

20 POEMS

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**TRANSLATED FROM THE FINNISH BY
ANSELM HOLLO**

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MUSTA OLI VALKOINEN (BLACK WAS WHITE), 1995
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20 POEMS

HERBAL WISDOM

New churches, old
 harmonized organs and repetitions
like a prayer or a psalm for seven voices.
Against scant blue
 a hundred people
believe in pilots and safety belts. The wind
 just a little too strong.

But my heart it was, that loaded institution
through four expectations it came
 here. Exactly here
where you, with both hands,
 almost inaudibly
intend to break
 the fragrant life of a sprig of thyme.

That soundless break, the speech of dust, said all
 I understood.

ABOUT THE THIRD

To stop waiting, the second step.

To be born of woman. The first.

The price of the word and the moon
are determined with the same weightless scales.

The third we don't know about, don't ask.

ON THE EAR'S WALK

The landscape's deepest melody flowed on
over the banks of the resounding Middle Ages.

Do you hear, do you hear it
the way a snail hears,
that snail there who teaches,
learns from the earth's replies, learning
the snail hears and gets there,
gets there for sure
even the slow one gets there,
even the slower one will
then get there, it will
surely get there, into the pot.

WHEN?

When I learned to pay
attention to unlikely reptiles
to surprising glacier waters
to nightgowned rejections
to wall-mounted assault rifles
to traveling angels
to lips shaped like promises
to mussels swimming in dreams
to crashes, rules and funerals
to shady, secret sacristies
to the indecisiveness of dancing shoes
to the immeasurable indifference of looks like bullets
to spring, myself and seductions slow as clouds
all of these
between the words,
was that when the difficulties began?

AROUND ZERO O'CLOCK

Just be the shape of an angel, be, be
 be, be a screeching
hatful of sleepless night it dresses
even the seagulls in diver's suits, be
 be lazy intellect and come
to bed
be manager of nightmare
 and conqueror of desire

to say

Be the disease of saying Be the lifelong remedy
which whether you take it or not
 certainly kills

Be the one who no longer is
 a dab of the freedom of the void, a flight of three strides
out of thought's night be

Because I'm fading

THE POETRY TRACK

1. Mute Walls

Mute walls and the choked breath of asphalt alleys,
the bouncer's eye's yellow blink on nocturnal streets

hot and cold messages that no one knows how to write anymore
nor leave on the answering machine and the neighbor's dog's crying
and genocides and military virtues

and pyromaniacs
shouted up onto emperor's thrones into emperor's clothes

await your measures
O poet

2. Even the Mirrors Had to Be Bribed

In the end, even the mirrors
had to be bribed
when there was too much extortion
and faces burst.
Slow drifts of nights piled up
on the steps of banks and many
a deposed Midas grew pale
and thin like candles
in wintry graveyards. The golden calf
dried up into a steel nipple.
Someone looked up to the cold of the stars
as if to ask whose fault and what bodes
life's room-shaped
brooding silence. No longer did a single god
sacrifice a single only son.
A blind man tore the outdated star map.
The galleries burned
but the strongest works, good deeds
survived nonetheless.

3. The Moon's Commitments

The moon's commitments: move
and reflect.

Against a light cold as milk
on the east side of the cemetery,
on a branch stretched out over the sea,
a squirrel: does not
ponder, reminisce, or make plans,
does not carry
in his glands
this Faustian fury.

To listen to the night's hymns, funeral marches,
or to walk on, self-propelled?

4. In No Man's Land

In no man's land there's a lovely hill
surrounded by valleys suffused by magic
and perennially greening mountains.

No poet will ever find his way here.

And when he, poorer by a day,
having penetrated the traffic's infuriating routine
beaten by aimless wandering and idleness
returns home, meets an expression
that is like an iceberg's summit,
 how demanding
and with armies altogether too huge
considering the adversary

 does evening come with its autumns
being lit in the parks

5. This Kind of Proposition

Those who speak, lose many words.
Their loneliness grows colder
as evening descends into the heart's deep rooms.

But an energy no one yet knows about
gives warmth like a well in which has been stored
some secret light.

This kind of proposition
when others
have been refuted

by listening

Δ

It's of you I now speak, bipedal spring that won't fit in the calendar.
And even though I shifted my gaze aside,
you cities, blooms, life's rituals,
I could not see past you.

Δ

Once, in the spring,
through snow and ice, through the sentence,
through memories and forest and housing estate,
through the glance, through myself,
through expectation, always,
always so damnably through into spring,
so all the way, so through.

Δ

If spring has a face.
She must be called Yellow.
If spring is a door.
We must still grope about for a channel,

cheek against this sleeping wall.

Δ

Be a poet, bow to May's odd parity.
But then, when you look up,

you are what you are.

Δ

Tomorrow you'll probably be in this same room awash with yesterdays and days before yesterdays.

Children in the schoolyard between French lessons and life. The picture is completed with the season when it starts to rain drops like fingernails lined with lead.

I still would not reveal to them what it is like

what it is like at least

what it is like at best

what it is really truly like

what absurdity there is

what secrecy there is

what it is like when a zeppelin falls in love with submarines.

OBSERVATIONS ON TRUE VOLUPTUOUSNESS

Mornings he ends up
putting on his clothes.

In his profession
he works.

On his way to work he sees an incident
and decides to tell his nearest about it that night,
employing a few colloquial expressions.

He has a mood
but the weather's outside.

From the lunch menu he does select
some food and a little drink.

In his free time he loves
works made by artists
and compositions composed by composers.

In the bus, he directs his gaze at a person (female).
"Subject, predicate, object!"
he admits.

"Expletive, giggle!"
She turns to look
at the view through the window.

But when saw-souled sun and contemplative moon
changed places
and day swooned into the weave of night

the world's engine
it, it just went on purring.

WERTHER'S APHASIA 1

In the forest I often saw
the forests wooden comment
and loved

How?
everything was so fast and possible

Light's morning, air's meaning
I just loved
meaningless

WERTHER'S APHASIA 2

loneliness of
closed place
high place
open place
short sentence
true sentence
loneliness of
dog
turtle ego
spider
death
loneliness of
July
middle age
adolescence
hospital
letter
telephone
loneliness of
hospital
lord
wisdom
lady
thunder
breath
inanimate
animate

WERTHER'S APHASIA 3

Out of the sea the night climbed onto my shoulders like an expired seal or swaying family tree.
But you were the flight of all seagulls.

The streets meander in their channels full of voices like a democracy that has lost its map.
But in you the quiet crop undulated like an inexhaustible sentence and orange grove.

The sky arched like weary copper or a loosely kept promise made in July.
But you were the hedgehog's expression in a differently framed law of nature.

Morning happened on the horizon as if clumsy fiction were to be sold at the price of water or air.

But even your absence burned with a flame transmuted into an animal.

The day was a bunch of keys dropped into the whale's grave.

But the idea of your frame was an accident in the velvety brooding humidity.

The gables of houses fell silent like pocket watches pierced by rays beyond intention and time.

But you, still there, like the sound of a zipper after a thousand-year-long opera festival.

A NOTE

The invitation to write an introductory note to my translations of these poems by Lauri Otonkoski set me to thinking about the folks among whom I was born, and some of their cultural traits. From the safe distance of Boulder, Colorado, it appears to me that Finns are notoriously reticent and taciturn. An example: Robert Creeley, who spent a year as a visiting Fulbright scholar at the University of Helsinki, once told me about a social occasion at his and his family's temporary residence in that town: as soon as the Creeleys left the room, the invited Finnish guests — who had not met before — would immediately, and typically, cease all conversation until their hosts returned. “Small talk” among “strangers” is an unknown cultural concept.

Lauri Otonkoski's books do not provide any biographical information — there are no blurbs, no photographs of the author. The back cover of his latest book, *Ahava* (March Wind), tells me that it is his fifth published collection of poems, and that he is also the author of a children's book titled *Otto*.

From the Finnish Writers' Union's directory I gather that he is forty years old and lives in Helsinki.

From a visit to Helsinki in 1997 (at the invitation of the Helsinki Festival), I have the memory of a pleasant cross-town walk in his company, from a reception at the Swedish Embassy to a smoky artists' and writers' watering hole where we joined some other local literati. The memory includes the impression of a tall, solid, bespectacled young gentleman, warm in manner, obviously well-read, with a compelling intellectual curiosity.

We may have discussed the landmark visit of some L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets in the Eighties (Lyn Hejinian, Kit Robinson, Michael Palmer) on their tour of Scandinavia and Russia. While these poets' work is not widely known or influential in Finland, one might see certain parallels in their (and their successors') work with that of some younger Finnish poets: after a brief flurry of Expressionist and even some quasi-Dadaist writing in the nineteen-twenties, by a group calling themselves the “torch bearers,” Finnish poetry relapsed into neo-classicism and national Romanticism until the early nineteen-fifties, when the work of poets like Paavo Haavikko, Tuomas Anhava, and Pentti Saarikoski introduced “modernism proper”. Since then, given the polyglot education of most Finnish writers and the “globalization” of cultural phenomena, the poetic literature has adopted, adapted, and absorbed much of what has taken place in USAmerican, Latin American, European

and Far Eastern writing since the days of Apollinaire and Pound. As is always the case in such cross-pollination, there have been some curious time warps: Pound was not translated into Finnish until the nineteen-sixties, while John Ashbery's work was translated well before that of William Carlos Williams (both within the last decade).

It is a pleasure to contribute these 20 Poems by Lauri Otonkoski to Jerrold Shiroma's laudable project of introducing poetry from far-flung places to the "happy few" readers of poetry in translation.

Anselm Hollo
Boulder, April 1999