



Jeff Schwaner

20
poems
& other
translations
FROM THE
E
GLISH

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How can this song survive?

— Ron Sexsmith.



for Tomas Tranströmer

&

for Mary

**"It must be refreshing for you
to translate a poem of mine
with no stones in it."**

— Tranströmer, in a letter to Robert Bly

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Apology to Ice

The snow flow
Solid on the step
Where night made
A snapshot of
The day's melting's
Treacherous, though I
Am loath to
Add salt to
The wind. Tomorrow
The thing that
Almost killed you
Stumbling down with
The dogs will
Not be there—
The steps were
Predictable and remembering
That and not the
Flow was the
Problem all along

Sunday Landscape, with Time

The mountains lean southwest
Pulled by the undertow.
The slow wave of rock threatens to crest
Thirteen hundred feet above the black
Horses grazing in the field of winter straw.
A perfect painting if not for the accident victim
Sitting on the median with her family
Fifty yards in the foreground waiting
For the next ambulance.

Grief

In the blurring-by tree I saw the hawk turn its head.
This distance I've come to bring you home to find I no longer lived
In there. Well we walked arm in arm to the seats on the wall.
On the other side of the planet nobody called in.
Stood up by the upside down world. By the static sigh
Which could mean anything. By the eye which does not
Recognize. And this way back where the rocks weep ice
Is the only way which is forward
This brief response direct as a laugh because it was
Though you were unable to say my name or know
Who I was though you knew me through some tone or gesture
Is better than a memory of a laugh though the tunnel of grief is
long
This goodbye where we are past the why to the final silent letter.

The Unknown

Laying in bed beside you as we talked our way to sleep
About this quiet occasion now covering
More than half our lives
In the way the blanket of sleep steadily
Encloses the quiet half of our days,
Four strangers appeared in my mind's eye, unbidden,
Keeping a respectful distance but smiling in calm
Acknowledgment as if aware of me.
I remember telling you
What I was seeing and how those four
Were replaced by another four, all looking directly
At me as if marking the moment with some
Familiarity although I did not know their names, then
By four more and
How I could not control the image or imagine them
Away, four more now, seen from the waist
Up as if standing by a table or bar in a casual
Setting of my mind I'd never before visited
Until they'd seen enough or I'd seen enough
Of them to know something I still can't control
And the space dissolved
Though then I wanted to keep them there
And now can remember nothing of it
But this vague sentence which perhaps
We can read next year if waiting for them
They do not return

New Path

There have been so many wise guides
Yet we cannot follow them.
While their footsteps
Echo in our minds their feet
Have never walked where our next step
Must be placed. Where did all the old paths
Go, smoothed by so many sure soles?
This path I'm on is the old path only
When I'm looking back the way
I have come through
These steps in spring snow

Alligator

William and I waited out under the dock for the creek to rise.
In the hot pluff mud an alligator basked three feet from the legs
Of an egret plundering the exposed shellfish.
Things under the South Carolina sun do not strive
Like businessmen in raincoats hailing cabs; striving
Is moving only when you absolutely need to
And thus blood enemies can coexist outside of that need
In heat's close quarters, and there's more time to appreciate
Not being dead. This, I thought, might be the definition
Of southern comfort.

The sun peeled the sky back an inch and we went in for beers
And came back out and the air went out of the creek
And into the bottles and we pushed the canoe through
A few feet of mud and settled on the rising surface.

I was fore and William aft.

"Why don't you wear a hat?" William's missing
Teeth make him more trustworthy in a boat.

"I'm just not used to wearing hats."

His answering laugh had the same effect.

The creek's current was so lazy the first thing we felt of it
Was the pluff mud creasing against the boat's bottom
After we'd been edged out of the center like a forgotten idea.

We'd plow back into the creek like a comb

That couldn't untangle anything, crisscross to the far bank
And jam our oars into the mud to hold our place and catch
Our breath, marshgrass towering behind us, squinting

Through sweat at the other shore a hundred feet away.
“Gator at nine-o-clock,” William intoned softly. As it turns out
Nine-o-clock was three feet to our left and ten feet long.
Parallel parked and floating on the surface beside us, every inch
Of mottled back a history as long as that of the canoe,
The heat- and light-absorbing design that keeps
The past alive and dangerous. A filmy eye assessed us
Like a director deciding whether to radically alter the scene.
Then it sunk all at once like an old waffle iron.
We watched the bubbles cross the creek’s surface
Until the black head reappeared
Thirty feet away. When I pulled on the oar I realized
It was sunk so deep into pluff mud I almost capsized us
Freeing it. That’s why my hands weren’t shaking.

Meaning

I clambered up the shrugging shoulders of the world
To find where my love fit to show it had meaning
Beyond my need to describe it
The joy in its increments passing
Below me the sea heaved in its dream of the moon
While the moon dreams only of drowning
And the clouds made their slow motion escape
So I carved our names on the trunk of heaven
So we would stay together always but the bark
Slipped off like a gown on a wedding night
And the creases as the wind took it were no language
Coming back home to you then
I cast myself out that empty vessel
Undressed myself of all desire stripped of words
Left them behind here where they are
Already fading
Until I was nothing but our meaning
And the joy in its increments passing

The Shortest Season

We sit on a porch a mere week long.
From someplace else soft the breeze
Brings muted traffic, talk, an effortless
Broadcast of random comfort sounds.
Last week we could not imagine
The trees being anything but brown
The empty coal train ever ending
Its run but tonight
The phlox eddy over the stone
Wall into spring's blue drift and we watch
In the new maple leaves bright green bats
Glowing in the upside down dusk.

In Absentia

In the conversation we will never have
It is you who will be talking and I who will be listening.
You will tell me the many things you were too kind
To relay in the complex act of reading, miles and
Moons away and across the same seasons
Familiar as sand dunes. You will correct
An inaccuracy or two about the loblolly pine
And the distance between certain bodies
Of light and matter. You will admit
I did not understand your relationships and I will
Nod in a way that reminds you of your lover reading
The signs of the road through a muddy windshield
Pressing forward in a still life through which
Every thing is speeding in the opposite direction
And I will not tell you that poem was not about you.
In this conversation, my dear friend, I will hear
The voice I have never heard and had to imagine
All this time, speak of a line when of a sudden you knew
Me, and like an invisible open hand a few of my words
Came to rest reassuringly on your shoulders
And how you wondered if at that very moment I knew
I was there with you,
Enough to smile or shrug absently in the face
Of whatever I was doing, even

Though in translation words are different words,
Did they fly back to me at that moment, even
Though I have been dead for years, or did maybe I feel
It when writing that poem years or minutes
Earlier and my eyes will drop
Slowly as if at the end of a line the last one on a page
Seeing there is no next page and I will not tell you
That was the poem about you but will be released
As words with a reader but no writer
On the shoulder of a new moment
And you will start out of a daydream looking
Like a sonnet that once discovered must be read again



Escapes

Look around you: the metal stamped paint chipped path in either
direction
Is as opaque as it is transparent: you can see where you're going
but
Not where you're going to: is it precious or improper to end
A thought on a preposition? Consider: if you go up you follow the
smoke
Rise with the heat to where the heat's at
Its eventual worst, if the world doesn't crumble beneath you first.
If you go down what is below you? a teeming riot of the
unburning
Passions looking to see you lit up. Because it's always been easier
To watch the rise and fall. Would it be too much to end
With a proposition? The trick to escape is not living
In the structures around you. It's okay to end in a certain
Direction instead of in a certain place. Under the rubble
Of a well-built guess? No. When the airless curtain
Closes, it's you I'll be heading to.

Pentecost

Surely there are enough
Green tongues of flame
In this mid-May maple
For every confused soul

Wishing to speak the infinite word
In a finite language

Surely the message would have run
From the single vein
Along the tips of each leaf's five lobes
Dark green above, whitened
Beneath the same message
Across all five points
There to the lobes of the brain
The first for language
The second for memory
The third for perception
The fourth for the recognition
The fifth for where we are all missing
But from our own tongues

Back to us is there a sense of familiarity
Or does a question without language
Travel from temporal things
Back up the many spines of god

There is no sign in the story
Of the Pentecost that the apostles
Touched by tongues of fire
And speaking in every conceivable language

Understood their own message
Only that others did and thought them drunk

Surely in this one maple
And all its progenitors
There is a single flame for each of us
Slow burning from the moment
It is freed from spring's loosening kindle

Seemingly eternal and imperceptible in its change
For all the questions' creased foreheads
Asking is anything damned without language

What does it mean to speak
And be understood by anyone
What does it mean to understand
Nothing and bleed nectar
From every incision and build
Houses from every harm

Is there a better possible apostle
Of mid-day spirit
Than the mid-May maple
Under which the summer sun will
Sharpen shade but fall into harmless
Soft pieces of fire on the soil by the trunk

Like the maple I'm an instrument drawn
Away from the song I should provide
By the very air passing through me making
Its own music a thing I comprehend

With the exclamation of lungs and
No higher gesture than to provide
A space under which you might rest here
A moment these words between us like leaves

I do not want to be a messenger
Or in so many words hear the word

Other Gods

Old Testament

I did not create the piano but I play the piano.
I produced the puppet show for a few years, then sold the rights.
My first love gave me a lock of her hair.
I have been meaning to call, but unimportant things
Got in the way.
Before the snake eats me it has to wrap
Itself around me and crush my bones.
This relieves pressure on the hinge
Of its jaw. Every time I open my mouth
To say something it turns into the wrong thing.
I am almost done with this poem but cannot think
Of the best last line. That whole thing about the better
World next door is true; that's where I spend
My time these days. I am not the biggest
Toy in the toybox. I built in a failsafe—everything
Dies. But they learned how to be born on their own.
I have waited 13.8 billion years to bring you here;
The timing was perfect. Would you have done it
Or at least done it any different? For every
minute that goes by with no ransom
I will kill one hundred and five of your friends.

New Testament

What did you put into my drink?
I am having this dream that everyone loves me
And no one is jealous. But if I wake up everyone
Disappears and the dream is forgotten.
I watched the snake slide beneath the bush
And I told no one and I just left.

The King of Frederick Street

Almost eighty, my father is surrounded
By my children, their dogs and cats
While wrestling a Solitaire game whose battery

Will not seem to die. We set a folding chair
On our elevated patch of lawn
Where the maple's shadow slows and slurs

Across his feet, sliding up the grass
To the house like an instant replay
Of a baserunner sliding past him safely home.

It takes an hour, but now he rests in the sun.
The King of Frederick Street, we call him,
Sitting on a lawn above car level on the high

Side of this crooked hill, watching cars
Go by, too fast, he notes, for a street
With children. Seven hundred

Miles to the north his wife does not remember
Most of why she's loved. Still, him she loves
And recognizes four times a week,

Musses his hair and strokes his nose and laughs,
And now does not beg to be released.
From love and parenthood there's no escape,

Also no home safe to slide past and drag
A hand across the plate just beneath
Death's late tag. Though I can see him

Try to calculate the odds, the angry focus
Like leading off third, game on the line.
Pop—the Yankees are on at eight. He'll come

Then, pick up that infernal Solitaire game
And we'll play it side by side on the couch,
Stand for the anthem and work the count

As innings race by in slow motion.
I glance across the thirty year gap
And know the years will thin;

Meanwhile, we sit, and compete
At who's best at being alone.
He wins and wins.

Sounds and Sights off a Sunday Porch

Bluejays and trains. Under the overcast
Sky the day's an aimless spider.
Going nowhere preparing for tomorrow's
Deaths and meals.
A crow flops from roof to rooftop
Working the angles, giving up balance
For proximity.
It has worked its way up the street's hill
Ignoring answers to its call.
I stand up to go inside. It is still coming.

The Last Words

I wield words to protect myself from words.
I pile words up like sandbags to prepare a flood wall for us
 against
Explanations, sympathies, the outpouring
Overflow of words
On those days when words will not work.
Believe me when you read this now
That later not even these words will help us
When we are alone and comfort lost.
I do this for comfort now, when it is not too late to read
Instructions for when there will be no afterword.
I mean by this that all words are forewords.
I mean to wind words aside like toy soldiers whose real danger
Is distraction, a tiny protection I've heard
Is no buffer against the oncoming sound
Which the loudest words cannot hide.
I mend these words so they might divide
Me from the world of words
Prepare me for the hard silence
When the world's wordlessness deafens.

This Road

Other things travel on this road with us.
On the highway shadows of clouds shimmer in and out,
Recording in shorthand the unbecoming above
And reconstitute with no memory of what they were before.

As I drive the weather is the same inside the car,
memories are landing on the nearest
Possible surface, thinning out and
Recombining along time's
Straight-seeming highway.

I forget this thought a second later thanks to a truck.
Only a week down the road and back, laying
On my bed near midnight staring at the ceiling and
The spray of light sliding in the opposite direction
Of the car driving up my road do I recall it.
Wondering if it's my memory or the driver's.

Full Moon, Late July

1.

The moths against the window behind me open up like anxious critics.

The pane contains the darkness of every day it has forgotten
And in it the moths look like silly marionettes of something that
used

To be real. I walk to the window, peer down in the alley between
houses

For the person dressed in black with the stick and strings.

2.

The moths don't care what I'm writing. They're drawn

By the lamp that makes my work tonight possible.

It's their nature to face the rawest local light, exposed to the
blinding

Glare much as I am exposed to the self behind

The words as I write, even as I try to cover it up with every letter
Which only frames more white space than it covers.

The lamp shivers as a power surge jogs through

The neighborhood. It used to be the angel of death

But now its best trick is turning clocks to blinking 12:00

And making us late for work. In that brief false midnight I can see
the thinnest

Strands of gossamer floating from my fingers into the night air.

This is when I know you are looking out your window at the
moon.

Midsummer

We all have the same parents now.
We know we will return
As many times again as we've seen this place
Though no hair is numbered
This startled summer moment

Of realizing all you mean is
Finely balanced on a day
The sunned leaf dark but not dry
Above the drink of shade
The year's age not old or new

The children of the year remembering
And the parents returning again
To the time before memory
Parentless time childless time
And at this crossing a balance holds them

Like a grief turned inside out
And what's not joy is a question
This stack of days will do
To answer, will do the trick
Till next midsummer's occasional

Rains, cricket song sleep,
Morning's eyes opening
Behind the curtain of strands
That you know has always
Counted for something

Standing in the Surf, Kure Beach

From the horizon inwards the southeast
Atlantic I face has no single issue with me,
hauls in fact unending unknowing accommodation.
How quiet it is ahead: that sound that for my life
Pulled me oceanward would now turn
Me towards the land. Strange how being
Pulled in all directions holds me aloft;
And my heels in the shifting sands still purchase
An increment of self control.
The dream I've faced has never been so full.

One Afternoon

All around me possibility rises like bubbles in a glass.
The possibility is light, it is transparent and so it holds
The entire world in its view. It does not magnify or shrink
Anything, defines gravity by defying it. Even the bubble trapped
In amber moves away from the error. Even the splink of air
In the hundred year old window moves towards the freeing frame
As fast and secure as a glacier. Or approaches the breakage
Of its limitation. There is no barrier that is not conquerable
In the speed of its liquidity. The tombstone with a single word
Is surrounded by tears drifting up into the sweet air.



Worst Poem in This Collection

I walked in a circle around an idea.
Like a car in a well lit parking lot it cast many faint shadows
Spoking out in all directions but was itself unperceived, as is
Anything at rest exactly where it should be.
Like a circle of vultures it led me to myself walking
Injured by the road's edge. I'm still not sure what hit me. That
Would have been the good poem.

September Song

Do not put down that guitar, madame.
Your children have come to dream by it,
The brush of your fingers across it brings
The shush of night, heedless of fears—
Do not interrupt me for I know you
So well it will do you no good.
You do not after all even need to listen—
I'm in that chord you can play
Without knowing when you learned it,
I'm in the part of the canvas you painted
Over, so deeply hidden I can't be judged,
Revised or removed, hugging close the grain
Of nothingness in the primer of life.
You are the necessary space between my words
And the music of words and the song I need
Not sing being as you are the song. Your hands
May even drift away from the strings
But I hum my way across our souls' silent bridge.

Per Diem

1.

You wake up each morning with a handful of wealth
That can only be spent that day.
Even a memory is purchased with it
And built before your very eyes, like a precious coin from gold.
But when you awake the next morning it is nowhere to be seen.
Coin of a realm that has passed.
What will you do? with this one that will never come back, and
the next, the next?

2.

The unwritten rule of time travel—you can't go back into the past
and change it,
You cannot even let your past self see its future face.
But the future is always causing the past,
Even if the future doesn't happen: when we love wanting love
To last, for instance.
The misguided futures pouring down like rain on the present!
As soon as they touch the ground the past has rooted itself,
And all from the future. Amazing—how we readily forgive
Ourselves for the mistakes our mistaken futures have caused!
Try that with the past.

3.

Did you know all these lines
Are in the past as soon as I have written them
I cannot change what I wrote
I can write it again and again but each line is a new line
I can write the words again but never revise the line
(As I can never revisit you I can only visit you once again)
And then that line the same words or different
Is also unchangeable if instructional for the next time
As in each day I focus myself to love you anew
Much like yesterday's love but in its own space
Which can never be occupied again like a dark bird's
Absence in the morning sky when you turn your head
And look back. That word has flown
Into the future. It is waiting for you there
To be read by the eyes you have not yet seen with
And a heart yet to leap in your breast

Other Materials

1.

I never pushed Jacques Derrida anywhere.
I did watch him argue that his own death was not possible,
Back when I was in my twenties and he
Was alive. Maybe he was kidding.
By which I mean that he was showing how bridges
Crossing that chasm aren't real. By which I mean the one
Between a word and its meaning such as death and whatever
death means or
the writer and the reader, speaker and listener. But if he got that
Much across, then didn't something come across?
Might not have been what he wanted.
But that's my point, not his.
Or was death on this side already?

2.

It's not that there aren't hard feelings
Even without words.
Any sign can be misinterpreted, the chasm
Is everywhere, between a glance and the heartbeat
Skipped as well as the "Love," and the love.
There's so much that can't be said
By saying it and so much that can be said
By not saying it. But shouldn't it
Be clearer or should it not be clearer
And if that was clear at all why was it?
In some languages that would translate
Just right; in English it's already translated.

3.

Is the idea of a house any better
Than the house that's built? Could it ever be
If the point is to live in it?
Some part of us cannot help but think in bricks and beams.
But the house that's built is still made from other materials.

Your Version

We each have a world we can never share,
Only enjoy in its moments. The smooth crepe myrtle trunks
Reaching like an octopus from the ground
Outside your mother's house this long late summer afternoon.
How would you have seen it? How even now do you?
The translucent pink flower clusters almost
Disappearing in dinnertime's slanted sunlight.

Our Time

Most of our time together is spent in these words,
The hours of writing and reading
And our house under the roof of your eyes
Is the place we will never come home to
Because we have never left it because
This is not a place but a time we share
Unaware of each other holding
The other sometimes of the wrist of mind
Resisting departure: have you felt that
And the memory of these words that may come
At any moment and at every moment
Is our time and the closest thing to permanence
Is that these words are waiting for us

Translations from the English

There was the time when I took the bandages off my head.
For the first time in years my two eyes were seeing the same thing
And the depths converged, sight reached for me.
The objects of vision became the subjects, became the I.

*

There was the time I saw the lamp on fire between my daughters' beds as they slept. I woke them so calmly that that the youngest did not even see the flames. All the rest happened as if I was underwater, against some resistance from the elements themselves that the fire once established should be allowed to have its way. As if I had broken some agreement by running back to the bathroom, my socks now soaking wet, for another bucketful.

*

Rain fell on the photographs, they shook themselves and flew
Where stillness migrates.

*

I once saw kitchen utensils after a house fire. They were still
In their rack but out on the driveway with pots and pans.
I held one up there to the light and fresh air
But it no longer had a name I could pronounce.

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