeps blonde, lovely hair from the wind's
stress,
so that, now heaven's fires overspill,
she made me tremble with an amorous chill.

II

'Now that the wind and earth and sky are silent'

Now that the wind and earth and sky are silent,
and the wild birds and creatures curbed by sleep,
without a wave the sea rests in the deep,
Night's chariot moving to its starred descent,
I gaze, think, burn, weep: she who destroys me
always appears to me in my sweet pain:
my state is anger, war, and misery,
but thinking of her gives me peace again.

III

‘Through the heart of the wild and inhospitable woods’

Through the heart of the wild and inhospitable woods,
where even men with weapons travel riskily,
I go in safety since nothing troubles me
but the Sun, whose living rays are kindled by Love.
And I go singing (how foolish the thoughts that stir!)
of her, from whom heaven cannot separate me,
who fills my eyes: I see her here among women,
and young girls: and they are all beeches and fir!

I seem to hear her, and not the branches and breeze,
or the leaves and the birds, sounding in the glade,
or the waters murmuring in the roots of grass.
Rarely did silence and solitariness please
so much, or sublimity of woodland shade,
except, that too much of my bright Sun is lost.

IV

'From what Idea, from what part of the skies'

From what Idea, from what part of the skies
came that first form, out of which Nature made
that lovely, shining face, down here displayed,
to show what she can fashion for our eyes?
What nymph of fountains, goddess of the trees,
loosed such fine, gold hair to the wind?
When did a heart so many virtues seize,
that, through their total, I my death will find?
He looks for divine beauty uselessly
who never saw the eyes that she reveals,
how tenderly she lets them move and see;
nor can he know how love kills, or how it heals,
who does not hear how she sighs, so sweetly -
so sweet her speech, so sweet her laughter's peals.

V

'Filled with consuming thought that divides me'

Filled with consuming thought that divides me
from other men, and sends me through life alone,
from hour to hour, out of myself I'm flown,
searching to find her, from whom I should flee.
And seeing her pass by, so sweet and deadly,
my spirit quivers to take wing, fly on,
so many armed sighs, with her, are gone,
whom Love and I know - our beautiful enemy.
Surely, if I am not wrong, from that brow
high and clouded, a ray of pity shines,
that, to some degree, brightens my sad heart.
Then, rousing my mind, I consider how
to tell her of this unwise choice of mine,
yet, having so much to say, I dare not start.

VI

'The eyes of which I spoke so warmly, the hands'

The eyes of which I spoke so warmly, the hands,
the shoulders and the ankles and the face,
that separated me from my Self's space,
and marked me out from every other man:
the lovely waving hair of shining gold,
the loving light of that angelic smile,
that made a paradise on earth a while,
are dust, a little dust, senseless and grown cold.

And I, I live (for which I despise myself),
and am saddened, left without the light I loved,
in a damaged boat, in a great storm's madness.
Now, make an end to the songs of the loving Self.
The veins are dry where creation's blood once moved,
and Poetry turned to eternal sadness.

Goethe 1749-1832

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was born at Frankfurt-on-Main. He studied at Leipzig and Strassburg. His early romantic poetry made him a leader of the Sturm and Drang movement. His novel the Sorrows of Young Werther made him famous. He settled at the Weimar court, travelling to Italy in 1786. He interested himself in science (botany, optics, anatomy) and helped to run the State theatre. He married in 1806. His major work was his version of the Faust legend. His broad sympathies and balanced personality illuminated German culture.

Goethe

Roman Elegies I

Tell me you stones, O speak, you towering palaces!
Streets, say a word! Spirit of this place, are you dumb?
All things are alive in your sacred walls
eternal Rome, only for me all's still.

Who will whisper to me, at what window
will I see the sweet thing who will kindle me, and quicken?
Already I guess the ways, walking to her and from her,
ever and always I'll go, while sweet time slips by.

I'm gazing at church and palace, ruin and column,
like a serious man making sensible use of a journey,
but soon it will happen, and all will be one vast temple,
Love's temple, receiving its new initiate.

Though you are a whole world, Rome, still, without Love,
the world's not the world, Rome cannot be Rome.

Mignon

Do you know the land where the lemon-trees grow,
in darkened leaves the gold-oranges glow,
a soft wind blows from the pure blue sky,
the myrtle stands mute, and the bay-tree high?
Do you know it well?

It's there I'd be gone,
to be there with you, O, my beloved one!

Do you know the house? It has columns and
beams,
there are glittering rooms, the hallway gleams,
and figures of marble looking at me?
'What have they done, child of misery?
Do you know it well?

It's there I'd be gone,
to be there with you, O my true guardian!

Do you know the clouded mountain mass?
The mule picks its way through the misted pass,

and dragons in caves raise their ancient brood,
and the cliffs are polished smooth by the flood;
Do you know it well?

It's there I would be gone!

It's there our way leads! Father, we must go on!

Venetian Epigrams I

Sarcophagi, urns, were all covered with lifelike scenes,
fauns dancing with girls from a Bacchanalian choir,
paired-off, goat-footed creatures puffing their cheeks,
forcing ear-splitting notes from the blaring horns.
Cymbals and drumbeats, the marble is seen and is heard.
How delightful the fruit in the beaks of fluttering birds!
No startling noise can scare them, or scare away love,
Amor, whose torch waves more gladly in this happy throng.
So fullness overcomes death, and the ashes within
seem still, in their silent house, to feel love's delight.
So may the Poet's sarcophagus be adorned,
with this book the writer has filled with the beauty of life.

April

Eyes tell, tell me, what you tell me,
telling something all too sweet,
making music out of beauty,
with a question hidden deep.

Still I think I know your meaning,
there behind your pupils' brightness,
love and truth are your heart's lightness,
that, instead of its own gleaming,

would so truly like to greet,
in a world of dullness, blindness,
one true look of human kindness,
where two kindred spirits meet.

Leopardi 1798-1837

Giacomo Leopardi was born of an aristocratic family in Recanati. Plagued, like Heine, by crippling illness he nevertheless made himself a life as a literary man. He lived in Florence, Bologna and Milan before finally settling in Naples where he died. The greatest Italian poet since Petrarch, Petrarch was equally an enormous influence on his clear, lucid Italian.

Leopardi

The Infinite

It was always dear to me, this solitary hill,
and this hedgerow here, that closes out my view,
from so much of the ultimate horizon.
But sitting here, and watching here, in thought,
I create interminable spaces,
greater than human silences, and deepest
quiet, where the heart barely fails to terrify.
When I hear the wind, blowing among these leaves,
I go on to compare that infinite silence
with this voice, and I remember the eternal
and the dead seasons, and the living present,
and its sound, so that in this immensity
my thoughts are drowned, and shipwreck seems sweet
to me in this sea.

To Silvia

Silvia, do you remember
the moments, in your mortal life,
when beauty still shone
in your sidelong, laughing eyes,
and you, light and thoughtful,
went
beyond girlhood's limits?

The quiet rooms and the streets
around you, sounded
to your endless singing,
when you sat, happily content,
intent, on that woman's work,
the vague future, arriving alive in your mind.
It was the scented May, and that's how
you spent your day.

I would leave my intoxicating studies,
and the turned-down pages,
where my young life,
the best of me, was left,

and from the balcony of my father's house
strain to catch the sound of your voice,
and your hand, quick,
running over the loom.
I would look at the serene sky,
the gold lit gardens and paths,
that side the mountains, this side the far-off sea.
And human tongue cannot say
what I felt then.

What sweet thoughts,
what hopes, what hearts, O Silvia mia!
How it appeared to us then,
all human life and fate!
When I recall that hope
such feelings pain me,
harsh, disconsolate,
I brood on my own destiny.
Oh Nature, Nature
why do you not give now
what you promised then? Why
do you so deceive your children?

Attacked, and conquered, by secret disease,
you died, my tenderest one, and did not see
your years flower, or feel your heart moved,
by sweet praise of your black hair
your shy, loving looks.
No friends talked with you,
on holidays, about love.

My sweet hopes died also
little by little: to me too
Fate has denied those years. Oh,
how you have passed me by,
dear friend of my new life,
my saddened hope!
Is this the world, the dreams,
the loves, events, delights,
we spoke about so much together?
Is this our human life?
At the advance of Truth
you fell, unhappy one,
and from the distance,
with your hand, you pointed
towards death's coldness and the silent grave.

To the Moon

O lovely moon, now I'm reminded
how almost a year since, full of anguish,
I climbed this hill to gaze at you again,
and you hung there, over that wood, as now,
clarifying all things. Filled with mistiness,
trembling, that's how your face seemed to me,
from all those tears that welled in my eyes, so
troubled was my life, and is, and does not change,
O moon, my delight. And yet it does help me,
to record my grief and tell it, year by year.
Oh how sweetly, when we are young, it hurts,
when hope has such a long journey to run,
and memory is so short,
this remembrance of things past, even if it
is sad, and the pain lasts!

Pushkin 1799-1837

Aleksander Pushkin's father was of the nobility. His mother had Abyssinian blood, and was descended from Hannibal, the Negro servant of Peter the Great. He lived in St Petersburg and became an official in the Ministry of Affairs but was effectively banished to the Crimea before he was twenty-one. He eventually returned, and in 1831 married Natalia Goncharova. He was subsequently killed in a duel. Russia's greatest poet, he is, in some respects, Russia's Byron, a great lyric poet whose Eugene Onegin nevertheless fulfils the same role of the 'superfluous' man as the narrator of Byron's Don Juan.

Pushkin

To ----

I remember the marvellous moment
you appeared before me,
like a transient vision,
like pure beauty's spirit.

Lost in hopeless sadness,
lost in the loud world's turmoil,
I heard your voice's echo,
and often dreamed your features.

Years passed. The storm winds scattered,
with turbulent gusts, that dreaming.
I forgot your voice, its tenderness.
I forgot your lovely face.

Remote in my darkened exile,
the days dragged by so slowly,
without grace, without inspiration,

without life, without tears, without love.

Then my spirit woke
and you, you appeared again,
like a transient vision,
like pure beauty's spirit.

And my heart beats with delight,
and ecstasy, inside me,
and grace and inspiration,
and tears, and life, and love.

The Talisman

There in the land where the waves
break, on empty shores, forever,
and where the moonlight makes
a sweet, warm twilight hour,
where the harem's languid days
delight the Mussulman,
there an enchantress caressed me,
and gave me this Talisman.

And, caressingly, she said
'My Talisman will not save you
from sickness or from death
in tempest or in storm,
but in it there is power,
my Beloved, mysterious virtue.
It is the gift of Love,
so take care of my Talisman.'

‘It will not bring you riches
out of the shining East.
It will not force the Prophet’s horde
to obey you in the least.
It will not transport you
from a dreary, alien land,
from south to north, to your native place,
to your friends, my Talisman.’

‘But when betraying eyes
bewitch you, suddenly,
or lips kiss without love
in the night’s uncertainty,
my Beloved, it will save you
from deceit, from oblivion,
from fresh distress to your wounded heart,
from wrong, my Talisman.’

(In the Crimea, in discreet exile, Pushkin had a love affair with the Countess Vorontsova. She was the wife of the Governor-General, Mikhail Vorontsov, who, in retaliation, ensured Pushkin’s

dismissal from the Foreign Service. Leaving Odessa, Pushkin took with him a gold talismanic ring, inscribed with a Cabbalistic Hebrew inscription, that she had slipped onto his finger one day, after they had made love on a Black Sea beach. It was looted from the Pushkin Museum in Moscow in the early months of the 1917 revolution.)

'I loved you'

I loved you: love may not have died
completely in my soul,
but don't let it disturb you,
I don't wish you any pain.

I loved you without hope or voice,
with diffidence, jealousy,
as tenderly, truly, as God grant
you may be loved again.

‘Bound for your distant home’

Bound for your distant home
you were leaving alien lands.
In an hour as sad as I’ve known
I wept over your hands.
My hands were numb and cold,
still trying to restrain
you, whom my hurt told
never to end this pain.

But you snatched your lips away
from our bitterest kiss.
You invoked another place
than the dismal exile of this.
You said, ‘When we meet again,
in the shadow of olive-trees,
we shall kiss, in a love without pain,
under cloudless infinities.’

But there, alas, where the sky
shines with blue radiance,

where olive-tree shadows lie
on the waters glittering dance,
your beauty, your suffering,
are lost in eternity.
But the sweet kiss of our meeting
I wait for it: you owe it me

Heine 1797-1856

Heinrich Heine was Jewish, born in Dusseldorf. He studied law at Bonn University and graduated from Gottingen in 1825. He married in 1841, and moved to Paris in 1848 disillusioned with Germany. His increasingly poor health left him bedridden from 1848. To his magical lyrics he added the intense poems of his last period of illness, where he compares himself to a lost Achilles, ‘the Shadow-Prince in the Underworld.’

Heine

The Asra

Every day so lovely, shining,
up and down, the Sultan's daughter
walked at evening by the water,
where the white fountain splashes.

Every day the young slave stood
by the water, in the evening,
where the white fountain splashes,
each day growing pale and paler.

Then the princess came one evening,
quickly speaking to him, softly,
'Your true name – I wish to know it,
your true homeland and your nation.'

And the slave said, 'I am called
Mahomet, I am from Yemen,

and my tribe, it is the Asra,
who die, when they love.'

Death

Our death is in the cool of night,
our life is in the pool of day.
The darkness glows, I'm drowning,
the day has tired me with light.

Over my head in leaves grown deep,
sings the young nightingale.
It only sings of love there,
I hear it in my sleep.

A Palm-tree

A single fir-tree, lonely,
on a northern mountain height,
sleeps in a white blanket,
draped in snow and ice.

His dreams are of a palm-tree,
who, far in eastern lands,
weeps, all alone and silent,
among the burning sands.

Death and his Brother Sleep ('Morphine')

There's a mirror likeness between those two shining, youthfully-fledged figures, though one seems paler than the other and more austere, I might even say more perfect, more distinguished, than he, who would take me confidingly in his arms – how soft then and loving his smile, how blessed his glance! Then, it might well have been that his wreath of white poppies gently touched my forehead, at times, and drove the pain from my mind with its strange scent. But that is transient. I can only, now, be well, when the other one, so serious and pale, the older brother, lowers his dark torch. – Sleep is so good, Death is better, yet surely never to have been born is best.

(Thanatos, Death, was the son of Night, usually shown as a winged spirit. He then completely resembled his brother Hypnos, Sleep, who lived with him in the Underworld. Hypnos put men to sleep by

touching them with his magic wand or by fanning them with his dark wings. His son, Morpheus, was god of dreams)

Baudelaire 1821-1867

Charles Baudelaire was born in Paris. He made a name as an art critic and translator of Edgar Allan Poe, but his fame rests on the poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. He visited Mauritius in 1841 but lived most of his life in Paris in poverty on a small allowance. He is pre-eminently the poet of the City, and an illusory immorality clings to his poetry that reveals, in reality, the sensitivity of a deeply moral spirit.

Baudelaire

The Invitation to the Voyage

My sister, my child
imagine, exiled,
The sweetness, of being there, we two!
To live and to sigh,
to love and to die,
In the land that mirrors you!
The misted haze
of its clouded days
Has the same charm to my mind,
as mysterious,
as your traitorous
Eyes, behind glittering blinds.

There everything's order and beauty,
calm, voluptuousness, and luxury.

The surface gleams
are polished it seems,
Through the years, to grace our room.
The rarest flowers
mix, with fragrant showers,
The vague, amber perfume.
The dark, painted halls,
the deep mirrored walls,
With Eastern splendour hung,
all secretly speak,
To the soul, its discrete,
Sweet, native tongue.

There, everything's order and beauty,
calm, voluptuousness and luxury.

See, down the canals,
the sleeping vessels,
Those nomads, their white sails furled:
Now, to accomplish
your every wish,
They come from the ends of the world.

- The deep sunsets
surround the west,
The canals, the city, entire,
with blue-violet and gold;
And the Earth grows cold
In an incandescent fire.

There, everything's order and beauty,
calm, voluptuousness and luxury.

For Madame Sabatier

What will you say tonight, poor soul in solitude,
what will you say my heart, withered till now,
to the so beautiful, so sweet, so dear one,
whose divine gaze recreated the flower?

- We will set Pride now to singing her praises:
Nothing outdoes her sweet air of authority.
Her spiritual flesh has the perfume of angels,
and her eye surrounds us in robes of infinity.

Whether in the night, and alone, and in solitude,
Whether in the street, and among the multitude,
her phantom dances in air, like a flame.

Sometimes it speaks and it says 'I am beautiful.
You, for the love of me, must love beauty alone:
for I am your Madonna, Muse, Guardian Angel.

The Balcony

Mother of memories, mistress of mistresses,
O you, all my pleasures! O you, all my learning!
You will remember the joy of caresses,
the sweetness of home and the beauty of evening,
Mother of memories, mistress of mistresses!

On evenings lit by the glow of the ashes
and on the balcony, veiled, rose-coloured, misted,
how gentle your breast was, how good your heart to me!
We have said things meant for eternity,
on evenings lit by the glow of the ashes.

How lovely the light is on sultry evenings!
How deep the void grows! How powerful the heart is!
As I leaned towards you, queen of adored ones
I thought I breathed perfume from your blood's kiss.
How lovely the light is on sultry evenings!

The night it was thickening and closing around us,
and my eyes in the dark were divining your glance,

and I drank your nectar. Oh sweetness! Oh poison!
your feet held, here, in these fraternal hands.
The night it was thickening and closing around us.

I know how to summon up happiest moments,
and relive my past, there, curled, touching your knees.
What good to search for your languorous beauties
but in your dear body, and your heart so sweet?
I know how to summon up happiest moments!

Those vows, those perfumes, those infinite kisses,
will they be reborn, from gulfs beyond soundings,
as the suns that are young again climb in the sky,
after they've passed through the deepest of drownings?
-O vows! O perfumes! O infinite kisses

Mallarmé 1842-1898

Stéphane Mallarmé worked as a lycée teacher at Tournon, Avignon and then Paris. His salon in the Rue de Rome became a rendezvous for young writers during the last fifteen years of his life. He was a friend of Degas. His verse often experiments with dislocated punctuation and grammar.

Mallarmé

Album Leaf

All at once, as if in play,
Mademoiselle, she who moots
a wish to hear how it sounds today
the wood of my several flutes

It seems to me that this foray
tried out here in a country place
was better when I put them away
to look more closely at your face

Yes this vain whistling I suppress
in so far as I can create
given my fingers pure distress
it lacks the means to imitate

Your very natural and clear
childlike laughter that charms the air.

(Written to Mademoiselle Roumanille whom
Mallarmé knew as a child .)

Autumn Complaint

Since Maria left me to go to another star - which one, Orion, Altair - or you green Venus? - I have always loved solitude. How many long days I have passed *alone* with my cat. By alone I mean without a material being, and my cat is a mystic companion, a spirit. I can say then that I have passed long days *alone* with my cat and *alone* with one of the last authors of the Roman decadence; for since the white creature is no more I have loved, uniquely and strangely, everything summed up in the word: *fall*. So, in the year, my favourite season is the last slow part of summer that just precedes autumn, and, in the day, the hour when I walk is when the sun hesitates before vanishing, with rays of yellow bronze over the grey walls, and rays of red copper over the tiles. Literature, also, from which my spirit asks voluptuousness, that will be the agonised poetry of Rome's last moments, so long as it does not breathe a breath of the reinvigorated stance of the Barbarians or stammer in childish Latin like Christian prose. I

was reading then one of those dear poems (whose flakes of rouge have more charm for me than young flesh), and dipping a hand into the pure animal fur, when a street organ sounded languishingly and sadly under my window. It was playing in the great alley of poplars whose leaves, even in spring, seem mournful to me since Maria passed by them, on her last journey, lying among candles. The instrument of sadnesses, yes, certainly: the piano flashes, the violin gives off light from its torn fibres, but the street organ in memory's half-light made me dream despairingly. Now it murmured a delightfully common song that filled the faubourgs with joy, an old, banal tune: why did its words pierce my soul and make me cry, like any romantic ballad? I savoured it slowly and did not throw a coin through the window for fear of troubling my spirit and discovering that not only the instrument was playing.

Sea Breeze

The flesh is sad, Alas! and I have read all the books.
Let's go! Far off. Let's go! I sense
that the birds, intoxicated, fly
deep into unknown spume and sky!
Nothing – not even old gardens mirrored by eyes –
can restrain this heart that drenches itself in the sea,
O nights, or the abandoned light of my lamp,
on the void of paper, that whiteness defends,
no, not even the young woman feeding her child.
I will go! Steamer, straining at your ropes
lift your anchor towards an exotic rawness!
A Boredom, made desolate by cruel hope
still believes in the last goodbye of handkerchiefs!
And perhaps the masts, inviting lightning,
are those the gale bends over shipwrecks,
lost, without masts, without masts, no fertile islands...
But, oh my heart, listen to the sailors' chant!

Mandelstam 1891-1938

Osip Mandelstam was Jewish, of Latvian parents, and was brought up in St Petersburg. He visited the Crimea in 1921. His individualistic poetry with its responsiveness to classical Greece and Rome, and its lament for the direction the Russian Revolution had taken, provoked and offended Stalin and he was arrested and exiled to Voronezh (near the Don, south of Moscow) in 1934. He returned from exile but was re-arrested in 1938 and died on his way to a labour camp.

Mandelstam

Tristia

I have studied the Science of departures,
in night's sorrows, when a woman's hair falls down.
The oxen chew, there's the waiting, pure,
in the last hours of vigil in the town,
and I reverence night's ritual cock-crowing,
when reddened eyes lift sorrow's load and choose
to stare at distance, and a woman's crying
is mingled with the singing of the Muse.

Who knows, when the word 'departure' is spoken
what kind of separation is at hand,
or of what that cock-crow is a token,
when a fire on the Acropolis lights the ground,
and why at the dawning of a new life,
when the ox chews lazily in its stall,
the cock, the herald of the new life,
flaps his wings on the city wall?

I like the monotony of spinning,
the shuttle moves to and fro,
the spindle hums. Look, barefoot Delia's running
to meet you, like swansdown on the road!
How threadbare the language of joy's game,
how meagre the foundation of our life!
Everything was, and is repeated again:
it's the flash of recognition brings delight.

So be it: on a dish of clean earthenware,
like a flattened squirrel's pelt, a shape,
forms a small, transparent figure, where
a girl's face bends to gaze at the wax's fate.
Not for us to prophesy, Erebus, Brother of Night:
Wax is for women: Bronze is for men.
Our fate is only given in fight,
to die by divination is given to them.

(Mandelstam wrote: 'In night's stillness a lover
speaks one tender name instead of the other, and
suddenly knows that this has happened before: the
words, and her hair, and the cock crowing under the

window, that already crowed in Ovid's *Tristia*. And he is overcome by the deep delight of recognition....' in 'The Word and Culture' in *Sobraniye sochineniy*. The reference is to the night before Ovid's departure to his Black Sea exile, in his *Tristia* Book I.III)

(Divination was carried out by girls, who melted candle wax on the surface of a shallow dish of water, to form random shapes)

(Erebus was the son of Chaos, and Night his sister. In versions of the Greek myths Eros and Nemesis are the children of Erebus and Night. Erebus is also a place of shadows between Earth and Hades)

Sisters

Sisters - Heaviness and Tenderness- you look the same.
Wasps and bees both suck the heavy rose.
Man dies, and the hot sand cools again.
Carried off on a black stretcher, yesterday's sun goes.

Oh, honeycombs' heaviness, nets' tenderness,
it's easier to lift a stone than to say your name!
I have one purpose left, a golden purpose,
how, from time's weight, to free myself again.

I drink the turbid air like a dark water.
The rose was earth; time, ploughed from underneath.
Woven, the heavy, tender roses, in a slow vortex,
the roses, heaviness and tenderness, in a double-wreath.

(Mandelstam said 'Poetry is the plough that turns up
time, so that the deepest layer, its black earth, is on
top.')

This

This is what I most want
unpursued, alone
to reach beyond the light
that I am furthest from.

And for you to shine there-
no other happiness-
and learn, from starlight,
what its fire might suggest.

A star burns as a star,
light becomes light,
because our murmuring
strengthens us, and warms the night.

And I want to say to you
my little one, whispering,
I can only lift you towards the light
by means of this babbling.

(Written for his wife, Nadezhda)

Petropolis

From a fearful height, a wandering light,
but does a star glitter like this, crying?
Transparent star, wandering light,
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

From a fearful height, earthly dreams are alight,
and a green star is crying.
Oh star, if you are the brother of water and light
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

A monstrous ship, from a fearful height
is rushing on, spreading its wings, flying -
Green star, in beautiful poverty,
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

Transparent spring has broken, above the black Neva's hiss,
the wax of immortality is liquefying.
Oh if you are star – your city, Petropolis,
your brother, Petropolis, is dying.

(Petropolis was Pushkin's and Derzhavin's name for St. Petersburg, Peter the Great's granite city on the River Neva, his 'window on Europe'. The poem was written during the early years of the Revolution.)

Machado 1875-1939

Antonio Machado was born in Seville and moved to Madrid at the age of eight. He studied in Paris where he worked as a translator, and met French poets. He became a schoolteacher. He returned to Spain and taught at Soria in Castile, from 1907, where he met his wife Leonor. Tragically she died very young, and in 1912 he left Soria for Baeza in Andalusia. Loyal to the Republic he left Spain for France when Catalonia fell, and died there in February 1939. He is acknowledged as Spain's finest poet of the early twentieth century.

Machado

From – Fields of Soria

Hills of silver plate,
grey heights, dark red rocks
through which the Duero bends
its crossbow arc
round Soria, shadowed oaks,
stone dry-lands, naked mountains,
white roads and river poplars,
twilights of Soria, warlike and mystical,
today I feel, for you,
in my hearts depths, sadness,
sadness of love! Fields of Soria,
where it seems the stones have dreams,
you go with me! Hills of silver plate,
grey heights, dark red rocks.

(Soria is on the Duero River in the highlands of Old Castile)

To José María Palacio

Palacio, good friend,
is spring there
showing itself on branches of black poplars
by the roads and river? On the steeps
of the high Duero, spring is late,
but so soft and lovely when it comes!
Are there a few new leaves
on the old elms?
The acacias must still be bare,
and the mountain peaks snow-filled.
Oh the massed pinks and whites
of Moncayo, massed up there,
beauty, in the sky of Aragon!
Are there brambles flowering,
among the grey stones,
and white daisies,
in the thin grass?

On the belltowers
the storks will be landing now.
The wheat must be green
and the brown mules working sown furrows,
the people seeding late crops,
in April rain. There'll be bees,
drunk on rosemary and thyme.
Are the plum trees in flower? Violets still?
There must be hunters about, stealthy,
their decoys under long capes.
Palacio, good friend,
are there nightingales by the river?
When the first lilies,
and the first roses, open,
on a blue evening, climb to Espino,
high Espino, where she is in the earth.

(Machado's wife Leonor Izquierdo died very young,
in 1911, and is buried in the church at Espino.)

From – Passageways

Who set, between those rocks like cinder,
to show the honey of dream,
that golden broom,
those blue rosemaries?
Who painted the purple mountains
and the saffron, sunset sky?
The hermitage, the beehives,
the cleft of the river
the endless rolling water deep in rocks,
the pale-green of new fields,
all of it, even the white and pink
under the almond trees!

From – Songs of the High Country

Soria, in blue mountains,
on the fields of violet,
how often I've dreamed of you
on the plain of flowers,
where the Guadalquivir runs
past golden orange-trees
to the sea.

Akhmatova 1889-1966

In Anna Akhmatova, Sappho's individualistic female voice returns again. Born Anna Gorenko, in Odessa, on the Black Sea, she spent most of her life in St. Petersburg. In 1910 she married Nikolai Gumilev, a poet and leader of the Acmeist movement. He was shot as a counter-revolutionary in 1921. Remaining in St Petersburg (renamed Leningrad) during the siege in the Second World War, and with her son, and her lover, Nikolai Punin, both sent to labour camps, she came to stand for the voice of an earlier Russia that had neither been silenced nor forgotten. Her great poem Requiem remembers the pain.

Akhmatova

Lot's Wife

The just man followed God's messenger,
vast and bright against the black hill,
but care spoke in the woman's ear:

'There is time, you can look back still,

at Sodom's red towers where you were born,
the square where you sang, where you'd spin,
the high windows of that dark home,
where your childrens' life came in.

She looked, and was transfixed by pain,
uncertain whether she could still see,
and her body turned to translucent, salt,
her quick feet rooted there, like a tree.

A loss, but who still mourns the breath

of one woman, or laments one wife?
Though my heart never can forget,
how, for one look, she gave up her life.

(The reference is to Lot's wife in the Bible,
Genesis 19:26)

Everything

Everything's looted, betrayed and traded,
black death's wing's overhead.

Everything's eaten by hunger, unsated,
so why does a light shine ahead?

By day, a mysterious wood, near the town,
breathes out cherry, a cherry perfume.
By night, on July's sky, deep, and transparent,
new constellations are thrown.

And something miraculous will come
close to the darkness and ruin,
something no-one, no-one, has known,
though we've longed for it since we were children.

Celebrate

Celebrate our anniversary – can't you see
tonight the snowy night of our first winter
comes back again in every road and tree -
that winter night of diamantine splendour.

Steam is pouring out of yellow stables,
the Moika river's sinking under snow,
the moonlight's misted as it is in fables,
and where we are heading – I don't know.

There are icebergs on the Marsovo Pole.
The Lebyazh'ya's crazed with crystal art.....
Whose soul can compare with my soul,
if joy and fear are in my heart? -

And if your voice, a marvellous bird's,
quivers at my shoulder, in the night,
and the snow shines with a silver light,
warmed by a sudden ray, by your words?

(The Moika River, the Lebyazh'ya Canal, and the Marsovo Pole, or Field of Mars, an open square, are all in St. Petersburg)

Voronezh

For Osip Mandelstam

And the town is frozen solid in a vice,
Trees, walls, snow, beneath a glass.
Over crystal, on slippery tracks of ice,
the painted sleighs and I, together, pass.
And over St Peter's there are poplars, crows
there's a pale green dome there that glows,
dim in the sun-shrouded dust.
The field of heroes lingers in my thought,
Kulikovo's barbarian battleground.
The frozen poplars, like glasses for a toast,
clash now, more noisily, overhead.
As though it was our wedding, and the crowd
were drinking to our health and happiness.
But Fear and the Muse take turns to guard
the room where the exiled poet is banished,
and the night, marching at full pace,
of the coming dawn, has no knowledge.

(The field of Kulikovo was the scene of a famous battle against the Tartar Horde in 1378. Mandelstam was exiled for a time to Voronezh.)

Shade

‘What does a certain woman know
of the hour of her death?’ - Mandelstam

Tallest, suavest of us, why Memory,
forcing you to appear from the past, pass
down a train, swaying, to find me
clear profiled through the window-glass?
Angel or bird? How we debated!
The poet thought you like translucent straw.
Through dark lashes, your eyes, Georgian,
looking, with gentleness, on it all.
Shade, forgive. Blue skies, Flaubert,
Insomnia, late-blooming lilac flower,
bring you, and the magnificence of the year,
nineteen-thirteen, to mind, and your
unclouded temperate afternoon, memory
difficult for me now – Oh, shade!

Thunder

There will be thunder then. Remember me.
Say ‘ She asked for storms.’ The entire
world will turn the colour of crimson stone,
and your heart, as then, will turn to fire.

That day, in Moscow, a true prophecy,
when for the last time I say goodbye,
soaring to the heavens that I longed to see,
leaving my shadow here in the sky.

Quasimodo 1901-1968

Salvatore Quasimodo was born in Sicily. He studied Greek and Latin from the age of twenty and became a professor of literature in Milan. He translated Shakespeare and Greek lyric poetry. Between 1930 and 1938 he was the leader of the Hermetic school of 'poesia pura'.

Quasimodo

Wind at Tindari

Tindari, I know you
mild between broad hills, overhanging the waters
of the god's sweet islands.
Today, you confront me
and break into my heart.

I climb airy peaks, precipices,
following the wind in the pines,
and the crowd of them, lightly accompanying me,
fly off into the air,
wave of love and sound,
and you take me to you,
you from whom I wrongly drew
evil, and fear of silence, shadow,
- refuge of sweetness, once certain -
and death of spirit.

It is unknown to you, that country
where each day I go down deep
to nourish secret syllables.
A different light strips you, behind the windows
clothed in night,
and another joy than mine
lies against you.

Exile is harsh
and the search, for harmony, that ended in you
changes today
to a precocious anxiousness for death,
and every love is a shield against sadness,
a silent stair in the gloom,
where you station me
to break my bitter bread.

Return, serene Tindari,
stir me, sweet friend,
to raise myself to the sky from the rock,
so that I might shape fear, for those who do not
know

what deep wind has searched me.

Street in Agrigentum

There is still the wind that I remember
firing the manes of horses, racing,
slanting, across the plains,
the wind that stains and scours the sandstone,
 and the heart of gloomy columns, telamons,
 overthrown in the grass. Spirit of the ancients, grey
with rancour, return on the wind,
breathe in that feather-light moss
that covers those giants, hurled down by heaven.
How alone in the space that's still yours!
And greater, your pain, if you hear, once more,
the sound that moves, far off, towards the sea,
where Hesperus streaks the sky with morning:
the jew's-harp vibrates
in the waggoner's mouth
as he climbs the hill of moonlight, slow,
 in the murmur of Saracen olive trees.

Enemy of Death
(For Rossana Sironi)

You should not have
ripped out your image
taken from us, from the world,
a portion of beauty.
What can we do
we enemies of death,
bent to your feet of rose,
your breast of violet?
Not a word, not a scrap
of your last day, a No
to earth's things, a No
to our dull human record.
The sad moon in summer,
the dragging anchor, took
your dreams, hills, trees,
light, waters, darkness,
not dim thoughts but truths,
severed from the mind

that suddenly decided,
time and all future evil.
Now you are shut
behind heavy doors
enemy of death.
Who cries?
You have blown out beauty
with a breath, torn her,
dealt her the death-wound,
without a tear
for her insensate shadow's
spreading over us.
Destroyed solitude,
and beauty, failed.
You have signalled
into the dark,
inscribed your name in air,
your No
to everything that crowds here
and beyond the wind.
I know what you were
looking for in your new dress.
I understand the unanswered question.

Neither for you nor us, a reply.
Oh, flowers and moss,
Oh, enemy of death.

Celan 1920-1970

Paul Antschel (changed to Ancel, then Celan in 1947) was Jewish, born in Bukovina. Celan studied medicine at Tours. In the summer of 1942 his parents were shipped to a concentration camp in Transnistria, where his father died of typhus, and his mother was shot in the neck and killed. Celan was conscripted to road-labour in Moldavia until 1944. In 1945 he was in Bucharest and traveled via Vienna to Paris in 1947. He became a lecturer at the École Normale Supérieure and married Gisèle Lestrangé. Deeply troubled by the Holocaust and his parents' deaths, he committed suicide, by drowning in the Seine.

Celan

Your hand

Your hand full of hours, you came to me – and I said:
‘Your hair is not brown.’
You lifted it, lightly,
on to the balance of grief,
it was heavier than I.

They come to you on their ships, and make it their load,
then put it on sale in the markets of lust.
You smile at me from the deep.
I weep at you from the scale that’s still light.
I weep: Your hair is not brown.
They offer salt-waves of the sea,
and you give them spume.
You whisper: ‘They’re filling the world with me now,
and for you I’m still a hollow way in the heart!’
You say: ‘Lay the leaf-work of years by you, it’s time,
that you came here and kissed me.’

The leaf-work of years is brown, your hair is not brown.

In Front of a Candle

I formed the holder of gold,
as you told me to mother,
gold, out of which She comes,
a shade, to me, in the middle
of fracturing hours,
your
being-dead's daughter.

Slender in shape,
a thin, almond-eyed shadow,
her mouth and her sex
danced round by creatures from sleep,
out of the cave of the gold,
she rises up,
to the summit of Now.

With night-dark-shrouded
lips,
I speak the Prayer:

In the name of the Three
who fight with each other, until
heaven reaches down into the graveyard of feeling,
in the name of the Three, whose rings
gleam on my finger, whenever
I loose the hair of the trees into the abyss,
so that the richer floods rush down through the deeps -

in the name of the first of the Three
who shrieked,
when he was called on to live,
where his word went before him,
in the name of the second, who watched it and wept,
in the name of the third, who piles
white stones in the middle –
I say you are free
of the amen that overpowers us,
of the ice-filled light at its rim,
there, where tower-high it enters the sea,
there, where the grey one, the dove
picks at the names
this side and that side of dying:

You still, you still, you still,
a dead woman's child,
sealed to the No of my yearning,
wedded to a cleft in time
to which the mother-word led me,
so that a single spasm
would pass through the hand
that now, and now, grasps at my heart!

(Almond-eyed: Celan writes elsewhere, using the synonym of bitter almonds for the Jews - almond is Mandel in German - and referring to the custom of eating a bitter food at the Passover - Pesach - table, 'Make me bitter, count me among the almonds.'

The Three: The triple goddess, personified perhaps as the three Graeae, who had only one eye between them, to see with, which they passed from hand to hand and struggled over, and also perhaps the Three Norns. In the myth, at the hero's birth he is blessed by two of the Norns, but the third prophesies that he will die on the day that the candle beside him gutters. The oldest of the three

seizes it, and warns the mother never to light it again until her son's last day has come. Here the three are, equally, father, mother and son. And there are also the echoes of Ulysses and Aeneas conversing with the dead in the Underworld)

Psalm

No-man kneads us again out of earth and loam,
no-man spirits our dust.
No-man.

Praise to you, No-man.
For love of you
we will flower.
Moving
towards you.

A Nothing
we were, we are, we shall
still be, flowering:
the Nothing-, the
No-man's-rose.

With
our pistil soul-bright,
our stamen heaven-torn,

our corolla red
with the violet word we sang
above, O above
the thorn.

(The pistil is the female part of the flower consisting of ovary, style and stigma. The stamen is the male part containing pollen. The corolla is the whorl of leaves forming the inner envelope of the flower.)

Neruda 1904-1973

Pablo Neruda was born in Parall, Chile. He studied in Santiago in the twenties. From 1927 to 1945 he was the Chilean consul in Rangoon, in Java, and then in Barcelona. He joined the Communist Party after the Second World War. Between 1970 and 1973 he served in Allende's Chilean Government as ambassador to Paris. He died shortly after the coup that ended the Allende Government.

Neruda

From – Twenty Poems of Love

I can write the saddest lines tonight.

Write for example: ‘The night is fractured
and they shiver, blue, those stars, in the distance’

The night wind turns in the sky and sings.

I can write the saddest lines tonight.
I loved her, sometimes she loved me too.

On nights like these I held her in my arms.
I kissed her greatly under the infinite sky.

She loved me, sometimes I loved her too.
How could I not have loved her huge, still eyes.

I can write the saddest lines tonight.

To think I don't have her, to feel I have lost her.

Hear the vast night, vaster without her.
Lines fall on the soul like dew on the grass.

What does it matter that I couldn't keep her.
The night is fractured and she is not with me.

That is all. Someone sings far off. Far off,
my soul is not content to have lost her.

As though to reach her, my sight looks for her.
My heart looks for her: she is not with me

The same night whitens, in the same branches.
We, from that time, we are not the same.

I don't love her, that's certain, but how I loved her.
My voice tried to find the breeze to reach her.

Another's kisses on her, like my kisses.
Her voice, her bright body, infinite eyes.

I don't love her, that's certain, but perhaps I love her.
Love is brief: forgetting lasts so long.

Since, on these nights, I held her in my arms,
my soul is not content to have lost her.

Though this is the last pain she will make me suffer,
and these are the last lines I will write for her.

Fable of the Mermaid and the Drunks

All those men were there inside,
when she came in totally naked.
They had been drinking: they began to spit.
Newly come from the river, she knew nothing.
She was a mermaid who had lost her way.
The insults flowed down her gleaming flesh.
Obscenities drowned her golden breasts.
Not knowing tears, she did not weep tears.
Not knowing clothes, she did not have clothes.
They blackened her with burnt corks and cigarette stubs,
and rolled around laughing on the tavern floor.
She did not speak because she had no speech.
Her eyes were the colour of distant love,
her twin arms were made of white topaz.
Her lips moved, silent, in a coral light,
and suddenly she went out by that door.
Entering the river she was cleaned,
shining like a white stone in the rain,
and without looking back she swam again
swam towards emptiness, swam towards death.

Poetry

And it was at that time... Poetry came
to find me. Don't know, don't know from where,
it leapt, winter or the river.
Don't know how or when
no, not words, not
voices, not silence,
but I was called from the street,
from the branches of the night,
suddenly, from the others,
in violent flames,
or coming back alone,
I, without a face,
it touched me.

I did not know how to say, my mouth
no names,
my eyes
were blind,
and something began in my soul,

fever or lost wings,
and I made it alone,
deciphering,
that fire,
and I wrote the first, vague line,
vague, without a body, pure
nonsense,
pure knowledge,
of he who knows nothing,
and suddenly saw
the sky
unlock

and open,
planets,
pulsating spaces,
perforated shadows,
riddled
with fires, flowers, flights,
the revolving night, the universe.
And I the smallest thing,
made drunk by the great void,
starred,

in the image, likeness
of mystery,
felt myself pure part
of abyss,
turned with the starlight,
my heart broken loose in the wind.

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