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Between Night And Day: Selected Poems of Mario Luzi 1947 - 1963

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Between Night and Day
Selected Poems of Mario Luzi 1947-1963

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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Abstract

This thesis consists of translations of the poetry of Mario Luzi, one of the most important Italian poets of the 20th century, from his collections *Gothic Notebook* (1947), *To Tell The Truth* (1954), and *In The Magma* (1963).
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*Atticus Review*, “But Where To,” “Country Inn”

*Italian Poetry Review*, “The Night Cleanses The Mind,” “To My Mother From Her House,” “This Happiness”

*Journal of Italian Translation*, “Such peace where you were not: the sky,” “As It Must,” “Birds,” “Interior”

*Poetry Northwest*, “Oh, you won’t stay inert in your sky,” “Once again the stars of love arc”

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Introduction: Translating the Web of Context in *Along the Bisenzio*

The postwar hermetic poetry of Mario Luzi has long been unavailable to Anglophone readers. Its lyrical intensity and hermetic content pose considerable challenges of comprehensibility to the translator, while seeming to offer perhaps questionable reward in terms of socio-cultural relevance or equivalent lyricism in English. The often tedious work of researching the historic or socio-political context of one of Luzi’s poems can involve digging through a seemingly endless warren of critical debates, historical documents, and public and private correspondences. Given the emphasis in Italian culture on face-to-face encounters and the importance of individual relationships, due diligence would also ideally include a variety of individual accounts from acquaintances or students of the poet, as well as from scholars who may have known the poet in person. A truly comprehensive approach would integrate viewpoints from scholars in several different regions of Italy as well, since the Italian practice of *campanilismo* pervades the intellectual climate as much as any other aspect of society, and scholarship in one region may easily have been disregarded or dismissed by another region’s set of *Luzisti*. It goes without saying that nearly all this research must be carried out in Italy in Italian. It is understandable then, with these potentially fascinating yet perhaps overwhelmingly daunting obstacles, that Luzi’s hermetic work has for the most part remained unavailable in English.

And yet the undeniable desire remains to bring to light in a new language not just a poem, which may, if the translator’s skill succeeds, delight both the senses and the mind, but also to draw to the surface along with the poem as much of its rich contextual webbing as possible. Within the overall context of Luzi’s postwar phase from 1947 to 1963, his poem *Along the*
*Bisenzio* offers the translator and foreign readers its own variety of just such a richness. North of Florence a minor river, the Bisenzio, flows through an area where there have been tanneries and other small industries for decades in a small town called Prato. As the title suggests, the poem takes place along the banks of this river. In an extended narrative in long lines of free verse, four friends from the speaker’s past confront him for choices made during and after the war. The poem is intriguing in many ways: first, its quality as a complex conversation about right and wrong which takes place along a natural feature serving as a barrier strongly recalls any one of several scenes in Dante’s *Commedia*; second, the poem represents a sharp stylistic break from Luzi’s previously more formal and lyrical work and descends into decidedly modern free-verse lines which abandon the Dantean first-person in favor of a plurivocal chorus of conflicting voices; and finally, the poem’s modernity is sealed in the almost technical specificity of its nouns (wires, antennae, the *cigaro* plants, chewing gum, a utility pole).

Beyond these stylistic and structural elements though, what is the content of this poem getting at? Who are the four men on the riverbank and what experience has driven such a deep rift between them and the speaker? Within which context are the speaker’s parting words of wisdom meant to be understood? The specificity of the location and of other objects as mentioned above seem to leave room for an equivalent specificity of characters and events, and while perhaps no single correspondence to people or happenings may be definitively pinned down, a careful examination of the poem in light of historical context and interviews with Luzi reveals a sort of three-sided prism of possible interpretations.

One understanding of *Along the Bisenzio* which has been referred to by critic Stefano Verdino grounds the companions’ discord in Luzi’s failure to participate in the Partisan resistance against the Nazis and in his choice to leave Florence during the heaviest violence of
the last years of the war. In 1943 Luzi moved with his wife into the hills away from the violence that brutalized the city and the Tuscan countryside along the front with the Germans called the Linea gotica, the Gothic Line. Some of his closest friends and fellow writers stayed in the city during that time, and after the war they challenged Luzi’s decision to leave.

In the context of historical events, most contemporary readers can probably empathize with the route that Luzi chose. In July of 1943 the King of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele, surprised Mussolini by asking him to resign. Labor unrest, economic woes, conscription, high taxation, and food shortages had eroded support for Fascist rule. Despite the presence of Allied troops in Sicily and the first Allied bombings, Hitler had refused to provide any more troops to defend the south of Italy. The Fascist Grand Council had recently issued Mussolini a vote of no confidence, which he had ignored. Stunned, however, by the King’s revocation of support, the Duce stepped down and throughout Italy popular demonstrations erupted in celebration (Ginsborg 12). In this inebriating moment, Luzi and a few other Florentine writers (Cancogni, Parronchi, Pandolfi) drafted an article inspired by socialist ideals and submitted it to the newspaper La Nazione (Tabanelli 5). The times, however, hadn’t changed quite as quickly as they and so many others had hoped. Given the German occupation of so much of the country, the King needed desperately to maintain a military dictatorship while secretly negotiating a peace deal with the Allies. Any hint that Italy might desert Germany would be fatal. Public demonstrations and individual expressions of dissent were met with bloodshed and massive waves of arrests. Luzi’s article was censored, and fearing arrest he moved with his wife, who was expecting their first child, to the village of Montevarchi in the Tuscan hills, where they took refuge until the end of the war.
In a 1938 article written for the magazine *Campo di Marte*, Luzi wrote in an almost prophetic voice, “E quando il tempo sarà venuto in cui l’essersi comunque difesi apparirà vano e vile e tutti i metodi saranno finalmente miscreduti, allora soltanto ricordatevi della nostra desolazione, della povertà delle nostre scritture.” (Luzi and Tabanelli 36) [And when a future time comes in which it appears vain and cowardly to have defended oneself and all the means of doing it come to be ultimately misunderstood, then just remind yourself of our desolation and the poverty of our writings.] He intuited a post-war criticism of his and other writers’ choices during the crucible of the war, and offered would-be critics -- including a future version of himself -- a reminder of that era’s utterly meager means. Later in the early 1960s, as if to play out that predicted amnesia, the companions in the Bisenzio poem can’t relate to the speaker’s high-minded, perhaps spiritual approach, and they leave no more convinced than when they arrived. At the end of the poem the speaker sends out a similar missive into the future, acknowledging his own inability to judge the times in which he is immersed. If an understanding couldn’t be forged among either the hermetic poets or those companions along the riverbank, then it must be entrusted to the hope of broader vision and greater mercy in some future time.

A second possible interpretation of this poem deals with the differences in the writers’ conceptions of the new culture which was to arise after the end of the war and the military dictatorship, and the role of culture in postwar politics. Luzi held to his Catholic faith throughout his life, and though it was primarily a private expression for him, in the highly politicized postwar environment every public move or personal action was scrutinized as a possible sign of loyalty toward either the Communist or the Christian Democratic end of the political spectrum. In the first postwar elections Luzi voted for the Christian Democrats, mostly out of the fear that a revolutionary Communist coup could quite possibly occur in Italy (Luzi and Tabanelli 58). He
was never a member of any one political party, but voted sometimes for the Communists, sometimes for the Social Democrats, sometimes for the Christian Democrats. Various other writers, including Pier Paolo Pasolini, aligned themselves more consistently with Marxism and the Communist Party, which advocated a strict realism in cultural expression.

Luzi’s political and ideological differences with Pasolini came to be well known. In 1954 in the journal Chimera, Luzi entered a debate regarding the nature of postwar culture with his article, A Look at the Present State of Poetry, in which he asserted the essential role of poetry in culture and identified the life and language of humanity as its wellspring. A few months later Pasolini rebutted Luzi’s view with an article in the same journal arguing that the new culture must spring from Marxist thought and its eventual fulfilment as the organizing schema for a new social system (Luzi and Tabanelli 79). One of the journal’s editors, Carlo Betocchi, who was a more orthodox Catholic than Luzi, attempted and for the most part failed to mediate these two viewpoints via a series of letters between himself and Pasolini (Luzi and Tabanelli 81). These personal exchanges took place in the context of a broader criticism of the hermetic poets which came to be known as “the trial of hermeticism”. Besides the obvious challenge that Marxist neorealism posed, a few writers (Pasolini again, as well as Franco Fortini) directly accused the hermetic poets of collusion with Fascism, a claim which Luzi dismissed as absurd (Luzi and Tabanelli 86).

In light of these specific and general clashes between the Catholic and Communist views on postwar culture, it becomes easy to imagine Luzi’s poem set on the Bisenzio as a possible portrayal of these divisions, and more specifically to imagine the younger man in the poem who tries to explain the other companions’ views to the speaker as a rough portrayal of Betocchi attempting to bridge Luzi’s and Pasolini’s rift. Despite the seeming plausibility of this
interpretation, when interviewer Giorgio Tabanelli asked Luzi about it directly, Luzi denied those specific correlations and instead explained the poem more generally as a conversation between men of different generations. The “longer road” of the speaker, he claimed, referred to the older generation’s tradition of spiritual reflection which penetrated life more deeply than the younger generation’s impulse to resolve conflict through struggle and possible warfare. He explained that the “years lived with a hard heart” referred to the harsh opposition between left and right, spiritualism and materialism, which was delivered with “a venom that left little room for mercy (Luzi and Tabanelli 145).” Luzi went on to argue that the neorealists’ striving to apprehend reality ultimately left them empty-handed, while poetry remained, as the philosopher Novalis had called it, more real than the real (Luzi and Tabanelli 145). “Reality,” Luzi explained, “is nothing without something else that identifies and sublimates it … It is intelligence and poetry that give it its meaning as reality. … and this can only be recognized after a great length of experience, after a long journey like the one Ulysses took to return to Ithaca (Luzi and Tabanelli 145).”

And so, through these three inter-related interpretations of Luzi’s poem *Along the Bisenzio*, we have likely only just begun to perceive the world in which it was conceived and in which it has subsequently taken on meaning and perhaps even become real by Luzi’s definition, via decades of experience and commentary.
Works Cited


I

The high and somber flame falls back on you, oh! figure not yet known but long desired, there behind your veil of years and seasons, a veil some god, perhaps, prepares to rend.

The still-unscathed delight, the heavy strain of living burns us both and turns us both to ash. But when the music rests between our strangers’ faces, a wind comes bearing gifts.

Like dim stars in a steady vigil whose radiant nocturnal spirit a tender planet revives, again we rise up searing, feverish with our future without end.

So in the soul there flutters hard a longing verging on mayhem, a hope that’s almost fear -- the eye, though, looks beyond, the breath of earth flows richer in the blood.

Held still in icy monuments, now all that seemed complete dissolves and comes again alive, the light’s a wave, the teeming rivers tremble, the festive cities rush and hum.

The faithful image fades, so I arise, I hover and I slave to make of me a Mario beyond my reach, in endless being, a fire that from its heat, regenerates.
II

Oh, you won’t stay inert in your sky,
and again the dangers crowd the road.
Behind the silence of shining walls,
behind windows staring out at winter,
your imminence breathes contained.
To walk is to come toward you, to live is to move
in your direction -- all is fire and pain.
How many times, so near to exposing you
have I shrunk from a sudden face behind the panels
of an ancient door at dusk, or at the top of the stairs.
Once again the stars of love are
bright above our clouded heads
as we sit oblivious
on opposite shores. And it seems
natural never to have seen or heard you
and to vex you in an ancient light.

Desire or regret? Desire
and regret, a single bitter fever.
In sips you drank an astral wine from crystal;
it shone like a melted sun while you stared
at the hard blindness of the land.
IV

The branches sway, the sky invites the moon. A living desire blooms out of the starry dark, the air delights above the field. What presence roams?

Through the trees a gentle breath passed by, a misty burst of essence twines among their brushing tresses; under the arches, a song at rest.

Oh, that dark joy was caused by you, its secret brings you alive, the wind awake in the brambles is you, you drew near on the grass in this lucid swirl.

You’ve leapt the hedge of what’s to come, to pierce this place where the firefly moves quick to flame and darken, gone to touch the trees, and leave aglow the sky.
V

Awake now in the lucid current of day
lofty and alive up the steep slope you rise
in the sun, triumphant person, honorable body,
a fire too long repressed within me. How many
times I saw you there and doubted, unsure
if it was you or else the spring, weary
of weaving in and out among the plants.

But after a dream and after a nightmare, I saw you
in the incandescent dawn, your head
in your hand, crying your existential cries –
oh, then the mask was off, you were yourself.
Lost in the maze, you couldn’t find the way
and you wept the tears that you were meant to weep.

It was, whatever its cause, a deep, unavoidable
gasp without a sound and without waves
that struck you with fear and struck me with devotion,
a desire to give of myself. And so you lasted
a long time within me, the way the sight of the sun
endures in the soul when the day falls behind the hills.

And that’s it -- then I felt the suffering,
the limits I had overcome, the hedges
guarding me, the pride and the indifference
of existing – none of it burned anymore in mystery.
VI

The heavens thrum, the hyacinths mound
profuse at umber walls, the breeze
raises and swells my shirt, a cloud
moves through me -- what cunning presence breathes?

Across my brow a dizzy feeling
passes – look! a lively fire
rains and blends with the quiet, reeling
shadows, an unseen essence lingers.

Ah, it’s you— you’ve skimmed the sky
at dusk, like one who disappears
behind a door and scatters wide
a deathly chill, and vivid fear.

You’ve gone beyond, to where the swallow
plummets down the path, a footstep
splits the skin of light on the cobbles,
summons the dark, fades in an instant.
VII

It was a vivid wait that shot you through
with fear and trembling and me
with the sensitive delight of venturing
among the trees, of drinking from pools.
The shimmer of vagrant waters, the sky, the shadows
still in the vibrant air, even the wind
tempted me to smile.

It was the same fever that estranges
us so quickly from the dead, leading
us away while they remain alone
among the torches in their massive effort
to dig a road through rock and shadow, tired
but determined to push through to the end.
You saw the chiseled shape of that -- nearby
rest their weary hands.
VIII

The dewy gaze of a star comes to rest
on the field, the sharp storm breathes in the vibrant
trees, along the roads a wind gust
scrapes, a fragrance wanders vagrant.

A fleeting rancor passed above
the grass, in sudden gusts and billows
a green clearing explodes and thrums,
the rapid air slips in and settles.

It’s you, the waiting wasn’t useless.
You’ve come this far to where the rain
darkens the plants and goes off in the distance,
in the alcove echoes a sleepy refrain.

But oh, my anguish hasn’t finished!
As the sky grows dim and leaves unaltered
the nightmare you still are, you’ve perished
somewhere in the soul, parted.
IX

That trembling, whatever its source, the maelstrom
stirring insistent and mute in me,
that dizzy feeling mixed with the mercy
of existing often brought me to tears.
When almost at the fever’s peak,
the nightmare flared up into a dream
and a vision firm, all at once
it was you, you were breathing here.
Fragile, you arced above the rain
and the wild sky, through icy lightning
you struck here like the swallow and soon
blended with the colors of the soul,
the way, after a pure, extended, vernal
delay, over the threshold a figure appears
vivid and dying in a room.
Often in black sleep, empty of images,
an intimate grief would torment me
with a narrow, dark possibility
and the still-uncertain fate of a sun
that was supposed to ripen me.

In the purest, sharpest part of the dream,
if I looked for a sign of you it would open
the core of a foreign grief, a secret
land where you were vanishing,
you, the nothing, the roused and wakened shade.

Reborn, you were elusive, remote,
bewildered, you dared not try to escape
the horror of being alive and real,
and weeping, you shared the plan you had sworn to,
through genuine, deserved tears.

But when, in a quiet state of joy,
I saw you pierce the eastern sky
with a pair of teary stars for eyes,
oh! I knew my trip through Hell was done,
it was complete, I could let go.
XI

A fleeting puff blew out the faint
dazzle, a razor moon cuts back
the brightened wind, a pure flame
ripened in the restless dark.

Another long day dies someplace
far from your brow, again the trusting
star moves across useless space
to look for you in the lucid morning.

The night again arises, but raises
not your shadow, again the vacant
night hisses in brambles, surges
in a mirage of you alive and distant.

And desire flies in quick to crown
in you a lavish season, the glow
of a fleeting omen dwindles down
in the trees, and guides me still to you.
XII

Oh, that time shimmers in a far, eternal frost,
the freely given hours lifted easy into heaven,
over and over the days reflected back the days,
in the true wind the trees went on rejoicing,
the highest star at evening sealed your joy,
and always proven hope was always born anew,
you didn’t come to greet me, your gracefulness detained you.
Whenever I turned and looked for you, your shadow stretched away,
pulled by a quiet caduceus through drowsy flowers,
through the low flames of berries and brambles.
XIII

Images rare and wakeful in the mind
a few enigmas at last made clear
by love, reduced down to the truth
like you they consented to the wait.
From nightmare to promise bright
yet still not known, still not
fallen within the scope of the spirit
you hounded the future with victory’s fire
as strong as those restless powers whose triumph
looms ever over the heart.
In regions unopened even by dreams
you were a mute spring gushing
images of days empty of you
where the ash and the rock
studded the weakened winter until
a figure came out the field
it was a sign of death, it was you --
ashamed and weeping in a feeble body.
And when, from one instant
of light and delight you melted
in the wind lush with flowers,
oh! a breeze blew over your brow,
it was late, I had to slip away
into the dense shadows. What stayed
with you -- awareness or pity?
Such peace where you were not: the sky
gathered the streets’ white offering
between swirling trees, a face
glistened in the dark pools,
honey-mild marrow
eased the angst of passersby
and beauty beamed,
disappeared divided down lighted
roads in the windy silence.

Not memory, not image, not dream.
The missing face was a sphere
shining in the dim evening star,
and even there you were not, you had fallen
out of existence.
Pure light vexed the crossroads
and it wasn’t nightfall,
it was harmless white truth
at the bottom of all my turmoil, unperceived.
TO TELL THE TRUTH
Birds

The wind is a harsh voice that scolds us,
this flock that at times finds peace
and refuge in these dry branches.
And the troop returns to its sad flight,
migrates to the heart of the mountains, purple
carved from boundless purple,
endless mine of space.
The flight is slow, only just penetrating
into the blue that opens beyond the blue,
into time outside of time, some
send piercing cries that tumble down
and no wall echoes back.
What resembles us is the motion of the treetops
in the moment – almost beyond thought
almost wordless – when on invisible stems
a strange spring blossoms all around
in thin clouds that the wind
shepherds through a sky dewy or singed
and the day’s lot is mixed,
hail, rain, brightness.
This Happiness

This happiness promised or given
is grief for me, grief without cause
or the cause if one exists is this trembling
that stirs the many in the one
like the liquid churning
in the fortune teller’s crystal ball.
Still I say: so far so good.
All around objects and images
wage war against it, over all of it falls
or lifts either night or the seamless
snow of memory.
Meeting

It isn’t love, but there’s something tempting down this still unknown road from me to you, from me to others. I find years at the bases of trees, years and fallen berries, and at the crossroads a cult of leaves tumbling or lifting up. Desires and griefs pile together in the mix and I go through it all and freeze.

Time,
you say, does its work, tears the skin off the streets, sets the bonfire blazing. I’m useless now, a shadow changing places in the flame of never-ending death. And who are you, someone real or a spirit coming back to this time in a dream?

See me:
what’s left after many or few years gone by, I’ve been transformed from a girl to a mother and even a defeated mother has faith, she stands firm on the earth, or pretends to since she knows her son must learn to live and draw from the field, even the spent field. This labor will never have an end.

The wind tosses the little boy’s ball into the brambles, ruins the game, the embers scattered, and you were just speaking and stopped … it’s one instant of our life.

The sun goes gathering up its lights off the floor of the sky, little by little it goes, and still the wind can find no rest. There, where a tuft of reddish light holds on above the peaks, a leaf or two swirls and gathers with its fellows. Nothing more; it’s time, you say, that you and I each turn and go down our own road along this stretch of souls and spoils. You go first, not knowing if there really is a light shining down on this night too.
On the Shore

Abandoned piers loom over the swells;
even the old sailor is grim.
What are you doing? I’m filling the lamp;
I brighten the room where I remain
in the dark about you and the ones you love.

The scattered company regroups,
takes a head-count after these squalls.
And where are you? In some port, I hope.
The lighthouse keeper goes out in his boat,
scans, patrols, heads for open water.
The weather and the sea have these kinds of lulls.
If You Dare At All

Autumn wind, wind of passion
and dust that streaks across this land
where the streets are whiter than bones.
This weather makes the burdened heart uncertain,
calls back into doubt what was real,
not a fable, not a vision in vain.
If news came of you, what could it tell me?
I know you well enough to know
you’re troubled, I’m sure you hardly dare,
if you dare at all, to wonder what I think.
I think about you, your passion left open
to the jeweled light of early summer
between Foligno and Terni, in Umbria,
and I wonder, I know it’s silly, if a joy
ever does become a joy forever
or if somehow I’ve had my full share
of things that I must love and lose.
As It Must

So what do you want, to come this far and fly blind in the fog here, where even the nesting birds lose their way from branch to branch?

Life goes on as it must, branching into a thousand streams. The mother divides the bread among the little ones, feeds the fire; the day flows full or dreary, a stranger arrives, leaves,

snow falls, it clears up or a late winter mist smothers the day’s hues, soaks boots and coats, night comes.

It’s not much -- no sign of anything else.
Black

It’s that the hour of night when
out of deep space there juts
the rugged face of the land,
the impasse, and we must take
comfort in our sad vigils and the meager
lights of an urban firmament.

The wind from the black and violet void
shakes up the shriveled gardens, sends
its cry down cat-filled streets,
slams unfastened shutters -- beyond
the walls whoever ventures out sees
the wind, the streetlamp, the drunks.

You ask what this day has sent me?
Nothing, or only enough to allow
this coming and going
through the mean, hard days,
this closed and open curtain of rain,
trees, pieces of city, convoys,
people, rain in rain, smoke.
As Much As You Want

The north wind cracks apart the clay, shrinks and hardens the farmers’ lands, irritates water in hollows, leaves shovels idle, plows aground in the field. If someone goes out looking for wood or slogs through fields or stops to rest shrunken in hoods and capes, they clench their teeth. What governs the street is silence, the wordless voice of the snow, the rain, and the smoke, the motionlessness of change.

I’m here adding pinecones to the fire, I tilt an ear to the shuddering windows, I am neither calm nor worried. You who promised long ago to come fill the space that was left by pain, don’t give up on me or you, forage around the land near the house, look for the grey wooden door. Little by little the measure fills, little by little by little, as much as you want, solitude overflows, come and enter, plunge in your hands.

It’s one day in the winter of this year, one day, one day of our lives.
Interior

Sunny Sundays we filter through hidden valleys, we pour through them, and come home brimming with flowers and garlands to put in vases in corners, or in the patch of light on the breadboard.

I lose my place in this open book of months, of years. Laughing, I lift my head to see two living windows where the hope of swallows hovers, and you, holding up these delicate trophies.

One day, but which one? From this spring and this winter, one year from so many, you and I and between us our son, from room to room this limpid light.
Along the River

Whoever goes out sees unexpected signs, patches of snow on the mountains. The cold Easter is cruel to the flowers, the weak and the sick take a turn for the worse and more than one give up hope shivering deep in collars and scarves.

If I run into you it’s not by choice, I follow the track of this fast river where it weaves past hovels and barrows. Spots where the vagrants, pipers, or knife throwers kindle a fire, hold out their hands, nod off; the old man runs his dog along the bank and watches the current, the man on the barge bumps the pole along the river bottom and presses on hours and hours ’til the lanterns rest on the table inside his cabin.

The landscape is the human one which for lack of love looks fractured and strange. Like you, as you wander alone. It’s plainer than ever, suffering penetrates deep into the suffering of others otherwise it’s in vain -- though I wish it weren’t cold like the river, but more like a fire drawing together …

Love hard to carry and hard to receive. If it dares it churns, turns cold as a snake; if it doesn’t dare it returns unfulfilled, presses on age to age, life to life. The river hurries, unravels its rapids, the family gathers for dinner and passes the time, dividing the food. It thunders, rains a little. Grass grows.
The Fisherman

People come in by boat. Quiet folk skirt the hulls of the ships into the harbor, and the hit on the dock makes them jump.

The breath of early summer hovers low, brushes through curtains and grass, tangles hair. It’s dawn and it’s time to cast out the nets, that moment that flashes from house to house in a bright, shy, hesitant shiver, making hollows and visions that melt away when you look, over trees, past the bridges.

A time halfway between a dark place and a clear one when it seems that what’s true is nowhere inside us, but in some secret or some wonder about to be revealed, a time that misleads men, and if any hope stirs, it’s the hope for a miracle.

Anxiety makes the shadows strange and distant on the wet sand along the shore where I gaze through all these masts and rigging.

Forgive me, it’s part of being human to dig like this in the most obscure places for what’s right next to us humble and true or else is nowhere. I crane my neck and follow with worried eyes the fisherman crossing the breakwater, hauling in from the sea what the sea allows him to take, an offering or two, from its constant seething.
Country Inn

The autumn sharpens the hills, the wind
whets down the old stones, smoke
pours in billows from the wood oven
between the houses and the slums.
Here behind the windows of this inn
where almost no one knows my name
I watch. The morning flows,
invades the cavern bit by bit. The innkeeper
counts, writes Thursday on the marble slab,
the woman pokes at the fire, glances
toward the door when a customer comes.

I follow the shifting light, the wind;
I wait here for whoever will come
to hurry or to linger on these benches.
Nobody but the poacher can be out
roaming through this bitter land
where the wild hares flare in the field,
or the peddler, if anyone it’s him
pushing through this far to the fairs
and the markets of the nearby towns.
There’s nobody else to wait for. The ones
who come trade news, rest awhile,
then leave out into the storm, gone.

What stays is the sound of dishes;
I look out at the bushes and beyond
where the only shadows come from sheep,
I stand between past and future
as long as I should, or as long as my heart can bear.
A Pilgrim Seeking Refuge in Viterbo

What windows, what garlanded rooms you open
to the breeze, the fresh air, the soft sun.
And house fronts catch fire all around:
the children, the swallows, the bats.

The grape carts stop single file at the gates,
shadows chase after living bodies.

A woman draws water at the fountain,
climbs the stairway back, gazes
up at that ship anchored in the sky --Viterbo --
then she goes back in, disappears
inside that house, that town, that time.

New to these streets, but not unknown
I’ve heard the invalid at the door
pray for the fate of this ark
with its workers coming and going,
its crumbling houses, its animals,
its shrill elders, and its dead.

I’ve left my horses at the gates
and asked for refuge, I’ve begged
to be taken in and belong. You keep
watch now, search for signs in the night.
Approaching Forty

A thought keeps hounding me in this drab town where the wind rushes down from the high plains and the dive of a plunging swallow cuts through the thin outline of the mountains in the distance.

It’s been almost forty years of worry, of boredom, of unexpected joys as swift as the brisk March wind that goes scattering light and rain. And now it’s these second thoughts, this tight-fisted tearing away from people and places dear to me, these old routines broken that I am asked to understand. The tree of sorrow is shaking its branches.

The years swell up and billow behind my back in swarms. It hasn’t been in vain -- this is the work we all must do on our own and all together living and dead, to penetrate this dark world through the open paths and narrow burrows thick with chance meetings and losses of one love or another or the single loss of a father by a son, until it’s clear.

And having said this, I can move ahead easy in the eternal gathering of all the living and all of the dead, to disappear in dust or else in fire if any fire endures beyond its flame.
To my Mother from her House

Your old, grey house welcomes me
as I stretch out on this narrow bed,
your bed, perhaps, for so many years. I listen
and count the the hours passing slowly,
more slowly than ever through the clouds that furrow
these mean lands on August nights.
Someone coming home late from the fields
offers a tired wave to the others,
wanders up the hill into the alley, vanishes
through the door of his shack. The muggy
sirocco disturbs the people asleep,
maddens the sick and the shut-ins.
I can’t sleep. I follow the late-night footsteps --
some lunatic, some delinquent kid --
as they echo over the cobblestones.
I set down and pick up my humble burden
and go down, down ever deeper
into this time, into these people.
Refugee Camp

Slowly the woman climbs and hauls down
the rags hung pole to pole
in the treacherous air. The dog whines,
gives a shape to shadows.

These are the signs of a stormy day
in the maze of levees and ditches,
the men are like herds at rest
or goods held at customs, stored
under tents or in shacks for good
or for a while – far into the night
migrations with no motion, with no
peace, and the just man chosen to atone
stands in the doorway considering them
between rain and rain, snow and snow.

The wind brings a thud of deafening water.
What are you doing? you’re lost in this chaos.
The man who just arrived hangs back, unsure
where to go, the other -- eel fisher
or sand digger -- goes ahead,
breaks a hole in this blanket of dampness
that lies on the river in thunder and lightning.
And the Wolf

When the ice creaks
and animals anxious there on the floe
look at the melted seas, the drifting bergs

and sharks shot through by harpoons
thressh and perish, and the avid
salmon dying to procreate
swim back up the flooding streams

and the wolf
in the throes of all of its life
and the life of its parents and pups
with this host in its heart

takes the mountain road and feels
light on the old paws, ready
for the call of the originary winds
that ring with love and the road and the hunt,

a life that isn’t mine, pain
I carry from the night
from the chaos, again
you feel suddenly overwhelmed,
you writhe in anguish under the weight.

To live as alive as a loyal
servant can who has no choice. All of it,
even the dark animal eternity
groaning within us can become sacred. It only
takes a little, that little that cuts like a sword.
The Night Cleanses the Mind

The night cleanses the mind.

Right away of course we’re back,
souls lined up along the ledge,
some ready to jump, others as good as in chains.

On the page of the sea someone
traces a sign of life, marks a point.
Here and there a seagull.
IN THE MAGMA
Along the Bisenzio

The icy fog smolders down the canal of the tannery
and along the path that follows the bank. Out of it come four
who I might have seen or never seen before,
lazily going along, lazily stopping and turning toward each other.
One, the most overwrought and the slowest,
comes up to me and says, “You? You’re not one of us.
You didn’t burn like us in the heat of the fight
when it flared high and the pyre blazed with good and evil.”
Without giving an answer I stare in his weak, wrinkled eyes
and glimpse along his lower lip a quiver of nerves.
“There was only one time to be saved” here the tremble
writhes into an uncontrollable tic “or lost, and it was then.”
The others who had to stop unexpectedly
start to look annoyed but don’t utter a word,
they stamp their feet in rhythm against the cold
and chew gum, looking at me or at no one.
“What are you, deaf?” his tight lips curse
as he comes closer, and then scrambles
backward over and over ‘til he stands
still and leans against a pole, looking at me
half mocking, half furious. And he waits. The place,
the little of it that’s visible, is deserted;
the fog pulls in close around the people
and shows only the soaked earth of the riverbank
and the cigaro, that succulent on the levees that oozes mucus.
I say, “It’s hard to explain. Just know that the road
was longer for me than it was for all of us,
and it took a different route.” “Which route?”
Since I say nothing more,
he stares at me for a long time and waits. “Which route?”
The companions, one sways back and forth, one stands on tiptoe,
and they all chew gum and look at me, at me or at empty space.
“It’s hard, really hard to explain.”
There’s a long silence
as everything stands still,
as the water in the canal rushes by.
Then they the leave me there, and I follow at a distance.

But one of them, the youngest, it seems, and the most uncertain,
goes off to one side, lingers on the grassy shore to wait for me
as I lag behind the others swallowed up in fog. A step away
now, but without me stopping, we look at each other
then he lowers his eyes and smiles like a sick man.
“O Mario” he says and walks alongside me
on that road that is not a road
but a crooked trail that gets lost in the mud
“Just look, just look around. While you’re off thinking
and synchronizing the spheres of that clock in your mind
to the movement of the planets in some eternal present
that isn’t ours, that isn’t here or now,
turn around and look at what the world has become,
set your mind to what this time requires,
not depth, not zeal,
but the repetition of words,
the mimesis with no why and no how
of those motions that we the masses lose ourselves in,
bitten by the tarantula of life, that’s all.
You say you’re aiming high, despite how it seems,
but you can’t see that it’s too much. Too much, I mean,
for us, who are after all your companions,
young and weary from the fight, and not just the fight but its shameful absence.

I listen to the footsteps of those companions eclipsed by the fog
and to this halting voice coming out in gasps,
and answer: “I’m working for you too, out of love for all of you.”
He gets quiet for a while as if to receive this stone in exchange
for the bag of sorrows emptied and spilled at my feet.
And since I say nothing else he begins, “O Mario,
it’s sad to be fighting, to tell you we don’t want salvation,
that we won’t eat the food that you offer, to say it offends us.”
Little by little I let his labored breathing settle,
while the steps of our companions die out
and only the water in the canal gurgles from time to time.
“It is sad, but it’s our fate to live together in the same time and place
and make war with each other in love. I’m talking about your pain,
but I’m the one paying the whole price. And I’ve accepted this.”
And he says, at a loss and indignant: “You? Only you?”
Then he stops short, squeezes my hand in his shaking ones
and hangs his head: “O Mario, it’s so awful you aren’t one of us.”
And he weeps, and I would weep with him
if I didn’t have to be a man in front of one who has seen so few.
Then he runs away, sucked into the fog along the path.

I stay there to weigh the little that was said,
the much that was heard as the water in the canal rushes by,
as the wires in the fog roar high overhead on poles and antennae.
You won’t be able to judge these years lived with a hard heart,
I say to myself, others will at a different time.
Pray that their souls be bare
and their mercy more complete.
Around the Clinics

Fireflies in the dark, in the thicket
of city, sparse like this one with houses, dismal with hospitals,
piercing the insidious twilight they blink
more starkly than anywhere else, they slip cruelly from the restless sight
of the patients. “Where was your house?
where? I looked for you the way
the swallow does when it flies high
and explores the white regions of rain
while its nest gets infested with ticks,”
someone mutters
as the fireflies crash down and rise
back up the blackness of chasms, of ditches
felt darkly by the senses,
and waking from hibernation
the blood butterfly dances on faltering thoughts in a swarm.

“I wasn’t far
I was inside you
when you went out looking”
a few phantoms respond
out of the warren of night, whether weeping or laughing
they arise from their treacherous quiet
not patient at all, years of limbo and passion
raise body and soul on a cross between regret and longing.

Here in these clinics
at the hour when the fireflies pick
at the cluster of grapes of the night, and hints
of a happiness never attained
or that slipped from the hand teem and turn searing
for the weak, for the poor in health,
I join this wavering force
of hardship and dissatisfaction, I touch
the unsociable element that holds the world hanging.

Sickness and health, the mind rushes to tell apart
sickness and health over and over
until they match, these pieces
of knowing that come in glints in the dark.
In the Café

As the valley deepens and combs with all of its cypresses the wisp of air through rain and the warning of more rain, here tucked away in this café of windows and branches, in this nest of secret gatherings, a dampened multitude rushes and crowds, exhaling smoke.

“Why don’t we talk a little, just us” says someone with a hole in his throat, pressing some gauze over the cavity or just above it, and he sits at my table in the empty seat across from me.

I look and see that his grey eyes express so much more than his withered mouth is able to say, and they stare at me laughing. “It’s a way to be next to each other again, like when we shared a desk at school” he adds, more with his eyes than that raspy voice.

Then quick before recognizing him, I see who he is in that tender way of a man who clings to the past just as he did as a boy, the girlish one who got hurt over nothing. “I’d never have thought it was you, my friend; I’m sorry” and we reach our hands over the table and pull at our woolly, grizzled necks.

And for a while we reconnect and look in each others’ still-living eyes, trying to guess at the rest. Again he presses the gauze on the cavity and starts to talk in that rough voice, harsh: “Maybe I should fill you in after so many years on the way to this cross. Nevermind. It’s better you figure it out for yourself. Sure, I know what’s coming for me.” I watch him lower his eyes and he looks calm.

I don’t know what else to say, I think about this meeting, whether any sense can come from it except just regret and I stand at a loss for words before this man who is too close of a friend for me to give him false comfort or to lie. He’s not asking for sympathy,
just a moment of full communion
as much for himself as for me, and he offers this peace in exchange.

“İ’ve followed your success” that voice begins again, almost gurgling.

“Oh, not without disagreement, but that doesn’t matter”
I turn and blush under his pale gaze.
“We’ve been given hard times
but we weren’t any less for it, even if we came out a little irreverent.”
“There wasn’t much time for prayer…”
“Hardly any, in fact. But I trust that action
is prayer too, for the future
and atonement for the past” he says and blushes in turn,
and in that shyness I see even more how he was as a boy.

Step by step as the conversation moves ahead
and the silences become more frequent
and longer, we watch: he
the pleasant oasis outside the windows
disappearing in a blanket of rain, and I
the smoke-filled room growing crowded.

On a radio they talk about Eichmann.
Where someone not long ago
would either have spilled or held back a few tears,
they dance to the low hum of a record,
not low enough, though, to hear the transistor.

“I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong” he says
with a smile turned gentle
as he looks outside, as the hour grows late,
“I can’t help but hear in this shuffle something holy.”
And meanwhile I think with a shiver
about us, how we’ll be at the exit
on the verge of saying farewell in the rain
and in the dense tangle of bird cry.
Between Night and Day

“What town are we in?” my friend mumbles half asleep, woken by the jolt of the train stopping in the middle of nowhere. “Somewhere near Pisa” I answer and in the grey distance I watch the violet ashen hue of the mountains plunge into the color of iris. One stage in the long coming and going from indoors to outdoors, from burrow to field, I reflect, thinking about him, how often he talks about our life as the work of some strange animal like an ant or a mole. And it must be another thought not too different from that one that brings a guilty smile to his lips as he curls against the seatback in this dawn. Either die or bend under the yoke of the baseness of the species, I read on that servile and eager face so sure of the good luck of the soul and, why not, of the inexorable revolution at our doors.

“You’re in this game too, you too carry stones stolen from the ruins around the walls of the building” I think, and I think of a love greater than my own that goes beyond this loathing and of a more perfect wisdom too, that takes what’s good and because of the good turns a blind eye to what’s corrupt and broken. Fleeting, fire of swallows assailed by the rain, dying on high, the shout of the railman cries all clear to this convoy grown lazy in the thick grass.

“You have to grow -- grow in love and in wisdom” that weary face commands, sweating in this uncertain light of day.
The One and the Other

“Staying true, binding your fate to the fate of others, that must count for something” he insists, twisting his face in a doubtful grimace, that look of a man in the wrong. “That must count for something” she answers lost in thought and watching the wind do its work from one end of the grassland valley to the other. “If you see it like that, it’s lucky. Virtue, these days, laughed at and treated like dirt …” he adds, solemnly moving a hand from the wheel to the gearshift. “Oh, sure” she cringes, watching the mountains coming toward them from afar, closing in on them over the stretch of asphalt. “Sure” and from her lips a sound escapes like a groan or the clack of slipped dentures.

A moment of silence follows, longer for me than for them, as I wonder which element is missing, fire or air, in this dead cell. And in the meantime, I observe how they are unalike, but in this way the same: that they take such useless care to keep each other away from the real issue and the real pain. “It’s love, love that’s missing if only you’d gotten the news or had the courage to call it by name” I tell them to myself, and that time and place shed all surroundings and before me streaks a shadow or the tail of a possum.
“Help me” and with her hands she covers her tense face gnawed by a senile jealousy that doesn’t inspire the pity she wants from me, just disturbance and dread. “Only you can” from behind that screen her lips insist hard and dry, crushed by her palms, babbling. I find no answer and look at her offended by my coldness, quaking at times from her elbows leaning against her knees up to her colorless neck. “Distorted love, a love that betrays its roots” I reflect, and focus the powers of my mind on one single point between desire and memory thinking not about her but about the journey with her between heaven and earth on a road through the high plains that cuts the blanket of grass where few herds graze. “See, deep down you can’t even find the words” those nagging lips moan pressing against her teeth, as I fall silent and look over her head for the fiery scaffold of the mountains. She waits, but it doesn’t escape her radar how far I am from her in this moment as she opens her wounds to me, and I desire her and think of how she was at other times, in other ways. “Why fight for a love that has strayed from its goal when it isn’t growing anymore or joyously adding to all that’s good, but is possessive control and nothing else” I’d like to ask but not to her, crying now behind her hands, shaking in tremors, to myself, maybe indulging in a lie out of cowardice or convenience. “This is love too, when you learn to recognize it in this tattered version, in this downcast form” her hands respond, and I’m a little scared and a little ashamed of those hands, bony and stiff, a few tears squeezing out between one finger and the next.
The Office

I see him standing at his post just past the door,
bent over his desk, indifferent
to the muffled frenzy rippling
that light from an aquarium or a false temple
and I am vaguely repelled and attracted.

Then over that strain he lifts up his face
and with his face the gaze of an invalid or an idiot weary and white.
I can’t place him, but with a sudden stab I know he’s no stranger
to my past and while he’s staring at me
I go looking not through my friendships,
but through the mute and inexplicable grudges of my earliest years.

“How come you’re here?” he asks
stressing the words more than he should,
unless I’m the one who’s turned bitter and prickly.
Maybe it’s just an empty outburst from a downtrodden man pressed at every pore
and that’s enough to revive
the unresolved rift between us from another time, right after childhood.

Without answering, I look at him in that cycle of shelving and papers
and wonder if that’s his domain
or a jail that has crushed and stifled him.
“How can fate be read on such an inexpressive face”
I wonder, and all at once my hostility falls away
and I even want him to go on talking, maybe for a long time.

So I stand quiet in front of him there waiting,
and wait for my turn and wonder
whether this coming face to face
is due to something more than just chance
so a debt might be forgiven at some not dead age
with death in the distance even, or to carry out some obscure purpose.

“The girl fell under your power, but it was nothing to brag about
as far as I know” his voice hails down
whining and absent against my face,
not without power to harm, animating
that mask into a sneer or a smile much worse than tears.
“Oh it didn’t go the way you think” I answer
and then I see again the where and the when
and how even then, at a certain angle he had that look of a moth.
I don’t think about fighting back, I think about the knot
of that pain held frozen
and locked at one point in his life, with no release.

“I know people like you. They sacrifice themselves and their neighbor, blinded by some presumption of art. It doesn’t even cross your mind what gets lost, sometimes.” And after a minute he starts again, “It was my liberation and hers, too” and he sharpens his gaze just enough for two pupils to finally emerge and stare at me out of that whiteness. “Who can say” I suggest, not finding other words that might put us on the same level in some vague sense of the good and the bad received and given.

But he isn’t one to meet me halfway on this point that should unite us as expert companions in the grief of the world. I see him closed within his own resentment, clenching his jaw and I don’t know if he’s brooding or gathering strength to face his inferno.

The silence that follows in that room where we aren’t alone but that’s somehow deserted is enormous, without boundaries or time, as the blades of the fan whirr and turn like the shudder of flipping cards and I think about the struggle for life on the ocean floor, about plankton.

“I’m not beat yet” he explodes wild-eyed, heaving in my face his stench of tobacco and alcohol. “No more than I am, no more than anyone else” I mutter, engulfed in his firestorm, and through the windows I look at the crowd into which I will soon disappear.
But Where To

“The heart of your city – it’s gone now,”
a voice slips in and trails off
into the maze, dark now
except for a liquid light
of raw spring just visible
over the high roofs.

I don’t know what to say, and watch
the bees in this ancient walled-in garden --
gilders of angels, cabinetmakers,
metal smiths and ebony carvers --
close up the old chambers one by one
and set out a little happy and a little afraid into the alleyways.

“It’s gone, but where to?” I wonder
as the unplanned and the required
tangle the mind’s eye
and I think of myself and my friends, of the halting
talk with those souls sentenced
to a life that amounts to little, their trackless
swarm of thoughts in search of a way.

Some let go, some hang on to that hard-kept faith.
Before Evening

“You think, you think you know me” she repeats into thin air and into the sun she observes the dust streaking down the deserted road. “You keep too much to yourself” that part of her still fighting insists on accusing me stretching out the punishment of delay wretched and raging in the parked car. But to her the argument rings false and in the glass I glimpse the dying ghost of a weary smile as soon as the words are said. “See, even you’ve suffered too much from this” she adds, as if laying flowers on the place, the nettle patch, where she’s crucified me. “In vain” I mutter, not so much from regret as tinged with that tone of persistent, wounded affection, and now I wish she wouldn’t find it inappropriate to look for the cause of her pain in others, even if it was my fault. “In vain” and maybe from a memory or a dream an image comes to me of her slender, standing tall and still, watching a river from the bank, and out past the river’s mouth the grey lacquer of the sea going dark. “Never mind” she says with the voice of someone returning to a place after years away to salvage the spoils left after the ambush. “Why isn’t it in our power to call each other back” I wonder, surprised she’s there unmoving in the seat beside me. “What understanding could there be without the light of hope since hope is irreversible?” her rigid silence says with no more struggle, and determined, she presses down on the handle and glances sideways up at the high building soon to swallow her.
We’re already saying goodbyes when the last two
happen to emerge out of who knows what depth of the party,
master and disciple perhaps, two who are sure in their unspoken pact
that one is a man of broad influence, the wise sage,
the other the eager novice, in all ways a tributary to the older man.
He makes room for the younger one on the sofa,
looking tired, it’s true, but no less ready to give him an audience.
“Isn’t he amazing” says the hostess,
without mentioning his name, to her guests
who are ready to go, gathering around her for their farewells,
crowding toward the hallway and the door.
“You at least can stay a little longer, can’t you”
in passing her smile stops me cold
as she immerses herself in the shuttling
from the coat closet to the final pleasantries
performed with due grace at the door.

A little later she and I are alone in the room,
nearly ourselves again, together gathering the meager fruits
and meditating on the empty party,
we, who were meant for higher things but still indulge in the frivolous, as we should.
She and I and those two still talking,
and she keeps catching his gaze as her last hope for a step up.
“You can’t think I don’t know your thoughts. In fact, I share them”
she says, giving a haughty tug at the line
of her wrinkled lips and the cords of her neck, arid and tough.
“You know, I just need someone to reward me with the gift of their presence.”
she adds, rolling her gleaming eyes
where a speck of mischief breaks
into affection in a brew
that boils and throbs.
“That’s the beating of her counterfeit heart”
I think, “and she’s proud of it, and weary”
and I turn toward that idol covered in dust and frost in front of her,
yet far away, exasperatingly self-assured.
“Courage” the master raises his voice
as the other man keeps his quiet and low. “Courage
is called for” he urges sincerely in spite of himself
as he watches in them the impact of his own fire
that doesn’t burn cleanly the way he would like,
but leaves a trace of ash, chilling and grey.
“Go straight for the goal, be bold” he begins, and then takes a long pause
before the other who’s more stunned by his silence than stirred by his shouting
since the elder, it’s clear, has gone beyond his role
and is shivering in the wind of the past
just as dark as that other wind blowing in his face from the opposite pole.
“Isn’t he amazing” her eyes, still sweet but turned glassy,
now sparkle as she looks for approval of her ecstasy
in me who’s imagining her and seeing her
devoted to a god that gives her no answer or sign through the years,
and just then I look at the glasses
left here and there on the shelves, and listen
to the Sèvres clock strike again and again.
Agreement

-- The course of a life decided on our behalf who knows how or when
it shelters other existences in good and bad,
offers a cause for joy and pain for those to come –
She who suffers pronounces her creed,
firm in her form as angel or deva
she invites me into the core of the house,
gives me this greeting or this farewell.

It wasn’t by chance I appeared there out of the dark forest in her presence
mulling over thoughts that came to nothing
along the path worn down by the field artillery.
I hope not desire not to to catch her off guard
this time the lightning shoots
I suspect from my disbelief mixed with tenderness.
In silence I gather this message under her pupils’ fire
determined to believe it bears sanction and chrism.

What does the object matter when the faith is so great,
I wonder, as she inspects me to see
if the light of her words is reaching its mark,
and I can imagine them
as a prison song,
maybe even the song heard
ringing out in the aviary highest of all, holding firm.