

AFTER LORCA (1957)

With an Introduction by Federico García Lorca



by

JACK SPICER

With an Introduction by

Federico García Lorca

Juan Ramón Jimenez

A Translation for John Ryan

In the white endlessness
Snow, seaweed, and salt
He lost his imagination.

The color white. He walks
Upon a soundless carpet made
Of pigeon feathers.

Without eyes or thumbs
He suffers a dream not moving
But the bones quiver.

In the white endlessness
How pure and big a wound
His imagination left.

Snow, seaweed, and salt. Now
In the white endlessness.

Ballad of the Little Girl Who Invented the Universe

A Translation for George Stanley

Jasmine flower and a bull with his throat slashed.
Infinite sidewalk. Map. Room. Harp. Sunrise.
A little girl pretends a bull made of jasmine
And the bull is a bloody twilight that bellows.

If the sky could be a little boy
The jasmines could take half the night to themselves
And the bull a blue bullring of his own
With his heart at the foot of a small column.

But the sky is an elephant
And the jasmines are water without blood
And the little girl is a bouquet of night flowers
Lost on a big dark sidewalk.

Between the jasmine and the bull
Or the hooks of the sleeping people of marble or
In the jasmine, clouds and an elephant—
The skeleton of a little girl turning.

Dear Lorca,

These letters are to be as temporary as our poetry is to be permanent. They will establish the bulk, the wastage that my sour-stomached contemporaries demand to help them swallow and digest the pure word. We will use up our rhetoric here so that it will not appear in our poems. Let it be consumed paragraph by paragraph, day by day, until nothing of it is left in our poetry and nothing of our poetry is left in it. It is precisely because these letters are unnecessary that they must be written.

In my last letter I spoke of the tradition. The fools that read these letters will think by this we mean what tradition seems to have meant lately—an historical patchwork (whether made up of Elizabethan quotations, guide books of the poet's home town, or obscure bits of magic published by Pantheon) which is used to cover up the nakedness of the bare word. Tradition means much more than that. It means generations of different poets in different countries patiently telling the

same story, writing the same poem, gaining and losing something with each transformation—but, of course, never really losing anything. This has nothing to do with calmness, classicism, temperament, or anything else. Invention is merely the enemy of poetry.

See how weak prose is. I invent a word like invention. These paragraphs could be translated, transformed by a chain of fifty poets in fifty languages, and they still would be temporary, untrue, unable to yield the substance of a single image. Prose invents—poetry discloses.

A mad man is talking to himself in the room next to mine. He speaks in prose. Presently I shall go to a bar and there one or two poets will speak to me and I to them and we will try to destroy each other or attract each other or even listen to each other and nothing will happen because we will be speaking in prose. I will go home, drunken and dissatisfied, and sleep—and my dreams will be prose. Even the subconscious is not patient enough for poetry.

You are dead and the dead are very patient.

Love,
Jack

Ballad of the Seven Passages

A Translation for Ebbe Borregaard

Rimbaud is spelled with seven letters of the alphabet
Your heart will never break at what you are hearing
Rimbaud was older than you are when he was dead
Your heart will never break at what you are hearing.
I tell you, darling, beauty was never as old as he was
And your heart will never break at what you are hearing.
Shut your mouth.

(Among the old rubber tires and cans of gasoline a Negro eats a straw hat.)

BUSTER KEATON: What a beautiful afternoon!

(A parrot flutters around in the sexless sky.)

BUSTER KEATON: I like riding a bicycle.

THE OWL: Toowit toowoo.

BUSTER KEATON: How beautifully these birds sing!

THE OWL: Hoo!

BUSTER KEATON: It's lovely!

(Pause. Buster Keaton ineffably crosses the rushes and little fields of rye. The landscape shortens itself beneath the wheels of his machine. The bicycle has a single dimension. It is able to enter books and to expand itself even into operas and coalmines. The bicycle of Buster Keaton does not have a riding seat of caramel or sugar pedals like the bicycles bad men ride. It is a bicycle like all bicycles except for a unique drenching of innocence. Adam and Eve run by, frightened as if they were carrying a vase full of water and, in passing, pet the bicycle of Buster Keaton.)

BUSTER KEATON: Ah, love, love!

(Buster Keaton falls to the ground. The bicycle escapes him. It runs behind two enormous gray butterflies. It skims madly half an inch from the ground.)

BUSTER KEATON: I don't want to talk. Won't somebody please say something?

A VOICE: Fool!

(He continues walking. His eyes, infinite and sad like a newly born animal, dream of lilies and angels and silken belts. His eyes which are like the bottom of a vase. His eyes of a mad child. Which are most faithful. Which are most beautiful. The eyes of an ostrich. His human eyes with a secure equipoise with melancholy. Philadelphia is seen in the distance. The inhabitants of that city now know that the old poem of a Singer machine is able to encircle the big roses of the greenhouse but not at all to comprehend the poetic difference between a bowl of hot tea and a bowl of cold tea. Philadelphia shines in the distance.)

(An American girl with eyes of celluloid comes through the grass.)

THE AMERICAN: Hello.

(Buster Keaton smiles and looks at the shoes of the girl. Those shoes! We do not have to admire her shoes. It would take a crocodile to wear them.)

BUSTER KEATON: I would have liked—

THE AMERICAN (breathless): Do you carry a sword decked with myrtle leaves?

(Buster Keaton shrugs his shoulders and lifts his right foot.)

THE AMERICAN: Do you have a ring with a poisoned stone?

(Buster Keaton twists slowly and lifts an inquiring leg.)

(Four angels with wings of a heavenly gas balloon piss among the flowers. The ladies of the town play a piano as if they were riding a bicycle. The waltz, a moon, and seventeen Indian canoes rock the precious heart of our friend. As the greatest surprise of all, autumn has invaded the garden like water explodes a geometrical clump of sugar.)

BUSTER KEATON (sighing): I would have liked to have been a swan. But I can't do what I would have liked. Because—What happened to my hat? Where is my collar of little birds and my mohair necktie? What a disgrace!

(A young girl with a wasp waist and a high collar comes in on a bicycle. She has the head of a nightingale.)

YOUNG GIRL: Whom do I have the honor of saluting?

BUSTER KEATON (with a bow): Buster Keaton.

(The young girl faints and falls off the bicycle. Her legs on the ground tremble like two agonized cobras. A gramophone plays a thousand versions of the same song—"In Philadelphia they have no nightingales.")

BUSTER KEATON (kneeling): Darling Miss Eleanor, pardon me! (lower) Darling (lower still) Darling (lowest) Darling.

(The lights of Philadelphia flicker and go out in the faces of a thousand policemen.)

Ballad of the Shadowy Pigeons

A Translation for Joe Dunn

On the branches of laurel
Saw two shadowy pigeons.
One of them was the sun
The other the moon.

Little neighbors, I asked them,
Where am I buried?
In my tail, said the sun.
In my craw, said the moon.

And I who had been walking
With the earth at my waistline
Saw two eagles of marble
And a naked maiden.
The one was the other
And the maiden was no one.

Little eagles, I asked them,
Where am I buried?
In my tail, said the sun.
In my craw, said the moon.

On the branches of laurel
Saw two naked pigeons.
The one was the other
And the both of them no one.

Suicide

A Translation for Eric Weir

At ten o'clock in the morning
The young man could not remember.

His heart was stuffed with dead wings
And linen flowers.

He is conscious that there is nothing left
In his mouth but one word.

When he removes his coat soft ashes
Fall from his arms.

Through the window he sees a tower
He sees a window and a tower.

His watch has run down in its case
He observes the way it was looking at him.

He sees his shadow stretched
Upon a white silk cushion.

And the stiff geometric youngster
Shatters the mirror with an ax.

The mirror submerges everything
In a great spurt of shadow.

Bacchus

A Translation for Don Allen

An untouched green murmur.
The figtree wants to extend me its branches.

Like a panther its shadow
Stalks my poet shadow.

The moon has words with the dogs.
She is mistaken and begins over.

Yesterday, tomorrow, black, and green
Troop around my circle of laurel.

Where would you look for my lifetime
If I exchanged my heart?

—And the figtree shouts at me and advances
Terrible and extended.

A Diamond

A Translation for Robert Jones

A diamond
Is there
At the heart of the moon or the branches or my nakedness
And there is nothing in the universe like diamond
Nothing in the whole mind.

The poem is a seagull resting on a pier at the end of the ocean.

A dog howls at the moon
A dog howls at the branches
A dog howls at the nakedness
A dog howling with pure mind.

I ask for the poem to be as pure as a seagull's belly.

The universe falls apart and discloses a diamond
Two words called seagull are peacefully floating out where the
waves are.

The dog is dead there with the moon, with the branches, with
my nakedness
And there is nothing in the universe like diamond
Nothing in the whole mind.

The Little Halfwit

A Translation for Robin Blaser

I said, "Afternoon"
But it wasn't there.
The afternoon was another thing
Which had gone someplace.

(And the light shrugged its shoulders
Like a little girl.)

"Afternoon" But this is useless,
This is untrue, this has to it
Half a moon of lead. The other
Will never get here.

(And the light that everyone sees
Played at being a statue.)

The other one was tiny
And ate pomegranates.

This one is big and green and I'm not able
To grab her in my arms or dress her.
Is she ever coming? What was she?

(And the light as it went along, as a joke
Separated the little halfwit from his own shadow.)

Verlaine

A Translation for Pat Wilson

A song
Which I shall never sing
Has fallen asleep on my lips.
A song
Which I shall never sing—

Above the honeysuckle
There's a firefly
And the moon stings
With a ray into the water—

At that time I'll imagine
The song
Which I shall never sing.

A song full of lips
And far-off washes

A song full of lost
Hours in the shadow

A song of a star that's alive
Above enduring day.

Dear Lorca,

When I translate one of your poems and I come across words I do not understand, I always guess at their meanings. I am inevitably right. A really perfect poem (no one yet has written one) could be perfectly translated by a person who did not know one word of the language it was written in. A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary.

It is very difficult. We want to transfer the immediate object, the immediate emotion to the poem—and yet the immediate always has hundreds of its own words clinging to it, short-lived and tenacious as barnacles. And it is wrong to scrape them off and substitute others. A poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer. The words around the immediate shrivel and decay like flesh around the body. No mummy-sheet of tradition can be used to stop the process. Objects, words must be led across time not preserved against it.

I yell "Shit" down a cliff at an ocean. Even in my lifetime the immediacy of that word will fade. It will be dead as "Alas." But if I put the

real cliff and the real ocean into the poem, the word "Shit" will ride along with them, travel the time-machine until cliffs and oceans disappear.

Most of my friends like words too well. They set them under the blinding light of the poem and try to extract every possible connotation from each of them, every temporary pun, every direct or indirect connection—as if a word could become an object by mere addition of consequences. Others pick up words from the street, from their bars, from their offices and display them proudly in their poems as if they were shouting, "See what I have collected from the American language. Look at my butterflies, my stamps, my old shoes!" What does one do with all this crap?

Words are what sticks to the real. We use them to push the real, to drag the real into the poem. They are what we hold on with, nothing else. They are as valuable in themselves as rope with nothing to be tied to.

I repeat—the perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary.

Love,
Jack

The Ballad of the Dead Woodcutter

A Translation for Louis Marbury

Because the figtree was sapless
It has cracked at the root.

Oh, you have fallen down on your head
You have fallen on your head.

Because the oaktree was rootless
It has cracked at the branch.

Oh, you have fallen down on your head
You have fallen on your head.

Because I walked through the branches
I have scratched out my heart.

Oh, you have fallen down on your head
You have fallen on your head.

The Ballad of Weeping

A Translation for Bob Connor

I have closed my window
Because I do not want to hear the weeping
But behind the gray walls
Nothing can be heard but weeping.

A few dogs might bark
A few angels might sing
There might be room for a thousand violins in the palm of my
hand.

But the weeping is a big dog
The weeping is a big angel
The weeping is a big violin
The tears put a muzzle on the air
And nothing can be heard but weeping.

Alba

A Translation for Russ Fitzgerald

If your hand had been meaningless
Not a single blade of grass
Would spring from the earth's surface.
Easy to write, to kiss—
No, I said, read your paper.
Be there
Like the earth
When shadow covers the wet grass.

Song of the Poor

A Translation

Ay qué trabajo me cuesta
quererte como te quiero!

Because I love you the table
And the heart and the lamplight
Feel sorry for me.

Who will buy from me
That small belt I have
And that sadness of white thread
To weave handkerchiefs?

Because I love you the ceiling
And the heart and the air
Feel sorry for me.

Ay qué trabajo me cuesta
quererte como te quiero!

Ode for Walt Whitman

A Translation for Steve Jonas

Along East River and the Bronx
The kids were singing, showing off their bodies
At the wheel, at oil, the rawhide, and the hammer.
Ninety thousand miners were drawing silver out of boulders
While children made perspective drawings of stairways.

But no one went to sleep
No one wanted to be a river
No one loved the big leaves, no one
The blue tongue of the coastline.

Along East River into Queens
The kids were wrestling with industry.
The Jews sold circumcision's rose
To the faun of the river.
The sky flowed through the bridges and rooftops—
Herds of buffalo the wind was pushing.

But none of them would stay.
No one wanted to be cloud. No one
Looked for the ferns
Or the yellow wheel of the drum.

But if the moon comes out
The pulleys will slide around to disturb the sky
A limit of needles will fence in your memory
And there will be coffins to carry out your unemployed.

New York of mud,
New York of wire fences and death,
What angel do you carry hidden in your cheek?
What perfect voice will tell you the truth about wheat
Or the terrible sleep of your wet-dreamed anemones?

Not for one moment, beautiful old Walt Whitman,
Have I stopped seeing your beard full of butterflies
Or your shoulders of corduroy worn thin by the moon
Or your muscles of a virgin Apollo
Or your voice like a column of ashes
Ancient and beautiful as the fog.

You gave a cry like a bird
With his prick pierced through by a needle
Enemy of satyrs
Enemy of the grape
And lover of bodies under rough cloth.
Not for one moment, tight-cocked beauty,
Who in mountains of coal, advertisements, and railroads
Had dreamed of being a river and of sleeping like one
With a particular comrade, one who could put in your bosom
The young pain of an ignorant leopard.
Not for one moment, blood-Adam, male,

Man alone in the sea, beautiful
Old Walt Whitman.
Because on the rooftops
Bunched together in bars
Pouring out in clusters from toilets
Trembling between the legs of taxi-drivers
Or spinning upon platforms of whiskey
The cocksuckers, Walt Whitman, were counting on you.

That one also, also. And they throw themselves down on
Your burning virgin beard,
Blonds of the North, negroes from the seashore,
Crowds of shouts and gestures
Like cats or snakes
The cocksuckers, Walt Whitman, the cocksuckers,
Muddy with tears, meat for the whip,
Tooth or boot of the cowboys.

That one also, also. Painted fingers
Sprout out along the beach of your dreams
And you give a friend an apple
Which tastes faintly of gas-fumes
And the sun sings a song for the bellybuttons
Of the little boys who play games below bridges.

But you weren't looking for the scratched eyes
Or the blackswamp-country where children are sinking
Or the frozen spit
Or the wounded curves like a toad's paunch
Which cocksuckers wear in bars and night-clubs
While the moon beats them along the corners of terror.

You were looking for a naked man who would be like a river
Bull and dream, a connection between the wheel and the seaweed,

Be father for your agony, your death's camellia
And moan in the flames of your hidden equator.

For it is just that a man not look for his pleasure
In the forest of blood of the following morning.
The sky has coastlines where life can be avoided
And some bodies must not repeat themselves at sunrise.

Agony, agony, dream, leaven, and dream.
That is the world, my friend, agony, agony.
The dead decompose themselves under the clock of the cities.
War enters weeping, with a million gray rats.
The rich give to their girlfriends
Tiny illuminated dyings
And life is not noble, or good, or sacred.

A man is able if he wishes to lead his desire
Through vein of coral or the celestial naked.
Tomorrow his loves will be rock and Time
A breeze that comes sleeping through their clusters.

That is why I do not cry out, old Walt Whitman,
Against the little boy who writes
A girl's name on his pillow,
Or the kid who puts on a wedding dress
In the darkness of a closet
Or the lonely men in bars
Who drink with sickness the waters of prostitution
Or the men with green eyelids
Who love men and scald their lips in silence,
But against the rest of you, cocksuckers of cities,
Hard-up and dirty-brained,
Mothers of mud, harpies, dreamless enemies
Of the Love that distributes crowns of gladness.

Against the rest of you always, who give the kids
Drippings of sucked-off death with sour poison.
Against the rest of you always
Fairies of North America,
Pajaros of Havana,

Jotos of Mexico,
Sarasas of Cadiz,
Apios of Seville,
Cancos of Madrid,
Adelaidas of Portugal,
Cocksuckers of all the world, assassins of doves,
Slaves of women, lapdogs of their dressing tables,
Opening their flies in parks with a fever of fans
Or ambushed in the rigid landscapes of poison.

Let there be no mercy. Death
Trickles from all of your eyes, groups
Itself like gray flowers on beaches of mud.
Let there be no mercy. Watch out for them.
Let the bewildered, the pure,
The classical, the appointed, the praying
Lock the gates of this Bacchanalia.

And you, beautiful Walt Whitman, sleep on the banks of the Hudson
With your beard toward the pole and your palms open
Soft clay or snow, your tongue is invoking
Comrades to keep vigil over your gazelle without body.
Sleep, there is nothing left here.
A dance of walls shakes across the prairies
And America drowns itself with machines and weeping.
Let the hard air of midnight
Sweep away all the flowers and letters from the arch in which you sleep
And a little black boy announce to the white men of gold
The arrival of the reign of the ear of wheat.

Aquatic Park

A Translation for Jack Spicer

A green boat
Fishing in blue water

The gulls circle the pier
Calling their hunger

A wind rises from the west
Like the passing of desire

Two boys play on the beach
Laughing

Their gangling legs cast shadows
On the wet sand

Then,
Sprawling in the boat

A beautiful black fish.

Forest

A Translation for Joe Dunn

You want me to tell you
The secret of springtime—

And I relate to that secret
Like a high-branching fir-tree

Whose thousand little fingers
Point a thousand little roads.

I will tell you never, my love,
Because the river runs slowly

But I shall put into my branching voice
The ashy sky of your gaze.

Turn me around, brown child
Be careful of my needles.

Turn me around and around, playing
At the well pump of love.

The secret of springtime. How
I wish I could tell you!

Dear Lorca,

I would like to make poems out of real objects. The lemon to be a lemon that the reader could cut or squeeze or taste—a real lemon like a newspaper in a collage is a real newspaper. I would like the moon in my poems to be a real moon, one which could be suddenly covered with a cloud that has nothing to do with the poem—a moon utterly independent of images. The imagination pictures the real. I would like to point to the real, disclose it, to make a poem that has no sound in it but the pointing of a finger.

We have both tried to be independent of images (you from the start and I only when I grew old enough to tire of trying to make things connect), to make things visible rather than to make pictures of them (*phantasia non imaginari*). How easy it is in erotic musings or in the truer imagination of a dream to invent a beautiful boy. How difficult to take a boy in a blue bathing suit that I have watched as casually as a tree and to make him visible in a poem as a tree is visible, not as an image or a picture but as something alive—caught forever in the structure of words. Live moons, live lemons, live boys in bathing suits. The poem is a collage of the real.

But things decay, reason argues. Real things become garbage. The piece of lemon you shellac to the canvas begins to develop a mold, the newspaper tells of incredibly ancient events in forgotten slang, the boy becomes a grandfather. Yes, but the garbage of the real still reaches out into the current world making its objects, in turn, visible—lemon calls to lemon, newspaper to newspaper, boy to boy. As things decay they bring their equivalents into being.

Things do not connect; they correspond. That is what makes it possible for a poet to translate real objects, to bring them across language as easily as he can bring them across time. That tree you saw in Spain is a tree I could never have seen in California, that lemon has a different smell and a different taste, BUT the answer is this—every place and every time has a real object to *correspond* with your real object—that lemon may become this lemon, or it may even become this piece of

seaweed, or this particular color of gray in this ocean. One does not need to imagine that lemon; one needs to discover it.

Even these letters. They *correspond* with something (I don't know what) that you have written (perhaps as unapparently as that lemon corresponds to this piece of seaweed) and, in turn, some future poet will write something which *corresponds* to them. That is how we dead men write to each other.

Love,
Jack

Narcissus

A Translation for Basil King

Poor Narcissus
Your dim fragrance
And the dim heart of the river

I want to stay at your edge
Flower of love
Poor Narcissus

Ripples and sleeping fish
Cross your white eyes
Songbirds and butterflies
Japanese mine

I so tall beside you
Flower of love
Poor Narcissus

How wide-awake the frogs are
They won't stay out of the surface
In which your madness and my madness
Mirrors itself

poor Narcissus
My sorrow
Self of my sorrow.

He Died at Sunrise

A Translation for Allen Joyce

Night of four moons
And a single tree,
With a single shadow
And a single bird.

I look into my body for
The tracks of your lips.
A stream kisses into the wind
Without touch.

I carry the No you gave me
Clenched in my palm
Like something made of wax
An almost-white lemon.

Night of four moons
And a single tree
At the point of a needle
Is my love, spinning.

Child, you are too tall for this bed.

The pine needles fall
Like an ax in the forest.

Can you hear them crumble
There where we are sleeping?

Dear Lorca,

When you had finished a poem what did it want you to do with it? Was it happy enough merely to exist or did it demand imperiously that you share it with somebody like the beauty of a beautiful person forces him to search the world for someone that can declare that beauty? And where did your poems find people?

Some poems are easily laid. They will give themselves to anybody and anybody physically capable can receive them. They may be beautiful (we have both written some that were) but they are meretricious. From the moment of their conception they inform us in a dulcet voice that, thank you, they can take care of themselves. I swear that if one of them were hidden beneath my carpet, it would shout out and seduce somebody. The quiet poems are what I worry about—the ones that must be seduced. They could travel about with me for years and no one would notice them. And yet, properly wed, they are more beautiful than their whorish cousins.

But I am speaking of the first night, when I leave my apartment almost breathless, searching for someone to show the poem to. Often now there is no one. My fellow poets (those I showed poetry to ten years ago) are as little interested in my poetry as I am in theirs. We both compare the poems shown (unfavorably, of course) with the poems we were writing ten years ago when we could learn from each other. We are polite but it is as if we were trading snapshots of our children—old

acquaintances who disapprove of each other's wives. Or were you more generous, García Lorca?

There are the young, of course. I have been reduced to them (or my poems have) lately. The advantage in them is that they haven't yet decided what kind of poetry they are going to write tomorrow and are always looking for some device of yours to use. Yours, that's the trouble. Yours and not the poem's. They read the poem once to catch the marks of your style and then again, if they are at all pretty, to see if there is any reference to them in the poem. That's all. I know. I used to do it myself.

When you are in love there is no real problem. The person you love is always interested because he knows that the poems are always about him. If only because each poem will someday be said to belong to the Miss X or Mr. Y period of the poet's life. I may not be a better poet when I am in love, but I am a far less frustrated one. My poems have an audience.

Finally there are friends. There have only been two of them in my life who could read my poems and one of that two really prefers to put them in print so he can see them better. The other is far away.

All this is to explain why I dedicate each of our poems to someone.

Love,
Jack

Narcissus

A Translation for Richard Rummonds

Child,
How you keep falling into rivers.

At the bottom there's a rose
And in the rose there's another river.

Look at that bird. Look,
That yellow bird.

My eyes have fallen down
Into the water.

My god,
How they're slipping! Youngster!

—And I'm in the rose myself.

When I was lost in water I
Understood but won't tell you.

Ballad of the Dead Boy

A Translation for Graham Mackintosh

Every afternoon in Granada
Every afternoon a boy dies
Every afternoon the river sits itself down
To talk things over with its neighbors.

All the dead wear wings of moss.
The cloudy wind and the bright wind
Are two pheasants who fly around towers
And the day is a boy with a wound in him.

There wasn't a touch of lark in the sky
When I met you at the wine cavern
Or a fragment of cloud near the earth
When you drowned on the river.

A giant of water went slopping over the mountains
And the canyon spun around the dogs and lilies.
Your body, with the violet shadow of my hands,
Was dead there on the banks, an archangel, cold.

Song for September

A Translation for Don Allen

In the distant night the children are singing:
A little river
And a colored fountain

THE CHILDREN: When will our hearts come back from your holiday?

I: When my words no longer need me.

THE CHILDREN: You have left us here to sing the death of your summer
A little river
And a colored fountain
What September flowers do you hold in your hand?

I: A bloody rose and a white lily.

THE CHILDREN: Dip them in the water of an old song
A little river
And a colored fountain
What are you tasting in your thirsty mouth?

I: The flavor of the bones of my big skull.

THE CHILDREN: Drink the kind water of an old song

A little river

And a colored fountain

Why have you gone so very far from the death of your
summer?

I: I am looking for a magical clockworkman.

THE CHILDREN: And how will you find the highway of poets?

I: The fountain and a river and an old song.

THE CHILDREN: You are going very far.

I: I am going very far, farther than my poems, farther than the
mountains, farther than the birds. I am going to ask Christ to give
me back my childhood, ripe with sunburn and feathers and a
wooden sword.

THE CHILDREN: You have left us here to sing the death of your summer.

And you will never return.

A little river

And a colored fountain

And you will never return.

Buster Keaton Rides Again: A Sequel

A Translation for The Big Cat Up There

BUSTER KEATON (entering a long dark corridor): This must be Room 73.

PIGEON: Sir, I am a pigeon.

BUSTER KEATON (taking a dictionary out of his back pocket): I don't
understand what anybody is talking about.

(No one rides by on a bicycle. The corridor is quite silent.)

PIGEON: I have to go to the bathroom.

BUSTER KEATON: In a minute.

(Two chambermaids come by carrying towels. They give one to the
pigeon and one to Buster Keaton.)

1ST CHAMBERMAID: Why do you suppose human beings have lips?

2ND CHAMBERMAID: Nothing like that entered my head.

BUSTER KEATON: No. There were supposed to be three chambermaids.

(He takes out a chessboard and begins playing upon it.)

PIGEON: I could love you if I were a dove.

BUSTER KEATON (biting the chessboard): When I was a child I was put in
jail for not giving information to the police.

3 CHAMBERMAIDS: Yes.

BUSTER KEATON: I am not a Catholic.

PIGEON: Don't you believe that God died?

BUSTER KEATON (crying): No.

(4 Spanish dancers come in. They are mostly male.)

1ST SPANISH DANCER: I have a little magazine up my ass.

4 CHAMBERMAIDS: Oh!

(Buster Keaton forgets his politeness and becomes a Catholic. He takes mass, says Holy Mary Mother of God, and distributes rosaries to all the policemen in the room. He hangs by his heels from a crucifix.)

VIRGIN MARY (coming in abruptly): Buster Keaton you have b^um^pe^d The Car.

BUSTER KEATON: No.

(Alcohol comes in wearing the disguise of a cockroach. It is blue. It crawls silently up Buster Keaton's leg.)

BUSTER KEATON: No.

(Alcohol and the Virgin Mary perform a dance. They both pretend to have been lovers.)

BUSTER KEATON: I will never see either of you in Rockland. I am not going to Rockland.

(He takes the chessboard and invents a new alphabet.)

VIRGIN MARY: Holy Mary Mother of God Pray For Us Sinners Now At The Hour Of Our Death.

ALCOHOL: Dada is as dada does.

VIRGIN MARY: Did. (She falls into a blue robe.)

BUSTER KEATON: I wonder if there is anything but love in the universe.

(Suddenly, at the last possible time before the curtain falls, somebody kisses the Virgin Mary, and Buster Keaton, and everybody.)

ALCOHOL: If I weren't tone-deaf I would sing.

BUSTER KEATON (sadly): I announce a new world.

(Three literary critics disguised as chambermaids bring down the curtain. Buster Keaton, bleeding, breaks through the curtain. He stands in the middle of the stage holding a fresh pomegranate in his arms.)

BUSTER KEATON (even more sadly): I announce the death of Orpheus.

(Everyone comes in. Policemen, waitresses, and Irene Tavener. They perform a complicated symbolic dance. Alcohol nibbles at the legs of every dancer.)

BUSTER KEATON (bleeding profusely): I love you. I love you. (As a last effort he throws the bleeding pomegranate from his heart.) No kidding, I love you.

VIRGIN MARY (taking him into her arms): You have b^um^pe^d the car.

(The gaudy blue curtain, silent and alive like the mouth of a seagull, covers everything.)

The Ballad of Escape

A Translation for Nat Harden

I have become lost many times along the ocean
With my ears filled with newly cut flowers
With my tongue full of loving and agony
I have become lost many times along the ocean
Like I lose myself in the hearts of some boys.

There is no night in which, giving a kiss,
One does not feel the smiles of the faceless people
And there is no one in touching something recently born
Who can quite forget the motionless skulls of horses.

Because the roses always search in the forehead
For a hard landscape of bone
And the hands of a man have no other purpose
Than to be like the roots that grow beneath wheat-fields.

Like I lose myself in the hearts of some boys
I have become lost many times along the ocean
Along the vastness of water I wander searching
An end to the lives that have tried to complete me.

Venus

A Translation for Ann Simon

The dead girl
In the winding shell of the bed
Naked of the little wind and flowers
Surges on into perennial light.

The world stayed behind
Lily of cotton and shadow.
It peeked timidly out of the mirror
Looking on at that infinite passage.

The dead girl
Was eaten from inside by love.
In the unyieldingness of seafoam
She lost her hair.

Friday, the 13th

A Translation for Will Holther

At the base of the throat is a little machine
Which makes us able to say anything.
Below it are carpets
Red, blue, and green-colored.
I say the flesh is not grass.
It is an empty house
In which there is nothing
But a little machine
And big, dark carpets.

Song of Two Windows

A Translation for James Broughton

Wind, window, moon
(I open the window to the sky)
Wind, window, moon
(I open the window to the earth)
Then
From the sky
The voices of two girls.

In the middle of my mirror
A girl is drowning
The voice of a single girl.
She holds cold fire like a glass
Each thing she watches
Has become double.
Cold fire is
Cold fire is.
In the middle of my mirror
A girl is drowning
The voice of a single girl.

A branch of night
Enters through my window
A great dark branch
With bracelets of water
Behind a blue mirror
Someone is drowning
The wounded instants
Along the clock—pass.

I stick my head out of the window and I see a chopper of wind ready
to cut it off. Upon that invisible guillotine I have mounted the heads
without eyes of all my desires, and the odor of lemon fills all of the
instant while the wind changes to a flower of gas.

At the pool there has died
A girl of water
She has pushed the earth aside
Like a ripe apple
Down from her head to her thighs
A fish crosses her, calling softly
The wind whispers, "Darling"
But is unable to awaken her

The pool holds loosely
Its rider of something
And in the air its gray nipples
Vibrate with frogs.
God, we hail you. We will make payment
To Our Lady of Water
For the girl in the pool
Dead below the ripples.
I will soon put at her side
Two small gourds
Because they can keep afloat,
Yes, even in water.

Dear Lorca,

Loneliness is necessary for pure poetry. When someone intrudes into the poet's life (and any sudden personal contact, whether in the bed or in the heart, is an intrusion) he loses his balance for a moment, slips into being who he is, uses his poetry as one would use money or sympathy. The person who writes the poetry emerges, tentatively, like a hermit crab from a conch shell. The poet, for that instant, ceases to be a dead man.

I, for example, could not finish the last letter I was writing you about sounds. You were like a friend in a distant city to whom I was suddenly unable to write, not because the fabric of my life had changed, but because I was suddenly, temporarily, not in the fabric of my life. I could not tell you about it because both it and I were momentary.

Even the objects change. The seagulls, the greenness of the ocean, the fish—they become things to be traded for a smile or the sound of conversation—counters rather than objects. Nothing matters except the big lie of the personal—the lie in which these objects do not believe.

That instant, I said. It may last for a minute, a night, or a month, but, this I promise you, García Lorca, the loneliness returns. The poet encysts the intruder. The objects come back to their own places, silent and unsmiling. I again begin to write you a letter on the sound of a poem. And this immediate thing, this personal adventure, will not have been transferred into the poem like the waves and the birds were, will, at best, show in the lovely pattern of cracks in some poem where autobiography shattered but did not quite destroy the surface. And the encysted emotion will itself become an object, to be transferred at last into poetry like the waves and the birds.

And I will again become your special comrade.

Love,
Jack

The Moon and Lady Death

A Translation for Helen Adam

The moon has marble teeth
How old and sad she looks!
There is a dry river
There is a hill without grass
There is a dead oak tree
Near a dry river.

Lady Death, wrinkled,
Goes looking for custom
At the heels of a crowd
Of tenuous phantoms.
Near the dead oak tree
Near the dry river
There is a fair without trumpets
And tents made of shadow.

She sells them dry paint
Made of wax and torture,
Wicked and twisted
Like a witch in a story.
There is a dry river
There is a hill without grass
There is a dead oak tree
Near a dry river.

The moon
Is tossing money

Down through the black air.
Near the dead oak tree
Near the dry river
There is a fair without trumpets
And tents made of shadow.

Afternoon

A Translation for John Barrow

The sky asks afternoon for a word.
—"It is 1:36. A black cloud
Has crossed one of the white clouds.
13 empty boats
And a seagull."

The bay asks afternoon for a word.
—"The wind is blowing
Southwest at nine miles an hour
I am in love with an ocean
Whose heart is the color of wet sand.
At 1:37
13 empty boats
And a seagull."

Afternoon asks the ocean,
"Why does a man die?"
—"It is 1:37
13 empty boats
And a seagull."

Dear Lorca,

This is the last letter. The connection between us, which had been fading away with the summer, is now finally broken. I turn in anger and dissatisfaction to the things of my life and you return, a disembodied but contagious spirit, to the printed page. It is over, this intimate communion with the ghost of García Lorca, and I wonder now how it was ever able to happen.

It was a game, I shout to myself. A game. There are no angels, ghosts, or even shadows. It was a game made out of summer and freedom and a need for a poetry that would be more than the expression of my hatreds and desires. It was a game like Yeats' spooks or Blake's sexless seraphim.

Yet it was there. The poems are there, the memory not of a vision but a kind of casual friendship with an undramatic ghost who occasionally looked through my eyes and whispered to me, not really more important than my other friends, but now achieving a different level of reality by being missing. Today, alone by myself, it is like having lost a pair of eyes and a lover.

What is real, I suppose, will endure. Poe's mechanical chessplayer was not the less a miracle for having a man inside it, and when the man departed, the games it had played were no less beautiful. The analogy is false, of course, but it holds both a promise and a warning for each of us.

It is October now. Summer is over. Almost every trace of the months that produced these poems has been obliterated. Only explanations are possible, only regrets.

Saying goodbye to a ghost is more final than saying goodbye to a lover. Even the dead return, but a ghost, once loved, departing will never reappear.

Love,
Jack

Radar

A Postscript for Marianne Moore

No one exactly knows
Exactly how clouds look in the sky
Or the shape of the mountains below them
Or the direction in which fish swim.
No one exactly knows.
The eye is jealous of whatever moves
And the heart
Is too far buried in the sand
To tell.

They are going on a journey
Those deep blue creatures
Passing us as if they were sunshine
Look
Those fins, those closed eyes
Admiring each last drop of the ocean.

I crawled into bed with sorrow that night
Couldn't touch his fingers. See the splash
Of the water
The noisy movement of cloud
The push of the humpbacked mountains
Deep at the sand's edge.

IMAGINARY ELEGIES

For Robin Blaser

All the philosophy a man needs is in Berkeley.
—W. B. Yeats

I.

Poetry, almost blind like a camera
Is alive in sight only for a second. Click,
Snap goes the eyelid of the eye before movement
Almost as the word happens.
One would not choose to blink and go blind
After the instant. One would not choose
To see the continuous Platonic pattern of birds flying
Long after the stream of birds had dropped or had nested.
Lucky for us that there are visible things like oceans
Which are always around,
Continuous, disciplined adjuncts
To the moment of sight.
Sight
But not so sweet
As we have seen.
When I praise the sun or any bronze god derived from it
Don't think I wouldn't rather praise the very tall blond boy
Who ate all of my potato-chips at the Red Lizard.
It's just that I won't see him when I open my eyes
And I will see the sun.
Things like the sun are always there when the eyes are open
Insistent as breath.

One can only worship
These cold eternal for their support of
What is absolutely temporary.
But not so sweet.

The temporary tempts poetry
Tempts photographs, tempts eyes.
I conjure up
From photographs
The birds
The boy
The room in which I began to write this poem
All
My eye has seen or ever could have seen
I love
I love—The eyelid clicks
I see
Cold poetry
At the edge of their image.
It is as if we conjure the dead and they speak only
Through our own damned trumpets, through our damned medium:
"I am little Eva, a Negro princess from sunny heaven."
The voice sounds blond and tall.
"I am Aunt Minnie. Love is sweet as moonlight here in heaven."
The voice sounds blond and tall.
"I'm Barnacle Bill. I sank with the Titanic. I rose in salty heaven."
The voice sounds blond, sounds tall, sounds blond and tall.
"Goodbye from us in spiritland, from sweet Platonic spiritland.
You can't see us in spiritland, and we can't see at all."

II.

God must have a big eye to see everything
That we have lost or forgotten. Men used to say
That all lost objects stay upon the moon
Untouched by any other eye but God's.
The moon is God's big yellow eye remembering
What we have lost or never thought. That's why
The moon looks raw and ghostly in the dark.

It is the camera shots of every instant in the world
Laid bare in terrible yellow cold.
It is the objects we never saw.
It is the dodos flying through the snow
That flew from Baffinland to Greenland's tip
And did not even see themselves.
The moon is meant for lovers. Lovers lose
Themselves in others. Do not see themselves.
The moon does. The moon does.
The moon is not a yellow camera. It perceives
What wasn't, what undoes, what will not happen.
It's not a sharp and clicking eye of glass and hood. Just old,
Slow infinite exposure of
The negative that cannot happen.
Fear God's old eye for being shot with ice
Instead of blood. Fear its inhuman mirror blankness
Luring lovers.
Fear God's moon for hexing, sticking pins
In forgotten dolls. Fear it for wolves.
For witches, magic, lunacy, for parlor tricks.
The poet builds a castle on the moon
Made of dead skin and glass. Here marvelous machines
Stamp Chinese fortune cookies full of love.

Tarot cards

Make love to other Tarot cards. Here agony
Is just imagination's sister bitch.
This is the sun-tormented castle which
Reflects the sun. Da dada da.
The castle sings.
Da. I don't remember what I lost. Dada.
The song. Da. The hippogriffs were singing.
Da dada. The boy. His horns
Were wet with song. Dada.
I don't remember. Da. Forgotten.

Da. Dada. Hell. Old butterface
Who always eats her lovers.

Hell somehow exists in the distance
Between the remembered and the forgotten.
Hell somehow exists in the distance
Between what happened and what never happened
Between the moon and the earth of the instant
Between the poem and God's yellow eye.
Look through the window at the real moon.
See the sky surrounded. Bruised with rays.
But look now, in this room, see the moon-children
Wolf, bear, and otter, dragon, dove.
Look now, in this room, see the moon-children
Flying, crawling, swimming, burning
Vacant with beauty.
Hear them whisper.

III.

God's other eye is good and gold. So bright
The shine blinds. His eye is accurate. His eye
Observes the goodness of the light it shines
Then, pouncing like a cat, devours
Each golden trace of light
It saw and shined.
Cat feeds on mouse. God feeds on God. God's goodness is
A black and blinding cannibal with sunny teeth
That only eats itself.
Deny the light
God's golden eye is brazen. It is clanging brass
Of good intention.
It is noisy burning clanging brass.

Light is a carrion crow
Cawing and swooping. Cawing and swooping.
Then, then there is a sudden stop.
The day changes.
There is an innocent old sun quite cold in cloud.
The ache of sunshine stops.
God is gone. God is gone.
Nothing was quite as good.
It's getting late. Put on your coat.
It's getting dark. It's getting cold.
Most things happen in twilight
When the sun goes down and the moon hasn't come
And the earth dances.
Most things happen in twilight
When neither eye is open
And the earth dances.
Most things happen in twilight
When the earth dances
And God is blind as a gigantic bat.
The boys above the swimming pool receive the sun.
Their groins are pressed against the warm cement.
They look as if they dream. As if their bodies dream.
Rescue their bodies from the poisoned sun,
Shelter the dreamers. They're like lobsters now
Hot red and private as they dream.
They dream about themselves.
They dream of dreams about themselves.
They dream they dream of dreams about themselves.
Splash them with twilight like a wet bat.
Unbind the dreamers.

Poet,

Be like God.

PSYCHOANALYSIS: AN ELEGY

What are you thinking about?

I am thinking of an early summer.
I am thinking of wet hills in the rain
Pouring water. Shedding it
Down empty acres of oak and manzanita
Down to the old green brush tangled in the sun,
Greasewood, sage, and spring mustard.
Or the hot wind coming down from Santa Ana
Driving the hills crazy,
A fast wind with a bit of dust in it
Bruising everything and making the seed sweet.
Or down in the city where the peach trees
Are awkward as young horses,
And there are kites caught on the wires
Up above the street lamps,
And the storm drains are all choked with dead branches.

What are you thinking?

I think that I would like to write a poem that is slow as a summer
As slow getting started
As 4th of July somewhere around the middle of the second stanza
After a lot of unusual rain
California seems long in the summer.
I would like to write a poem as long as California
And as slow as a summer.
Do you get me, Doctor? It would have to be as slow
As the very tip of summer.
As slow as the summer seems
On a hot day drinking beer outside Riverside

Or standing in the middle of a white-hot road
Between Bakersfield and Hell
Waiting for Santa Claus.

What are you thinking now?

I'm thinking that she is very much like California.
When she is still her dress is like a roadmap. Highways
Traveling up and down her skin
Long empty highways
With the moon chasing jackrabbits across them
On hot summer nights.

I am thinking that her body could be California
And I a rich Eastern tourist
Lost somewhere between Hell and Texas
Looking at a map of a long, wet, dancing California
That I have never seen.

Send me some penny picture-postcards, lady,
Send them.

One of each breast photographed looking
Like curious national monuments,
One of your body sweeping like a three-lane highway
Twenty-seven miles from a night's lodging
In the world's oldest hotel.

What are you thinking?

I am thinking of how many times this poem
Will be repeated. How many summers
Will torture California
Until the damned maps burn

Until the mad cartographer
Falls to the ground and possesses
The sweet thick earth from which he has been hiding.

What are you thinking now?

I am thinking that a poem could go on forever.

Ballad of the Terrible Presence

A Translation for Joe LeSueur

I want the river lost from its bed
I want the wind lost from its valleys

I want the night to be there without eyes
And my heart without the golden flower

So that the oxen talk with big leaves
And the earthworm is dead of shadow

So that the teeth of the skull glisten
And the yellows give a complete color to silk.

I can look at the agony of wounded night
Struggling, twisted up against noontime

I can stand all the sunsets of green poison
And the wornout rainbows that time suffers

But don't make your clean body too visible
Like a black cactus opened out among rushes

Let me go in an anguish of star clusters
Lose me. But don't show me that cool flesh.

Ballad of Sleeping Somewhere Else

A Translation for Ebbe Borregaard

The pine needles fall
Like an ax in the forest.

Can you hear them crumble
There where we are sleeping?

The windows are close to the wall
Here in the darkness they remain open.

(When I saw you in the morning
My arms were full of paper.)

Five hundred miles away
The moon is a hatchet of silver.

(When I saw you in the morning
My eyes were full of paper.)

Here the walls are firm
They do not crumble and remain certain.

(When I saw you in the morning
My heart was full of paper.)

Five hundred miles away
The stars are glass that is breaking.

The windows sag on the wall
I feel cold glass in the blankets.

Rimbaud is spelled with seven passages

A E I O U Y

And that stony vowel called death.

Oh,

Damn Rimbaud,

Beauty is spelled with all the vowels of seven passages.

Shut your damned mouth.

When Rimbaud died he became older than your alphabet

And your heart will never break at what you are hearing.

Debussy

A Translation for the University of Redlands

My shadow moves silently

Upon the water in the ditch.

Upon my shadow are the frogs

Blocked off from the stars.

The shadow demands from my body

Unmoving images.

My shadow skims the water like a huge

Violet-colored mosquito.

A hundred crickets try to mine gold

From the light in the rushes.

A light born in my heart

Upon the ditch, reflected.

Frog

A Translation for Graham Mackintosh

Like all the novels I've read

My mind is going to a climax

And a climax means a splash in the pool.

Booing. Booing. Booing.

And your heart is full of water

And your nose can't hardly breathe.

Remember

How black those pinetrees were that fire burned.

All that black forest. And the noise

(Splash)

Of a single green needle.

Buster Keaton's Ride

A Translation for Melvin Bakkerud

ROOSTER: Cockledoodledoo!

(Buster Keaton enters carrying four children in his arms.)

BUSTER KEATON (takes out a wooden dagger and kills them):

My poor children!

ROOSTER: Cockledoodledoo!

BUSTER KEATON (counting the corpses on the ground): One, two, three, four. (Grabs a bicycle and goes.)