

THE VARIOUS VOICES

Poems of the Unofficial Cultures

Compiled and

Introduced by John Reeves

CANADIAN POETRY is almost always thought of as being in English or French. The bulk of it is. But not all. Not all our poets have been born here: some have immigrated, and have continued to write in their mother tongues. And so poetry, like many other traditions, has been part of the Canadian scene in other than the two official cultures. Its publication has been various: sometimes the poet is published in his native land, either out of nostalgia or necessity; sometimes his books are put out here in Canada or in other countries with a thriving emigré community; and sometimes he publishes in the so-called ethnic press. The quality of this work, as in any literature, varies much. But the best is very good and well worth sharing.

I've long thought something should be done about sharing this achievement. An enterprising publisher with lots of money to lose would do us all a great service if he'd put out a poetry series of French and English translations from our other languages and of translations into those other languages from our English and French verse. Since that will probably never happen, I decided a few years ago to cover at least a small section of this territory on radio. Philip Lanthier was available at the time to undertake the main research, which was both difficult and extensive: he had to trace the poems from all over the country, find a consultant in each language to advise him on their quality, and then skim off the cream. This took a long time: years, not months. But in the end we found a respectable body of evidently good verse in twelve languages: Estonian, German, Hungarian, Irish Gaelic, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Low German, Polish, Serbian, Ukranian, and Yiddish. That list is perhaps not comprehensive. There may well have been good poems written in Canada in other languages. But, if so, we failed to turn them up.

The most noticeable absentees, of course, are poems in the indigenous languages. So far as we could discover, none of the Indian cultures has a tradition of verse apart from song, and there seems to have been no modern recourse to verse. We did find one Eskimo poet of impressive quality; but to our great regret she declined to contribute.

Eventually we chose twenty-three poems which seemed to go well together. Good translations already existed in some cases. For the rest, we had to commission translations. When they were done, I was at last ready to go on the air: bilingually: each poem was read first in English translation and then in the original. The programmes (three half-hours) were broadcast on the C.B.C. radio network in February 1968, and the response from listeners was enthusiastic: it is worth noting, by the way, that the programmes seem to have pleased many listeners whose only language is English; in other words, the project had a general appeal beyond its obvious built-in audience.

Some of this success was due, no doubt, to the work of pioneers who were in the field before us. Miriam Waddington, for instance, has done much for Yiddish poetry in Canada, both as a critic and as a translator. John Robert Colombo and George Jonas have been active, with Hungarian poetry. And the large German output of Walter Bauer has been well served, in translation, by Humphrey Milnes. Others, in various ways, have done what they can to promote this part of our literature. Bringing the several strands of it together into one place was merely an obvious piece of anthologising. But it was also overdue, and it deserved the acceptance it won. So I am glad that at least some of the translations are being printed here and preserved, and will not pass into the limbo that waits for radio programmes as soon as they're off the air.

I've chosen ten poems for this publication. The first four have to do with emigration: variously they concern exile and nostalgia, adaptation to a new land, and the sense here of roots elsewhere. The fifth poem is simply a nature poem. The sixth and seventh lightly and seriously, touch on the writer's craft. And the last three are love lyrics. All, in my view, are the work of true poets.

THE HOUSE

*translated by Myra Haas
from the Ukrainian of Yar Slavutych*

ON A SUMMIT ascending the banks of the Dnieper's
Far reaching blue
Where the ripening wheat in the sun's heat breaks foam
A house once stood. Immeasurably blessed, its sovereign circle
grew
Like the white crown of a poppy in the poplared wood.
The sea-foaming sound of the rain swells the river's
High rising banks.
The field with its huge yield of bread, grows, swells
Momentously. Abundant in their praise, man, woman, swell with
thanks
Boasting the good seed of a fruitful family.
Who came then? Who came by the soft stealth of midnight
To trouble the dust
Of the ancient ones? Daughters and sons: for the evil of others
Who shall atone? In exile enduring, the blameless, the innocent
must,
Until their waiting wanes the spirit and the bone.
Without touch or direction the children of exile
Blindly go,
Redeeming the past, they re-live the last measure of home
Brimming memory and sight. Do they labour the truth, seeking
causes or knowing it so
Make real the dream prophetic as their fathers might?
From a summit descending smoke ruins, black fires
That rend the sky
Sounds and voices in one chanting unison, shiver the house
Like a prayer. The dried poplars crackle. The silence snaps,
barren and dry,
And the wind thins in a wolf-howl, holding nothing there.

TERRA INCOGNITA

*translated by Robert and Aldona Page
from the Lithuanian of Henrikas Nagys*

IN THE LAND of blue snow there are no trees:
only the shadows of trees and the names of trees
written by a sombre hermit in the writing of the blind.

In the hall of mirrors not a single person is left:
only profiles cut out by the cutter of Tilsit fair,
and silhouettes traced on the dusty glass by the fingers
of the dead violinist late in the evening of All Souls.

In the valley of the ebbing rivers there is no birthplace:
only long rows of barracks, wooden sphinxes
with their sooty heads on their paws, dreaming
of flags, summer, sun and sand.

In the land of blue snow only names remain,
lines and drawings and letters remain on ashes.
In the land of blue snow there is no land.

COME, SAYS THIS LAND

*translated by Humphrey Milnes
from the German of Walter Bauer*

COME, says this land,
Come, all of you, I can hold you,
I can satisfy your wishes, great or small,
No one will be left out —
Wage earners, gamblers, tough guys, dreamers —
Each will get what's coming to him.
But you won't belong to me, you are foreigners.
I can't adopt you.
Don't complain that I'm unfriendly. I am just indifferent.
Don't say that you are lonely; what prize did you expect
For leaving to come here?

And what were you willing to give?
I will grant you what you want and no more.
Europe's echo will gradually fade in your children.
I will gradually draw them to me.
And then you will experience an even bitterer loneliness.
It will be left to one of your children's children
To sing the song of my boundless horizons
And to be at home here.
He will understand the melody of my rivers and not be afraid,
He will understand the great language of my silence that
frightened you.
For him, love will find its reward,
I will tell him who I am.

LATE AUTUMN IN MONTREAL

*translated by Miriam Waddington
from the Yiddish of Y. Y. Segal*

THE WORM CRAWLS into the dark earth,
The wind glitters and sharpens his sword,
And where did all the coloured leaves fly to?
The branches are lost in their hard grey sleep,
The skies seem high and lift up higher.
Their clear light drips blue over the roof tops,
And the stillness assures us that all is well.
Our churchy city becomes even more pious,
And on Sundays the golden crosses gleam brightly,
The big bells ring out hallelujahs
And the little bells answer with an amen.
The tidy peaceful streets dream in broad daylight
And smile serenely at me who am such a Jewish Jew
That even in my way of walking everyone can hear
The music of my ancestral song
And the rhythm of my Hebrew prayer.

MAY

*translated by Janina Gembicka
from the Polish of Zofja Bohdanowicz*

How MANY varying emerging shades
dissipate like filmy images
pink greenness looks into the eyes of golden green

The black greenness pins its thorny wind-swept comb
gently
into the braid of the emerald green

The grey green enfolds in her hands
featherless newborn greenness
trembling with dew and immaturity
green greenness

PENCIL

*translated by John Robert Colombo
from the Hungarian of Robert Zend*

SOMEONE WRITES with me
his fingers clutch my waist
he holds me tight leads me on
holds me tight again

The poem done he drops me
I feel diminished
with surprise I read
the part of me he wore away

AND SO WHAT

*translated by Astrid Ivask
from the Estonian of Arved Viirlaid*

AND SO WHAT if poetry
is the thread in the needle's eye,
stitching the patterns of a shroud
into the bridal gown.

And so what

Even towards silence all roads run
with the happy yapping of puppies.

Trickles and worms
knot the fringes of the garment,
and the Bride's arms
are always open for embraces,
for thought carries fire into the earth —
roots full of dynamite.
With every heartbeat the earth
pumps fire
to sleep in granite.

NOW

*translated by Ingride Viksna
from her own Latvian original*

Now is the time
when silenced are
sea,
 birds,
 and wind,
and even the voices of men.

I tell you: — there is nothing —
no love,
no doomsday,
no death —
but you trembled.
Did you guess
the final secret:

 under this sun we
 will never quench
 our deepest thirst?

PURITAN REFLECTION

*translated by Elio Costa
from the Italian of Luigi Romeo*

“No”, you said
“I beg you”.
But
the faint prayer
begged with your eyes
“Come back”.

And my throbbing heart
lifted its sail
prowed across waves
then
tired it paused
before a harbour
still closed.

So
it will always be
so.

You call me
with eyes of dawn
and then you reject me
at the last glimmer of
light.

FEARGUS THE RED DISREMEMBERS

*translated by Pádraig O Broin
from his own Irish Gaelic original*

I REMEMBER her name — the music of pipes.

I have forgotten her hair —

And the butterfly

That lighted on it.

I have forgotten her face,

And her mouth —
Meant for kissing.

I have forgotten the sound of her voice,
That night, that night;
I have forgotten her two hands
Holding me, shyly, eagerly;
I have forgotten the very shape of her body,
That night, that night.

I do not remember anything at all;
Except,
The living warmth of her mouth on my mouth
In our first kiss;
And
Light as a tress, as a feather, as breath itself,
Curve of her maiden's exquisite breast
Touching my breast,
That night, that night.

Wife to another, she,
This night.