

Salvatore Quasimodo

Selected Poems

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Wind at Tindari

(Tindari, mite ti so)

Tindari, I know you
mild between broad hills, overhanging the waters
of the god's sweet islands.
Today, you confront me
and penetrate my heart.

I climb airy peaks, precipices,
following the wind in the pines,
and the crowd of them, lightly accompanying me,
fly off into the air,
wave of love and sound,
and you take me to you,
you from whom I wrongly gathered
evil, and fear of shadow, silence
– refuge of sweetness, once certain –
and death of spirit.

It is unknown to you, that country
where each day I go deep
to nourish secret syllables:
a different light bares you, behind the windows
clothed in night,
and another joy than mine
rests on your breast.

Exile is harsh
and the search, for harmony, ending in you,
changes today
to a precocious anxiousness for death,
and every love is a shield against sadness,
a silent stair in the gloom,
where you station me
to break my bitter bread.

Return, serene Tindari,
stir me, sweet friend,
to raise myself to the sky from the rock,
so that I might shape fear, for those who do not know
what deep wind has searched me.

*Note: Tindari, ancient Tyndaris, lies on a coastal headland in the province
of Messina, Italy.*

Street in Agrigentum

(Là dura un vento che ricordo acceso)

There is still the wind that I remember
firing the manes of horses, racing,
slanting, across the plains,
the wind that stains and scours the sandstone,
and the heart of gloomy columns, telamons,
overthrown in the grass. Spirit of the ancients, grey
with rancour, return on the wind,
breathe in that feather-light moss
that covers those giants, hurled down by heaven.
How alone in the space that's still yours!
And greater, your pain, if you hear, once more,
the sound that moves, far off, towards the sea,
where Hesperus streaks the sky with morning:
the jew's-harp vibrates
in the waggoner's mouth
as he climbs the hill of moonlight, slow,
in the murmur of Saracen olive trees.

*Note: On the southern coast of Sicily, Agrigento is the ancient
Agrigentum, or Akragas, one of the leading cities of Magna Graecia.*

Nostalgia and Regret

(Ora che sale il giorno)

Now the day breaks
night is done and the moon
slowly dissolved in serene air
sets in the canals.
September is so alive in this country
of plains, the meadows are green
as in the southern valleys in spring.
I have left my companions,
I have hidden my heart behind ancient walls,
to be alone, to remember.
Since you are further off than the moon,
now the day breaks
and the horses' hooves beat on the stones.

Lament for the South

(La luna rossa, il vento, il tuo colore)

The red moon, the wind, your complexion
of a woman of the North, the expanse of snow...
My heart lies among these grasslands now,
in these waters clouded by fog.
I forget the sea, the sombre
conch blown by Sicilian shepherds,
the rumble of carts along the streets
where the carob tree trembles in stubble-smoke.
I forget the passage of herons and cranes,
through the air of green highlands
to the fields and rivers of Lombardy.
But people everywhere cry the fate of my country.
Nothing any more will take me South.
Oh, the South is weary of dragging its dead
along the edges of malarial marshes,
weary of solitude, weary of chains,
its mouth wearied
with the curses of all the races
who screamed death, to the echo of its wells,
who drank the blood from its heart.
That's why its children take to their mountains,
drive their horses under a blanket of stars,
eat the acacia flowers along the trails
the freshest red, still red, still red.
Nothing any more will take me South.

And this evening filled with winter
is still ours, and here I repeat to you
my absurd counterpoint
of sweetness and fury
a lament of love without love.

Mirror

(Ed ecco sul tronco)

And see, buds break
out of the tree:
a newer green in the grass
eases the heart:
the tree seemed already dead,
bowed on the slope

And all I know of miracle;
and I am this watery cloud
that reflected today in the ditches,
the more blue, its fragment of heaven,
this green that splits the bark
that only last night was not there.

On the Island

(Un colle, i simboli)

A hill, the symbols
of time, the mirror of mind
continuous, motionless,
listening to themselves, await
the future answer. This hour of ours
appears without warning, a narrow beam
in the harmonic labyrinth.

It's March with bursts of blue,
the man leaves his bed of branches
and goes to search out stone and mortar.
Over his head is the morning star
that lights the water, in his pocket
a yellow wood ruler, feet bare,
he can close curves, incline slopes,
set squares, forge corners, trusses.
He alone is worker and architect,
the donkey carries stones, a boy
breaks them and scatters sparks. He labours
three months, four, before the mistletoe
sultriness and rain, dawn and dusk.

Of all the hands that raised walls
on this island, Greek hands or Swabian
Saracen hands or hands of Spain,
walls of the dog days or autumn,
the anonymous hands or the hands adorned
with signet rings, now I see
those that laid down houses
on Trabia's shore. Vertical lines,
wrappings of air leaning
to the leaves of acacia and almond.

Beyond the houses, there among the mastic trees
of the hares, lies dead Sòlunto.
I climbed that hill one morning
with other lads, through
inner silences. I had
yet to discover life.

*Note: Sòlunto was the Phoenician settlement of Soluntum, or Solus
in northern Sicily. Trabia is nearby.*

Metamorphoses in the Urn of the Saint

(I morti maturano)

The dead mature;
my heart with them.
Mercy on the self
is earth's final humour.

A light of lacustrine trees
stirs in the glass of the urn.
a dark mutation ravages me,
unknown saint; in the scattered seed
green maggots moan:
my visage forms their springtime.

A memory of darkness is born
in the depths of walled wells,
an echo in buried eardrums:

I am your pale relic.

'Already the rain is with us'

(Già la pioggia è con noi)

Already the rain is with us,
shaking the silent air.
Swallows skim the dull waters,
by the lakes of Lombardy,
swoop like seagulls after tiny fish;
there's a scent of hay beyond the garden fences.

The Submerged Oboe

(Avara pena, tarda il tuo dono)

Miserly pain, late your gift
in this my hour
of abandoned sighs.

A cold oboe re-syllabizes
joy of eternal foliage,
not mine, and forgets;

in me it is evening
the rain flows
over my hands of grass.

Wings flutter in a dull sky,
passing. The heart migrates,
and I am barren,
and my days rubble.

Now Autumn

(Ora l'autunno guasta il verde ai colli)

Now autumn despoils the green of hills,
O my sweet creatures. Again we shall hear,
before night, the last lament
of the birds, the call of the grey
plain that flows towards the deep
murmur of the sea. And the smell of wood
in the rain, the odour of lairs,
how do I live here among houses
among humans, o my sweet creatures...

Enemy of Death

For Rossana Sironi

(Tu non dovevi, o cara,)

Dear one, you should not have
ripped out your image,
taken from us, from the world,
a portion of beauty.

What can we do
we enemies of death,
bent to your feet of rose,
your breast of violet?

Not a word, not a scrap
of your last day, a No
to earth's things, a No
to our dull human record.

The sad moon in summer,
the dragging anchor, took
your dreams, hills, trees,
light, waters, darkness,
not dim thoughts but truths,
severed from the mind
that suddenly decided,
time and all future evil.

Now you are shut
behind heavy doors
enemy of death.

Who cries?
You have blown out beauty
with a breath, torn her,
dealt her the death-wound,
without a tear
for her insensate shadow's
spreading over us.
Destroyed solitude,
and beauty, failed.
You have signalled
into the dark,
inscribed your name in air,
your No
to everything that crowds here
and beyond the wind.
I know what you were
looking for in your new dress.
I understand the unanswered question.
Neither for you nor us, a reply.
Oh, flowers and moss,
Oh, enemy of death.

Refuge of Nocturnal Birds

(In alto c'è un pino distorto)

On the heights a twisted pine;
intent, listening to the void
with trunk arched in a bow?
Refuge of nocturnal birds,
it resounds at the ultimate hour,
with a beating of swift wings.
It even has its nest my heart
suspended in the darkness, a voice;
also listening, the night.

The Sea Still Sounds

(Già da più notti s'ode ancora il mare)

Even more so at night the sea still sounds,
Lightly, up and down, along the smooth sands.
Echo of an enclosed voice in the mind,
that returns in time; and also that
assiduous lament of the gulls; birds
perhaps of the summits that April
drives towards the plain; already
you are near to me in that voice;
and I wish there might yet come to you
from me, an echo of memory,
like this dark murmur of the sea.

Imitation Of Joy

(Dove gli alberi ancora)

Where the trees render
the evening yet more abandoned,
how indolently
your last footstep vanishes
that appears with the flower
of the lime, and insists on its fate.

You search for reason in affection,
you experience silence in life.

Another outcome reveals to me
mirrored time. It grieves
like death, beauty now
flashes like lightning in other faces.
I have lost every innocence,
even in this voice that survives
to imitate joy.

Horses of Volcanoes And The Moon

(Isole che ho abitato)

I inhabited islands
green on a motionless sea.

Shores of scorched seaweed, marine fossils,
where the horses of volcanoes and the moon
amorously race.

In the hours of landslides
leaves, cranes, assault the air:
in the light of the flood clouded
skies shine, open to stars;

doves fly
with the naked shoulders of children.

Here the earth ends;
with blood and sweat
I fashion a prison.

For you I will hurl myself
at the feet of the powerful,
sweeten my brigand's heart.

But hunted by men
I still lie beneath the lightning flash
a child with open hands,
on the banks of woods and rivers:

there is the quarry of Greek orange-trees
fertilized by the nuptials of gods.

Note: After their defeat at Syracuse in 414BC during the Peloponnesian War the Athenians were imprisoned in the quarries.

Alleyway

(Mi chiama talvolta la tua voce)

Sometimes your voice calls to me,
and I do not know what skies
or waters you wake me to:

a net of sunlight that glazes
your walls that at evening were
a swaying of late lanterns
in the workshops filled
with the breeze and sadness.

At other times: a loom clattered in the yard
and at night were the cries
of children and puppies.

Alleyway: a crossing of houses,
that calls thus softly,
and knows not the fear
of being alone in the dark.

Without Memory Of Death

(Primavera solleva alberi e fiumi)

Spring heightens the trees and rivers;
I cannot hear the deep voice
lost in you, beloved.

Without memory of death
in the conjoined flesh,
the roar of the final day
rouses us adolescents.

The grown branch
my hand
flowers in your side....

Grown Dark And Tall

(Tu vieni nella mia voce)

You arrive in my voice
and I see the quiet light
descend in shadowy rays
and make you a cloud of stars about my head.
And I suspended there, to stupefy myself with angels,
the dead, the bright arc of air.

Not mine; but within the space
re-emerged, trembling in me,
grown dark and tall.

The Birth Of Song

(Sorgiva: luce riemersa)

Arise: re-emergent light:
bright burning leaves.

I lie down in brimming rivers
where there are islands
mirrors of shadows and stars.

And your celestial heights overwhelm me,
that always nurture
my other life with joy.

I long to reclaim you,
though disillusioned,
adolescence with infirm
limbs.

Autumn

(Autunno mansueto, io mi possego)

Mild autumn, I master myself
and bend to your waters to drink the sky,
sweet fugue of trees and depths.

Harsh punishment for being born,
I find myself one with you;
and in you I shatter myself and heal:

poor fallen thing
the earth gathers.

Freshness Of Rivers In Sleep

(Ti trovo nei felici approdi,)

I find you in fortunate harbours,
consort of night,
disinterred hour,
almost the warmth of a new joy,
bitter grace of living without voice.

Virgin paths oscillate
freshness of rivers in sleep:

And I am still the prodigal who hears
his name in the silence
when they summon the dead.

And death is
a space in the heart.

Grant Me My Day

(Dammi il mio giorno)

Grant me my day;
so I might yet search myself
for some dormant face of the years
that a hollow of water
returns in its transparency
and weep for love of myself.

You are a path in the heart
and a finding of stars
in sleepless archipelagos,
night, kindly to me
a fossil thrown from a weary wave;

a curve of secret orbit,
where we are close
to rocks and grasses.

Epitaph for Bice Donetti

(Con gli occhi alla pioggia e agli elfi della)

With her eyes to the rain and the imps of
night, she is there, in plot fifteen at Musocco,
the woman from Emilia I loved in
the sad days of youth.

She was recently toyed with by death
while she quietly watched the autumn wind
shake the branches and leaves of the plane trees
of her grey suburban home.

Her face was still alive with surprise,
as it was surely in childhood; struck
by the fire-eater high on his cart.

O you who pass by, brought by other dead,
there before grave eleven sixty
stop for a moment to salute her
who never complained of the man who
remains behind, despised, with his verses,
one like so many, a worker with dreams.

Note: Bice Donetti was Quasimodo's first wife. Musocco is a district of Milan containing its largest cemetery.

A Burial Sings in Me

(M'esilio; si colma)

I exile myself; so shadow
fills with myrtle,
and subdued space lays me down lightly.

Nor does love achieve
happy sylvan harmonies
with me in a lonely hour:
paradise and marshland
sleep in the hearts of the dead.

And a burial sings in me,
that forces into the stony ground
like a root, and attempts to mark
the opposing path.

Almost A Madrigal

(Il girasole piega a occidente)

The sunflower bends to the west,
and the daylight already fades in its
ruined eye, and the air of summer
thickens and already the leaves and the smoke
in the wood-yards curl. The last play of light fades
in a dry belt of cloud and a clap of thunder. Again,
and for years, dear, the transformation of trees
holds us within the narrow circle
of the Navigli. But it is always our day
and always that sun that leaves
with threads of affectionate rays.
I no longer recall; nor wish to recall;
the memory risen from the dead,
life is endless. Each day
is ours. One will end thus forever,
and you and I, when it seems late to us.
Here on the bank of the canal, swinging
our feet, like children,
we gaze at the water, the branches
clothed in their tint of green that darkens.
And the man who approaches in silence,
hides no knife in his hand
but a geranium flower.

*Note: The Navigli was a system of canals around Milan, its Inner Ring
being paved over in the 1930's.*

Poetry Of Love

(Il vento vacilla esaltato e porta)

The wind sways exultant, and bears
leaves on the trees in the Park,
there is grass already around
the walls of the Castle, barges
of sand thread the Naviglio Grande.
Irritating, unhinged, it's a day
that turns to ice like any other,
it goes on, it will. But you're here and have no limits:
it does violence thus to motionless death;
and prepares our bed of life.

Note: The Park is the Parco Sempione, adjacent to the grounds of the Sforza Castle.

Dialogue

(Siamo sporchi di guerra e Orfeo brulica)

*“At cantu commotae Erebi de sedibus imis
umbrae ibant tenues simulacraque luce carentum”*

*“The insubstantial shadows, and the phantoms of those without light, came
from the lowest depths of Erebus, startled by his song”*

Virgil: Georgics IV:471-2

We are besmirched by war, and Orpheus swarms
with insects, pierced by lice,
and you are dead. In winter what a weight
of ice, water, stormy air,
surrounded you, and the thunder peal on peal
in your life on earth. And now I know
that I owed you greater Assent,
but our time was one of fury and blood;
others sinking already into the mud,
their hand and eyes melted,
they cried for mercy and love.
But how late it is always for love;
forgive me, then. Now I still cry
your name in this idle meridian
of wings, of strings of cicadas
stretched in the cypress bark.

We no longer know where your shore is;
there was a path marked out by the poets,
by springs that smoked with landslides
on the plateau. But in that place I saw
from boyhood bushes with purple berries
herd-dogs and birds of the gloomy air
and horses mysterious animals
that follow behind a man head held high.
The living have lost the paths
of the dead forever and stand apart.
This silence is now more fearful
than that which divides your shores.
'Insubstantial shadows came.' And here
the Olona runs calmly, no tree
stirs from its well of roots.
O, were you not Eurydice? Were you not Eurydice!
Eurydice is living! Eurydice, the Eurydice!
And I still besmirch you with war, Orpheus,
as your horse, without the whip,
lifts his head, the earth no longer trembles;
howl of love, conquer, if you would, the world.

Note: The Olona river flows from the mountains down to Milan.

The Magpie Mocks

(Forse è un segno vero della vita)

Perhaps it's a true sign of life;
around me the children with brisk
motions of their heads dance in a play
of cadences and voices down the meadow
by the church. Evening's mercy, shadows
reigniting the oh so green grass,
with the moon's loveliest flame.
Memory grants you brief rest,
an hour, you wake. Behold the well echoes,
or, for a first time, the sea. This is the hour;
no longer mine, dry, remote simulacra.
And you wind of the south, redolent with orange blossom,
urge the moon to where the naked children
sleep, force a stallion's hoof-prints on the colt
in the damp meadow, reveal
the sea, raise the mist from the trees:
now the heron enters the water,
and slowly prods the mud among the thorns,
the magpie mocks, black in the orange tree.

Summer

(Cicale, sorelle, nel sole)

Cicadas, sisters, in the sun
amongst you I hide,
in the heights of poplars
and gaze at the stars...

Man of My Time

(Sei ancora quello della pietra e della fionda)

You are the creature still of stone and sling,
man of my time. Yours was the cockpit
of malignant wings, the gnomons of death,
– I saw you – in the fiery chariot, at the gallows,
at the torturer's wheel. I saw you: it was you,
your exact science devoted to extermination,
without love, or saviour. Again you kill,
as ever, as your fathers did, as the creatures
that saw you for the first time, killed.
And the blood still smells of that day
when one brother said to the other:
'Let us go to the field.' And that echo, chill,
tenacious, reaches down to you, in your day.
Forget, o sons, the clouds born of blood
risen from the earth, forget the fathers:
their tombs sink down deep in the ashes,
dark birds, the wind, cover their hearts.

Auschwitz

(Laggiù, ad Auschwitz, lontano dalla Vistola)

There, at Auschwitz, far from the Vistula,
love, on the northern plain
in a field of death: funereal, cold,
rain on the rusted poles,
and a tangle of steel fences:
and no trees or birds in the grey air,
or above our thought, but inertia
and pain that memory leaves
to a silence without irony or anger.

You sought neither elegy nor idyll: only
a reason for our fate, here,
you, sensitive to the contrasts of mind,
unsure of the clear presence
of life. And life is here,
in every 'no' that seems sure:
Here we can hear the angel weep, the monster,
our future hours,
beating at the beyond, which is here, in eternity
and in motion, not in a vision
in dreams, of possible mercy.
And here are the metamorphoses, here are the myths.
Without names of symbols or gods,
they are chronicles, places on earth.
they are Auschwitz, love. How suddenly
it turned to the smoke of shades,
that dear flesh of Alpheus, and Arethusa!

From that hell revealed by a white
inscription: '*Arbeit macht frei*'
the smoke issued endlessly
of thousands of women thrust
from kennels at dawn to the wall
for target-practice, or stifled howling
for merciful water with skeletal
mouths under showers of gas.
You'll discover them, soldier, in your
record, in the form of rivers, creatures,
or are you too but ashes of Auschwitz,
the medal of silence?

Long tresses rest enclosed in urns
of glass still crowded with amulets,
and infinite shadows of little shoes,
and Jewish shawls: they are the relics
of a time of wisdom, of the wisdom
of men who make weapons the measure,
they are the myths, our metamorphoses.

On the stretches of land where love and tears
and pity rotted, in the rain,
there a 'no' beat within us,
a 'no' to death, dead at Auschwitz,
never again, from that pit
of ashes, death.

Suddenly It's Evening

(Ognuno sta solo sul cuor della terra)

Everyone is alone at the heart of the earth,
pierced by a ray of sunshine;
and suddenly it's evening.

To My Father

(Dove sull'acqua viola)

Where Messina stands above
violet waters, you walk the tracks
amongst mangled rails and debris,
in your station-master's cap, like
a Sicilian cockerel. The three day
earthquake rumbles on, it's December of hurricanes,
and poisonous seas. Night descending
on goods-wagons and our childish cattle,
we count dusty dreams with the dead
crushed by iron, munching almonds,
and desiccated garlands of apple. The science
of pain adds iron truth to the lowland hazards
of yellow malaria and muddy bloated tertian fever.

Your patience
sad, delicate, robbed us of fear,
was the lesson of days spent with traitorous
death, with contempt for the thieves
caught in the wreckage, tried in the dark
in a fusillade of gunfire a tally
of low numbers proving exact,
concentric, a final balance of future life.

Your hat, for the sun, bobbed up and down
in the little space always granted you.
Within me too, everything was weighed,
and I have borne your name,
a little further from hatred and envy.
That red cap of yours was a mitre.
a crown with aquiline wings.

And now in your eagle-like ninetieth year,
I wanted to speak to you, the signal-lamps
of your departure tinged by the night light
that casts the imperfect
orbit of this earth
on a stretch of narrow wall,
far from the Arabian jasmine,
where you are now, to say to you
what I once could not – difficult affinity
of thought – to say to you, so not merely
the cicadas of Biviere, the agaves and mastics, hear,
speak as the steward speaks to the master,
'I kiss your hand.' That, nothing more.
Life is darkly strong.

*Note: Lake Biviere lies among the beech woods of the Nebrodi
Regional Park in Sicily.*

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