



Jidi Majia

The Power of a Mouth Harp

Sound as fine as floss
From depths of the good earth and the cosmos,
A cry that penetrates
Right into the blood:
My heart
Has begun
Beating outside the body
Like a stalwart
Of our tradition
Still on the battle line;
Such was my merit
Won in battle:

With a mouth harp
I once warded off
The attack of an orchestra.

Translated by Denis Mair

A Flyting¹ Spoken to Oneself

**When a rock passes through the eye of a needle,
The needle's backbone gives off a sound of light.**

The needle's eye has ribs that enfold rocks of words,
Without sound, yet lulling to eternal slumber.

**That golden raindrop flung from an eagle's wing— Is
it an egg the sky has been hatching?**

No, it is emptiness from the celestial vault, But
an egg did foretell the birth of a universe.

Translated by Denis Mair

1 “*kne-re*” (similar to the Scots word “flyting”) is a performance of wordplay or verbal dueling heard on festive occasions among the Yi people.

For Nicanor Parra¹

In his lifetime he practiced “anti-poetry.”
He opposed poems that ought to be opposed.
He was against their irrelevance to human reality,
Against them for being drained of blood,
And thus no more than faceless words,
For being aloof and setting themselves above things,
For presuming that they occupy the heights of spirit, For
lyric flights that are hollow and contrived. Of course . . .
He opposed the manifestoes they thought up.
He often strolled along the beaches of Chile;

His feet left a string of question marks in the sand;
He protruded a questioning tongue at the sky
So he could tell us about the rain's rusty flavor.
He was always anti-poetry, because
So much of poetry has strayed away from the soul,
Away from sorrow of men with different skin colors.
Such a departure has been going on for a long time.
He is "anti-poetry" because the brain of poetry
Has been lingering at the edge of death;
The breasts of words have no fragrant milk,
Their withered womb cannot receive seeds of life.
His existence was a retort to all inanities,
It even hurled mockery at death's blackness,
And it always responded to life with a jest,
Even jeering as his coffin was moved into place,
And sewing a patch on a brand-new shirt.
Now I see news of his funeral in the papers:
Over his coffin was draped
A gaily-patterned quilt
Sewn by his mother in his childhood.
Not everyone can understand
What the message behind this could be.
In fact, he was saying to us:
"This moment marks the grand beginning Of
another game: this time 'anti-death.' "

Translated by Denis Mair

1 Nicanor Parra (1914–1976) was one of Chile's most famous poets and a leader of the "antipoetry" movement. His influence as a poet was felt in Latin America and worldwide.

My Sister's Woolen Cape

If blackness were to encounter love
Most pure in its excess, adrift in the night sky
Of fathomless indigo, ah, sister, could that be your dream
Or myself as you've dreamt me? I don't know who created
This reality more distant than fantasy.
Could it be a miracle that came to pass in childhood,
Reappearing as an echo in this moment?

Forgive me, I can't call the incident to mind
Yet I see you wearing that woolen cape,
But it's just a figment, no longer mine,
Seen by someone else, in an eternity of forgetting.

Translated by Denis Mair

A Poet in His Waning Years

Please forgive him, despite what is etched in his bones
He can no longer utter all their names;
Those bird-shapes vanishing over highland groves,
Their traces gone in gathering mist.
That is an ocean given scope by time;
Sails that dotted it have slipped from sight.
That is a serenade of love songs,
But today only memory, in the form of soliloquy,
Communes with the deathly silence of years.
Of course, certain details still give off flashes
Even now his heartbeat quickens at them;
There is no holding back his brimming tears.

Two lacquer-black braids growing past the rump
And honeyed breath of heart-melting sweetness,
Crystalline eyes like animated pools,
Pink lips on which poetry has suckled;
Ah, all seems to have dropped into an abyss,
Lovely features swept off by an insomniac wind.

Ah, such is our poet, he had love to offer
For poetry's sake, and then poetry offered itself to him.

Please forgive him, he took time to bury bygone things
At the bottom of his heart . . .

Translated by Denis Mair

For My Statue in Herculane¹

—for Ilya Cristescu²

Oh, Ilya Cristescu,
My eyes
Are in Herculane.
My eyes, calling up visions
Of a quiet ocean, transparent spheres Hills
and rivers, cities and shrines . . .
My eyes, in the name of the ten-thousand things,
Open the stage curtain of darkness and light;
Perhaps this is the unity of center and margin.
My eyes, if they are brimming with tears,
This must be . . . and can only be the sorrow Of
Herculane, making me weep in spite of myself.
My eyes show the hint of a smile
Because the one-and-only Herculane
Was praised at a banquet by poems in many languages.
My ears
Are in Herculane
Like the soliloquy of an insect that subsides
Into the white interior of thought;
My ears know the black hole of a stone's totality;
They hear the outcry of crushed rock, the womb of silence,
Like a star plunging from above, an iron band to crown one's head,
But only my mouth still waits, in Herculane
For the day I will enter its body
And serve as the voice for its heart.

Translated by Denis Mair

1 Herculane is a walled town in eastern Romania.

2 Ilya Cristescu is a well-known Romanian poet and a professor at Romania Western University.

Another Springtime

Another springtime arrives unnoticed as
though the wind informed the animals
in open fields
it stretches out hands that shine like crushed leaves
and uncovers the pebbles asleep on the riverbanks
in traces of dreams from yesterday's season
could they be repeating a trick
the dead grasses and newly emerging insects
can perhaps deduce the processes of life
but that vaulting Uranus remains as it was
even far-seeing people in their brief existence
cannot observe over the years of one lifetime
the change in its position
the cuckoo's calls are sweet and bright
their melody brims with flowing light
red pheasants come and go in the damp underbrush
they are the survivors of uncertain fate
beneath the sun clan members are summoned by the spring
and wave to the earth in tribute
the fertile land longing to bear fruit awakens
this is the springtime of a life
and of course it is the springtime of every life
your arrival is reincarnation's victory!
But still my springtime
when you quietly arrive
and caress my eyelids and lips
I am moved by life
but my body is filled with stones
in those moments my silence belongs to me
when I realize that only death
can give birth to this new season
in that instant not for myself but for all lives
my eyes fill with tears

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

Give Back to the World

We demand too much from the world,
we must give back to the world.

César Vallejo said that he had eaten
that which belonged to someone else.
He was filled with pain because of it.
Not every person
is so aware.

We are exhausting the earth,
encouraged by the masses
we pull the fish from the sea,
making news out of the lucky ones who escape.
We open the mouths of the earth's wounds
and make them bite down on rocks.
Only rocks can withstand such a heavy bite,
but the rocks' legs tremble,
and their eyes fill with muddy tears.

Today, for their own benefit people seek out
ample reasons
to prove the legitimacy of this overdraw.
Lungs gobble up forests, and in other animals' homes
we turn solid steel bars and cement
into an infertile womb for the earth.
It isn't correct proclamations
that stand on the highest moral ground,
allowing the injured and weak to sink into silence.
There is no other choice,
the snowline is rising, the ice is disappearing;
the hawks let fall from the sky
eggs exterminated by anger.

We come in throngs, more than one person.
We open our mouths, more than one person.
The distant man who hasn't been born,
we have already eaten his portion.
We have already secretly carved up
their myriad things,
and tricked them out of their property.
It isn't theoretical, and it isn't

just a possibility drawn from the data.
Perhaps we can create a new wealth,
but we do not have the right! We do not
have the right to deprive another generation of people and lives
of the spiritual inheritance that should belong to them.

We should give something back
to the earth.
It doesn't belong to us,
it is theirs, even if they have no way
to take the case to today's courts.

Translated by Eleanor Goodman

Yet My Song Is Offered to Fleeting Lives

Precious sword, eagle-talon goblet, agate earrings—
For such things each man has an inborn liking.
A stallion, a cowrie-studded sash, a white wool cape—
Are known as the manliest accoutrements of heroes.
To shape a new life and cherish honor with no fear of death . . .
Such is the legacy passed down by every clan.
It seems that all of this was made ready for me.
But I am a poet, what I need even more
Is wind of freedom and words abluted by fire,
Dewdrops at dawn, starry sky of boundless indigo,
Muted notes of cradle songs, a lover's sweet nothings . . .
Along with those, I should possess musical instruments,
An old recorder, a moon guitar, a three-reed jaw harp.
To recite verses for such a world is my mission.
From time immemorial, death has shadowed the living,
Yet my song is offered to fleeting lives.

Translated by Denis Mair