

## Penguin Modern European Poets

*Advisory Editor: A. Alvarez*

### Paul Celan: Selected Poems

Paul Celan was the pseudonym of Paul Anczel, who was born in Romanian Bukovina in 1920. His home town was occupied by Russian troops in 1940 and by the Germans in 1942. Both his parents were deported to an extermination camp, and Celan himself was sent to a labour camp. He survived, and moved to Paris in 1948 where he lived until his death. His first book of poems, *Der Sand aus den Urnen* (1948), was withdrawn after publication; his main work is contained in the collections *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952), *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (1955), *Sprachgitter* (1959), and *Die Niemandsrose* (1963). He also published translations of, among others, Rimbaud, Valéry and René Char. Paul Celan committed suicide in 1970.



# Paul Celan: Selected Poems

*Translated by Michael Hamburger and  
Christopher Middleton, with an  
Introduction by Michael Hamburger*



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Note: The translations marked (C.M.) are by  
Christopher Middleton. The others are by  
Michael Hamburger.



## *Introduction*

From whichever direction we approach it – as plain readers of poetry, as critics or literary historians, as biographers or sociologists, or as translators – Paul Celan's work confronts us with difficulty and paradox. The more we try to concentrate on the poem itself, on its mode of utterance, which includes both theme and manner, the more clearly we see that difficulty and paradox are of its essence. As for 'placing' his work within the body of German literature after 1945, or against the larger background of international modernism, all we can be certain of at this point is that it occupies a prominent, isolated and anomalous position. With Nelly Sachs, this German poet, born of a Jewish family in Romania, shared an obvious preoccupation with the holocaust which he survived in body but not in spirit; and a not so obvious debt to Jewish history, tradition and mystical thought. Yet, apart from their essential differences in poetic practice, Nelly Sachs was a German poet before the holocaust turned her into a Jewish one. Like other assimilated German Jews she had to look for her Jewish heritage – with the help of Gentile friends, as it happened. Paul Celan spent his formative years in a Jewish community that had recently ceased to be within the boundaries of the Austrian Empire; and most of his productive years were spent in France. His poetic affinities were French, Russian and even English, as well as German. Among his German contemporaries, the one closest to him in sensibility and manner was Johannes Bobrowski, a resident in East Germany with distinctly Christian allegiances. Literary scholars and historians have only begun to survey Celan's background, to unravel his

complex affinities and uncover the sources of many seemingly cryptic allusions in his poems.

As a translator I have profited by their researches, particularly by those of Dietlind Meinecke and of Joachim Schulze, to whom my thanks are due. As a translator, again, and as a reader of Celan's work, I insist on the essential difficulty and paradox of his poetry. It is the difficulty and the paradox that demand a special attention to every word in his texts, and this attention is something other than what is normally meant by understanding. I am by no means sure that I have 'understood' even those of his poems – a very small part of his total output – which I was able to translate. But the darkness in Celan's poems, their leaps and bounds, their haltingness and their silences, all these are inseparable from their authenticity and their fascination.

Paul Anczel – 'Celan' was an anagram adopted in 1947 when his first poems appeared in a Romanian periodical – was born at Czernowitz (now Chernovtsy), Bukovina, on 23 November 1920. After attending school there he paid his first visit to France in 1938, as a medical student in Tours, but returned to Czernowitz in the following year to study Romance languages and literatures. In 1940 his home town was occupied by Russian troops, but he was able to continue his studies until the following year, when German and Romanian forces took over and the Jews were herded into a ghetto. In 1942 his parents were deported to an extermination camp. Paul Celan managed to escape, but remained in a Romanian labour camp until he was able to return to Czernowitz, which had been re-occupied by the Russians, in December 1943. In the following year he took up his studies again until 1945, when he left the Soviet Union and settled in Bucharest as a translator and publisher's reader. In December 1947 he moved to Vienna,

and in July 1948 – after the publication of his first book of poems, which he later withdrew – he settled in Paris, where he took up the study of German literature, obtaining his *Licence ès Lettres* in 1950 and becoming a teacher of German literature at the École Normale Supérieure. After his marriage that year to Gisèle Lestrange, Paris remained his home until his suicide in April 1970, at the age of forty-nine.

Most of the poems in his first collection were reprinted in *Mohn und Gedächtnis*, which appeared in West Germany in 1952 and won him immediate recognition, confirmed by an invitation to the Gruppe 47 in the same year. His next collection, *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle*, followed in 1955. Between 1957 and 1967 Celan received a number of prizes and awards, including the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960. A speech delivered by Celan on that occasion, *Der Meridian*, is one of the very few prose pieces which he published and an important comment on his own work. With the publication of *Sprachgitter* (1959) and *Die Niemandsrose* (1963) Celan's work moved into a second phase. These two crucial and central collections were followed by *Atemwende* (1967), *Fadensonnen* (1968) and, posthumously, by *Lichtzwang* (1970) and *Schneepart* (1971). Celan's many translations into German included poems by Rimbaud and Valéry, Apollinaire, Michaux and André du Bouchet; a selection from Shakespeare's sonnets, and poems by Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore; and selections of poems by Blok, Mandelstam and Yesenin. At an earlier period he published translations into Romanian of Russian prose works.

These basic facts of Celan's biography may indicate something of the anomaly and extremity of his position as a poet. What the facts do not reveal, and his productivity seems to belie, is that the loss of his parents and his early

experience of persecution left indelible scars. Throughout his later years he suffered acute crises and breakdowns that seriously affected both his personal and his professional life. One such crisis occurred soon after his emergence as a poet, when he was accused of having plagiarized the work of Yvan Goll, the Franco-German poet with whom Celan became personally acquainted in 1949. Since Celan's early poems linked up both with German Expressionism and French Surrealism, movements with which Goll had been associated, certain stylistic features were bound to be common to both poets. If Celan had not been predisposed towards paranoia, the foolish and protracted controversy that ensued could not have hurt him; as it was, it obsessed and unbalanced him to a degree far in excess of the cause. I recall a later meeting with Celan when he was similarly obsessed with the 'treachery' of one of his publishers, who had decided to re-issue the poems of a ballad-writer popular during the Nazi régime. Towards the end of his life the crises became more violent and more disruptive.

Paul Celan was not a confessional poet. Even in the early *Fugue of Death*, his most famous and most widely anthologized poem, the personal anguish is transposed into distancing imagery and a musical structure so intricate that a kind of 'terrible beauty' is wrested from the ugly theme. Realists and literalists among Celan's critics objected to this 'aestheticizing' of the death camps. Yet the power of the poem arises from the extreme tension between its grossly impure material and its almost pure form. A great deal has been written about the impossibility of writing poems after Auschwitz, let alone about Auschwitz. Even Celan could not do so directly, realistically, but only by an art of contrast and paradox that celebrates beauty and energy while commemorating their destruction. Though he turned against his *Fugue of Death* in later years,

refusing permission to have it reprinted in more anthologies, it was because he had refined his art in the meantime to a point where the *Fugue of Death* seemed too direct, too realistic. Yet the anguish, the darkness, the shadow of death are present in all his poems, early and late, including the most high-spirited and sensuous.

The aspiration towards a pure or absolute poetry was pervasive in France among poets of almost every school, and it was not necessarily felt to be incompatible with political and ethical commitments. Like Paul Eluard and René Char, among the French poets to whom Celan felt close, he did not feel constrained to sacrifice the freedom of his art to an 'engagement' beyond it. At his most difficult, most elliptic and paradoxical, he insisted that he was not a hermetic poet but one out to communicate, describing his poems as 'ways of a voice to a receptive you', a 'desperate dialogue' and 'a sort of homecoming'. Another way of putting it is that his poetry never ceased to be rooted in experience, extreme experience that could not be enacted in any manner less difficult than his. The hiatuses, the silences, the dislocations of normal usage belong to what he had to say and to the effort of saying it.

If Celan's poems were meant to be hermetic they would be less difficult, since they would save us the effort of making sense of them. That is why the earlier verse, though purer, is less difficult than the later. Any reader familiar with the kind of poetry whose progression is one of imagery rather than argument will know how to read the earlier poems, whose diction too is closer to established conventions. From *Sprachgitter* onwards the images grow sparser and more idiosyncratic, the syntax more broken, the message at once more urgent and more reticent. The existing resources of language become inadequate. Celan begins to coin new words, especially compound words,

and to divide other words into their component syllables, each of which acquires a new weight. The process of condensation and dislocation is carried further in the following collections. Both verse lines and whole poems tend to grow shorter and shorter.

One exception, the long poem *The Straitening*, exemplifies the change. Its German title, *Engführung*, is a technical term for a device employed in the composition of fugues. Its counterpart in English usage would have been the Italian word 'stretto'. This points to the precedent of Celan's earlier poem *Fugue of Death*, and a comparison between the two longer poems shows just how daring, condensed and cryptic Celan's art had grown in the thirteen years separating them. Although the form of the later poem is an even closer approximation to fugal composition with words, I decided not to use the technical term for the title. (The French translation by Jean Daive, which was authorized by Celan, does use the technical term, *Strette*.) A German reader of the original text not versed in the art of counterpoint would take the title more literally as a 'narrowing' or reduction; and since this wider, thematic connotation would not be conveyed by the strictly musical term, I looked for an English word that would at least suggest it. Ambiguity, in any case, occurs throughout this poem.

The later poems included in the present selection are those that were not rendered totally untranslatable by ambiguity, play on words or a degree of uncertainty as to what the poem is about that would have made translation little more than guesswork. It was a question not of whether I could catch this allusion or that – many must have escaped me even in poems which I did translate – but whether I could respond to the gesture of a poem as a whole. If the gesture of the poem made sense, the oddities

of diction and usage, including the ambiguities, could usually be reproduced in English, with certain modifications due to the different characters of the two languages. German, for instance, lends itself to the formation of compound words in a way that English does not. German also permits nouns to be preceded by complete clauses that qualify them, a peculiarity of the language that was especially congenial to Celan when the movement of his poem had come to be governed by breath units rather than by metrical or syntactic units.

*Und du:  
du, du, du  
mein täglich wahr- und wahrer-  
geschundenes Später  
der Rosen -:*

where the German capitalization of nouns helps to bring out that the adjective 'später' has been turned into a noun, has had to be transposed as follows:

*And you:  
you, you, you  
my later of roses  
daily worn true and  
more true -:*

A structurally faithful rendering would have demanded:

*And you:  
you, you, you  
my daily true- and truer-  
worn later  
of (the) roses -:*

with the added substitution of a stronger word than 'worn' to convey the sense of misuse or abuse implied by the German word 'geschunden'.

Those lines are from a poem of Celan's middle period.

More puzzling neologisms abound in the later collections, as in this short poem, *Once*:

Once  
I heard him,  
he was washing the world,  
unseen, nightlong,  
real.

One and Infinite,  
annihilated,  
ied.  
Light was. Salvation.

The German word corresponding to 'ied' is 'ichten'. Since it comes after 'vernichtet' (annihilated) it could be the infinitive of a verb that is the positive counterpart of 'annihilate', and that is how it was construed by a reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement*, who translated it as 'ihilate'. This new verb would not be more far-fetched than other neologisms of Celan's, since in Middle High German, which he knew, there was a positive 'iht' (aught) corresponding to the negative 'niht' (nought). My authority for 'ied' is Paul Celan himself. When I last met him, in April 1968, he was convinced that I was the author of the anonymous review in question and would not accept my repeated denial. He explained that 'ichten' was formed from the personal pronoun 'ich', so that it was the third person plural of the imperfect tense of a verb 'ichen' ('to i'). An equally ambiguous word formation is to be found in the poem *Etched Away From*, but Celan did not comment on the translation offered by the same reviewer of *Atemwende*. I refer to

das hundert-  
züngige Mein-  
gedicht, das Genicht

rendered there as

the hundred-  
tongued my-  
poem, the noem.

'*Mein-gedicht*' could indeed mean 'my-poem', but it could also mean 'false poem' or 'pseudo-poem', by analogy with the German word '*Meineid*', a false oath. Possibly Celan had both senses in mind when he coined the word. In translation the ambiguity had to be resolved, and after much pondering I decided in favour of 'pseudo-poem', although '*Meineid*' is the only modern German word that preserves this sense of '*mein*'. Paul Celan was a learned poet with an outstandingly rich vocabulary derived more from reading than from practice in the vernacular, since he spent little time in German-speaking countries. Since he also knew Yiddish, he was closer to the medieval roots of the German language than contemporaries who grew up in Germany.

Negation is a strikingly recurrent feature not only of Celan's new word-formations but of his later poetry in general. The seemingly negative theology of his great poem *Psalm* has been shown to have antecedents in both Jewish and Christian mysticism, and Celan is known to have been well versed in both. Less explicitly than in *Psalm*, something of this theology is prefigured in early poems like *The Jugs*. Celan's religion – and there can be no doubt as to his profoundly religious sensibility, whatever he may have believed or not believed – had to come to grips with the experience of being God-forsaken. Negation and blasphemy were the means by which Celan could be true to that experience and yet maintain the kind of intimate dialogue with God characteristic of Jewish devotion.

At the same time negation and paradox served him as a

basic stylistic principle, as expounded in the early poem *Speak, You Also*. In that poem he exhorts himself to 'keep yes and no unsplit', to admit enough darkness into his poems, because 'he speaks truly who speaks the shade'. With its dialectic of light and darkness, life and death, this poem anticipates the whole of Celan's subsequent development, as well as linking the formal aspects of that development – the reduction carried further from book to book – with the inner necessity from which they arose:

Thinner you grow, less knowable, finer.

This applies to the poems as much as to the poet; and so does the star image, towards the end of the poem, that stands for the urge towards the transcendence and resolution of paradox present in Celan's work right up to the posthumous collections.

One thing sets Paul Celan's work apart from that of most of his German coevals: he had hardly any use for realism of a kind that merely imitates and reproduces, for what Northrop Frye has called 'the low mimetic'. Direct social comment is not to be found in his work, though it became increasingly realistic in a different sense – the widening of its vocabulary to include twentieth century phenomena and technologies. From *Die Niemandrose* onwards invective becomes prominent in Celan's poems, though the invective is as rich in cryptic allusions and intricate word-play as every other mode that he employed. He was realistic, too, in doing full justice to 'the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart'. Yet the 'inwardness' of his poetry places it in a line of descent that runs from Hölderlin through Rilke to Expressionism. As a very short late poem attests, he found Brecht's poetry of social and political comment too 'explicit'. One reason is that he wanted poetry to be open to the unexpected, the unpredictable,

the unpredictable. His poems were 'messages in a bottle', as he said, which might or might not be picked up. That element of risk was as necessary to them as the need to communicate. On the few occasions when he spoke about poetry in public he spoke of it as a process, a groping forward, a search. Paradoxically once more, he spoke of its practice, and the practice of any art, as a driving of the practitioner into the 'inmost recess of himself', his narrowest place, and as a 'setting free'. That, incidentally, is one reason why the title of his poem *Engführung* means more than the technical term 'stretto' could possibly convey to an English reader.

No feature of Celan's later poems is more characteristic of their openness and mysteriousness than their unidentified personal pronouns, the 'you' that can be the woman addressed in a love poem or an *alter ego* or a deity; the 'he', 'she' or 'they' that enters a poem without any introduction or explanation. Most of these persons have no existence or significance outside the poem. It is the poem that creates them or discovers them. A reader can either relate himself to them through his own experience and imagination or he can not, in which case the message in the bottle has not reached him. If it does reach him it will tell him something of which he was not aware before reading it. That is the distinction of poetry like Celan's, poetry always close to the unutterable because it has passed through it and come out on the other side.

Such poetry demands a special kind of attention and perhaps a special kind of faith in the authenticity of what it enacts. Without a similar attention and faith it could not have been written, since the risk is shared by writer and reader. Speaking about poetry, Celan quoted this definition by Malebranche: 'Attention is the natural prayer of the soul.' It was this quality of attention that I had in mind

when I referred to Celan's religious sensibility. The more we read Celan's poems, the more his kind of attention imposes itself as the only adequate response to them.

The present selection from Celan's successive collections, with its inevitable concentrations on poems more easily accessible than many others, could not encompass the full range of his work, which becomes most rewarding when read in its entirety. We need to know his recurrent images before we can appreciate their modifications and transmutations from poem to poem. This book will serve its purpose if it permits English readers to make a start. It seems very likely that Celan's work will be widely translated, for a long time to come.

MICHAEL HAMBURGER

from *Mohn und Gedächtnis* (1952)

## *Tallow Lamp*

The monks with hairy fingers opened the book:  
September.

Now Jason pelts with snow the newly sprouting grain.  
The forest gave you a necklace of hands. So dead you  
walk the rope.

To your hair a darker blue is imparted; I speak of love.  
Shells I speak and light clouds, and a boat buds in the  
rain.

A little stallion gallops across the leafing fingers –  
Black the gate leaps open, I sing;  
How did we live here?

## *Your Hand Full of Hours*

Your hand full of hours, you came to me – and I said:  
Your hair is not brown.  
So you lifted it lightly on to the scales of grief; it  
weighed more than I . . .

On ships they come to you and make it their cargo, then  
put it on sale in the markets of lust –

You smile at me from the depth, I weep at you from the  
scale that stays light.

I weep: Your hair is not brown, they offer brine from  
the sea and you give them curls . . .

You whisper: They're filling the world with me now,  
in your heart I'm a hollow way still!

You say: Lay the leafage of years beside you – it's time  
you came closer and kissed me!

The leafage of years is brown, your hair is not brown.

## *Aspen Tree. . .*

Aspen tree, your leaves glance white into the dark.  
My mother's hair was never white.

Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine.  
My yellow-haired mother did not come home.

Rain cloud, above the well do you hover?  
My quiet mother weeps for everyone.

Round star, you wind the golden loop.  
My mother's heart was ripped by lead.

Oaken door, who lifted you off your hinges?  
My gentle mother cannot return.

## *Sand from the Urns*

Green as mould is the house of oblivion.

Before each of the blowing gates your beheaded  
minstrel turns blue.

For you he beats his drum made of moss and of harsh  
pubic hair;

With a festering toe in the sand he traces your eyebrow.  
Longer he draws it than ever it was, and the red of your  
lip.

You fill up the urns here and nourish your heart.

## *In the Cherry-Tree's Branches . . .*

In the cherry-tree's branches a crunching of iron shoes.  
Summer foams up for you out of helmets. The blackish  
cuckoo  
with diamond spurs draws his image on to the gates of  
the sky.

Bareheaded the horseman looms up from the foliage.  
On his shield he bears the dusk of your smile,  
nailed on to the enemy's kerchief of steel.  
The garden of dreamers was promised to him,  
and spears he keeps ready, so that the rose will climb . . .

But unshod through the air comes he who resembles  
you most;  
iron shoes buckled on to his delicate hands,  
he sleeps through the battle and summer. It's for him  
that the cherry bleeds.

## *Memory of France*

Together with me recall: the sky of Paris, that giant  
autumn crocus . . .

We went shopping for hearts at the flower girl's booth:  
they were blue and they opened up in the water.

It began to rain in our room,  
and our neighbour came in, Monsieur Le Songe, a lean  
little man.

We played cards, I lost the irises of my eyes;  
you lent me your hair, I lost it, he struck us down.

He left by the door, the rain followed him out.

We were dead and were able to breathe.

## *Chanson of a Lady in the Shade*

When the silent one comes and beheads the tulips:

Who wins?

Who loses?

Who walks to the window?

Who's the first to speak her name?

He is one who wears my hair.

He wears it much as one wears the dead on one's hands.

He wears it much as the sky wore my hair that year  
when I loved.

He wears it like that out of vanity.

That one wins.

Doesn't lose.

Doesn't walk to the window.

He does not speak her name.

He is one who has my eyes.

He's had them since gates have shut.

He wears them like rings on his fingers.

He wears them like shards of sapphire and lust;

Since the autumn he has been my brother;

He's counting the days and the nights.

That one wins.

Doesn't lose.

Doesn't walk to the window.

He's the last to speak her name.

He's one who has what I said.

He carries it under his arm like a bundle.

He carries it as the clock carries its worst hour.  
From threshold to threshold he carries it, never throws  
it away.

That one doesn't win.  
He loses.

He walks to the window.  
He's the first to speak her name.

With tulips that one's beheaded.

## *Night Ray*

Most brightly of all burned the hair of my evening loved  
one;  
to her I send the coffin of lightest wood.  
Waves billow round it as round the bed of our dream  
in Rome;  
it wears a white wig as I do and speaks hoarsely:  
it talks as I do when I grant admittance to hearts.  
It knows a French song about love, I sang it in autumn  
when I stopped as a tourist in Lateland and wrote my  
letters to morning.

A fine boat is that coffin carved in the coppice of  
feelings.  
I too drift in it downbloodstream, younger still than  
your eye.  
Now you are young as a bird dropped dead in March  
snow,  
now it comes to you, sings you its love song from  
France.  
You are light: you will sleep through my Spring till  
it's over.  
I am lighter:  
in front of strangers I sing.

## *The Years from You to Me*

Your hair waves once more when I weep. With the  
blue of your eyes  
you lay the table of love: a bed between summer and  
autumn.

We drink what somebody brewed neither I nor you nor  
a third; we lap up some empty and last thing.

We watch ourselves in the deep sea's mirrors and faster  
pass food to the other:  
the night is the night, it begins with the morning,  
beside you it lays me down.

## *Corona*

Autumn eats its leaf out of my hand: we are friends.  
From the nuts we shell time and we teach it to walk:  
then time returns to the shell.

In the mirror it's Sunday,  
in dream there is room for sleeping,  
our mouths speak the truth.

My eye moves down to the sex of my loved one:  
we look at each other,  
we exchange dark words,  
we love each other like poppy and recollection,  
we sleep like wine in the conches,  
like the sea in the moon's blood ray.

We stand by the window embracing, and people look  
up from the street:  
it is time they knew!  
It is time the stone made an effort to flower,  
time unrest had a beating heart.  
It is time it were time.

It is time.

## *Fugue of Death*

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at nightfall  
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night  
drink it and drink it

we are digging a grave in the sky it is ample to lie there  
A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden  
hair Margarete

he writes it and walks from the house the stars glitter  
he whistles his dogs up

he whistles his Jews out and orders a grave to be dug in  
the earth

he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
we drink in the mornings at noon we drink you at  
nightfall

drink you and drink you

A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes  
he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden  
hair Margarete

Your ashen hair Shulamith we are digging a grave in the  
sky it is ample to lie there

He shouts stab deeper in earth you there and you others  
you sing and you play

he grabs at the iron in his belt and swings it and blue  
are his eyes

stab deeper your spades you there and you others play  
on for the dancing

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at nightfall  
we drink you at noon in the mornings we drink you at  
nightfall  
drink you and drink you  
a man in the house your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

He shouts play sweeter death's music death comes as a  
master from Germany  
he shouts stroke darker the strings and as smoke you  
shall climb to the sky  
then you'll have a grave in the clouds it is ample to lie  
there

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night  
we drink you at noon death comes as a master from  
Germany  
we drink you at nightfall and morning we drink you  
and drink you  
a master from Germany death comes with eyes that are  
blue  
with a bullet of lead he will hit in the mark he will hit  
you  
a man in the house your golden hair Margarete  
he hunts us down with his dogs in the sky he gives us a  
grave  
he plays with the serpents and dreams death comes as a  
master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete  
your ashen hair Shulamith.

## *Crystal*

Not on my lips look for your mouth,  
not in front of the gate for the stranger,  
not in the eye for the tear.

Seven nights higher red makes for red,  
seven hearts deeper the hand knocks on the gate,  
seven roses later the fountain begins to splash.

## *The Jugs*

At the long tables of time  
the jugs of God carouse.  
They drink empty the eyes that see and the eyes of the  
blind,  
the hearts of the mastering shadows,  
the hollow cheek of the evening.  
They are the most mighty carousers:  
they carry empty and full alike to their mouths  
and do not flow over like you or like me.

from *Von Schwelle zu Schwelle* (1955)

## *From Darkness to Darkness*

You opened your eyes – I saw my darkness live.  
I see through it down to the bed;  
there too it is mine and lives.

Is that a ferry? Which, crossing, awakens?  
Whose light can it be at my heels  
for a boatman to appear?

## *With a Variable Key*

With a variable key  
you unlock the house in which  
drifts the snow of that left unspoken.  
Always what key you choose  
depends on the blood that spurts  
from your eye or your mouth or your ear.

You vary the key, you vary the word  
that is free to drift with the flakes.  
What snowball will form round the word  
depends on the wind that rebuffs you.

## *In Memoriam Paul Eluard*

Lay these words into the dead man's grave  
which he spoke in order to live.  
Pillow his head amid them,  
let him feel  
the tongues of longing,  
the tongs.

Lay that word on the dead man's eyelids  
which he refused to him  
who addressed him as thou,  
the word  
his leaping heart-blood passed by  
when a hand as bare as his own  
knotted him who addressed him as thou  
into the trees of the future.

Lay this word on his eyelids:  
perhaps  
his eye, still blue, will assume  
a second, more alien blueness,  
and he who addressed him as thou  
will dream with him: We.

# *Shibboleth*

Together with my stones  
grown big with weeping  
behind the bars,

they dragged me out into  
the middle of the market,  
that place  
where the flag unfurls to which  
I swore no kind of allegiance.

Flute,  
double flute of night:  
remember the dark  
twin redness  
of Vienna and Madrid.

Set your flag at half-mast,  
memory.  
At half-mast  
today and for ever.

Heart:  
here too reveal what you are,  
here, in the midst of the market.  
Call the shibboleth, call it out  
into your alien homeland:  
February. No pasaran.

Unicorn:  
you know about the stones,

you know about the water;  
come,  
I shall lead you away  
to the voices  
of Estremadura.

## *Speak, You Also*

Speak, you also,  
speak as the last,  
have your say.

Speak –  
But keep yes and no unsplit,  
And give your say this meaning:  
give it the shade.

Give it shade enough,  
give it as much  
as you know has been dealt out between  
midday and midday and midnight.

Look around:  
look how it all leaps alive –  
where death is! Alive!  
He speaks truly who speaks the shade.

But now shrinks the place where you stand:  
Where now, stripped by shade, will you go?  
Upward. Grope your way up.  
Thinner you grow, less knowable, finer.  
Finer: a thread by which  
it wants to be lowered, the star:  
to float further down, down below  
where it sees itself glitter: on sand dunes  
of wandering words.



from *Sprachgitter* (1959)

## *Homecoming*

Snowfall, denser and denser,  
dove-coloured as yesterday,  
snowfall, as if even now you were sleeping.

White, stacked into distance.  
Above it, endless,  
the sleigh track of the lost.

Below, hidden,  
presses up  
what so hurts the eyes,  
hill upon hill,  
invisible.

On each,  
fetched home into its today,  
an I slipped away into dumbness:  
wooden, a post.

There: a feeling,  
blown across by the ice wind  
attaching its dove- its snow-  
coloured cloth as a flag.

## *Below*

Led home into oblivion  
the sociable talk of  
our slow eyes.

Led home, syllable after syllable, shared  
out among the dayblind dice, for which  
the playing hand reaches out, large,  
awakening.

And the too much of my speaking:  
heaped up round the little  
crystal dressed in the style of your silence.

# *Tenebrae*

We are near, Lord,  
near and at hand.

Handled already, Lord,  
clawed and clawing as though  
the body of each us were  
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,  
pray to us,  
we are near.

Wind-awry we went there,  
went there to bend  
over hollow and ditch.

To be watered we went there, Lord.

It was blood, it was  
what you shed, Lord.

It gleamed.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.  
Our eyes and our mouths are open and empty, Lord.

We have drunk, Lord.  
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.  
We are near.

## *Flower*

The stone.

The stone in the air, which I followed.

Your eye, as blind as the stone.

We were

hands,

we baled the darkness empty, we found

the word that ascended summer:

flower.

Flower – a blind man's word.

Your eye and mine:

they see

to water.

Growth.

Heart wall upon heart wall

adds petals to it.

One more word like this word, and the hammers  
will swing over open ground.

## *Language Mesh*

Eye's roundness between the bars.

Vibratile monad eyelid  
propels itself upward,  
releases a glance.

Iris, swimmer, dreamless and dreary:  
the sky, heart-grey, must be near.

Athwart, in the iron holder,  
the smoking splinter.  
By its sense of light  
you divine the soul.

(If I were like you. If you were like me.  
Did we not stand  
under one trade wind?  
We are strangers.)

The flagstones. On them,  
close to each other, the two  
heart-grey puddles:  
two  
mouthsfull of silence.

# Night

Pebbles and scree. And a shard note, thin,  
as the hour's message of comfort.

Exchange of eyes, finite, at the wrong time:  
image-constant,  
lignified  
the retina –:  
the sign of eternity.

Conceivable:  
up there, in the cosmic network of rails,  
like stars,  
the red of two mouths.

Audible (before dawn?): a stone  
that made the other its target.

## *Matière de Bretagne*

Gorselight, yellow, the slopes  
fester to heaven, the thorn  
woos the wound, bells ring  
in there, it is evening, the void  
rolls its ocean to worship,  
the sail of blood is aiming for you.

Dry, stranded  
the stream-bed behind you, reed-choked  
its moment, above  
by the star, the milky  
creeks gossip in mud, stone-borer  
below, bunched, gapes at blue, a shrub  
of transience, beautiful, admits  
welcoming your memory.

(Did you know me,  
hands? I took  
the forked way you showed, my mouth  
spat its macadam, I walked, my time,  
ambling patrols, cast its shadow – did you know me?)

Hands, the wound  
wooed by the thorn, bells  
ring, hands, the void, its oceans,  
hands, in the gorselight, the  
sail of blood  
is aiming for you.

You

you teach  
you teach your hands  
you teach your hands you teach  
you teach your hands  
sleep

## *All Souls*

What did I  
do?

Seminated the night, as though  
there could be others, more nocturnal than  
this one.

Bird flight, stone flight, a thousand  
described routes. Glances,  
purloined and plucked. The sea,  
tasted, drunk away, dreamed away. An hour  
soul-eclipsed. The next, an autumn light,  
offered up to a blind  
feeling which came that way. Others, many,  
with no place but their own heavy centres: glimpsed  
and avoided.

Foundlings, stars,  
black, full of language: named  
after an oath which silence annulled.

And once (when? that too is forgotten):  
felt the barb  
where my pulse dared the counter-beat.

## *Draft of a Landscape*

Circular graves, below. In  
four-beat time the year's pace on  
the steep steps around them.

Lavas, basalts, glowing  
stone from the world's heart.  
Wellspring tuff  
where light grew for us, before  
our breath.

Oilgreen, soaked with sea spray the  
impassable hour. Toward  
the centre, grey,  
a stone saddle, and on it,  
dented and charred,  
the animal forehead with  
its radiant blaze.

## *An Eye, Open*

Hours, May-coloured, cool.  
The no more to be named, hot,  
audible in the mouth.

No one's voice, again.

Aching depth of the eyeball:  
the lid  
does not stand in its way, the lash  
does not count what goes in.

The tear, half,  
the sharper lens, movable,  
brings the images home to you.

# *The Straitening*

★

Driven into the  
terrain  
with the unmistakable track:

grass, written asunder. The stones, white,  
with the shadows of grassblades:  
Do not read any more – look!  
Do not look any more – go!

Go, your hour  
has no sisters, you are –  
are at home. A wheel, slow,  
rolls out of itself, the spokes  
climb,  
climb on a blackish field, the night  
needs no stars, nowhere  
does anyone ask after you.

★

Nowhere  
does anyone ask after you –

The place where they lay, it has  
a name – it has  
none. They did not lie there. Something  
lay between them. They  
did not see through it.

Did not see, no,  
spoke of

words. None  
awoke,  
sleep  
came over them.

★

Came, came. Nowhere  
anyone asks –

It is I, I,  
I lay between you, I was  
open, was  
audible, ticked at you, your breathing  
obeyed, it is  
I still, but then  
you are asleep.

★

It is I still –

years,  
years, years, a finger  
feels down and up, feels  
around:  
seams, palpable, here  
it is split wide open, here  
it grew together again – who  
covered it up?

★

Covered it  
up – who?

Came, came.

Came a word, came,  
came through the night,  
wanted to shine, wanted to shine.

Ash.

Ash, ash.

Night.

Night-and-night. – Go  
to the eye, the moist one.

★

Go

to the eye,

the moist one –

Gales.

Gales, from the beginning of time,  
whirl of particles, the other,  
you  
know it, though, we  
read it in the book, was  
opinion.

Was, was  
opinion. How  
did we touch  
each other – each other with  
these  
hands?

There was written too, that.  
Where? We  
put a silence over it,  
stilled with poison, great,  
a  
green

silence, a sepal, an  
idea of vegetation attached to it –  
green, yes,  
attached, yes,  
under a crafty  
sky.

Of, yes,  
vegetation.

Yes.  
Gales, whirl of part-  
icles, there was  
time left, time  
to try it out with the stone – it  
was hospitable, it  
did not cut in. How  
lucky we were:

Grainy,  
grainy and stringy. Stalky,  
dense;  
grapy and radiant; kidneyish,  
flattish and  
lumpy; loose, tang-  
led –; he, it  
did not cut in, it  
spoke,  
willingly spoke to dry eyes, before closing them,

Spoke, spoke.  
Was, was.

We  
would not let go, stood

in the midst, a  
porous edifice, and  
it came.

Came at us, came  
through us, patched  
invisibly, patched  
away at the last membrane  
and  
the world, a millicrystal,  
shot up, shot up.

★

Shot up, shot up.  
Then –

Nights, demixed. Circles,  
green or blue, scarlet  
squares: the  
world puts its inmost reserves  
into the game with the new  
hours. – Circles,  
red or black, bright  
squares, no  
flight shadow,  
no  
measuring table, no  
smoke soul ascends or joins in.

★

Ascends and  
joins in –

At owl's flight, near  
the petrified scabs,

near  
our fled hands, in  
the latest rejection,  
above  
the rifle-range near  
the buried wall:

visible, once  
more: the  
grooves, the

choirs, at that time, the  
psalms. Ho, ho-  
sannah.

So  
there are temples yet. A  
star  
probably still has light.  
Nothing,  
nothing is lost.

Ho-  
sannah.

At owl's flight, here,  
the conversations, day-grey,  
of the water-level traces.

★

(-- day-grey,  
of

the water-level traces -

Driven into the  
terrain

with  
the unmistakable  
track:

Grass,  
grass,  
written asunder.)



from *Die Niemandrose* (1963)

## *There was Earth*

There was earth inside them, and  
they dug.

They dug and they dug, so their day  
went by for them, their night. And they did not praise  
God  
who, so they heard, wanted all this,  
who, so they heard, knew all this.

They dug and heard nothing more;  
they did not grow wise, invented no song,  
thought up for themselves no language.  
They dug.

There came a stillness, and there came a storm,  
and all the oceans came.  
I dig, you dig, and the worm digs too,  
and that singing out there says: They dig.

O one, o none, o no one, o you:  
Where did the way lead when it led nowhere?  
O you dig and I dig, and I dig towards you,  
and on our finger the ring awakes.

## *Zürich, the Stork Inn*

*For Nelly Sachs*

Of too much was our talk, of  
too little. Of the You  
and You-Again, of  
how clarity troubles, of  
Jewishness, of  
your God.

Of  
that.

On the day of an ascension, the  
Minster stood over there, it sent  
some gold across the water.

Of your God was our talk, I spoke  
against him, I  
let the heart that I had  
hope:  
for  
his highest, death-rattled, his  
quarrelling word –

Your eye looked on, looked away,  
your mouth  
spoke its way to the eye, and I heard:

We  
don't know, you know,  
we  
don't know, do we?,  
what  
counts.

## *So Many Constellations*

So many constellations that  
are held out to us. I was,  
when I looked at you – when? –  
outside by  
the other worlds.

O these ways, galactic.  
O this hour, that weighed  
nights over for us into  
the burden of our names. It is,  
I know, not true  
that we lived, there moved,  
blindly, no more than a breath between  
there and not-there, and at times  
our eyes whirred comet-like  
toward things extinguished, in chasms,  
and where they had burnt out,  
splendid with teats, stood Time  
on which already grew up  
and down and away all that  
is or was or will be –,

I know.

I know and you know, we knew,  
we did not know, we  
were there, after all, and not there  
and at times when  
only the void stood between us we got  
all the way to each other.

## *Dumb Autumn Smells*

Dumb autumn smells. The  
marguerite, unbroken, passed  
between home and chasm through  
your memory.

A strange lostness was  
palpably present, almost  
you would  
have lived.

## *Psalm*

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,  
no one conjures our dust.  
No one.

Praised be your name, no one.  
For your sake  
we shall flower.  
Towards  
you.

A nothing  
we were, are, shall  
remain, flowering;  
the nothing-, the  
no one's rose.

With our pistil soul-bright  
with our stamen heaven-ravaged  
our corolla red  
with the crimson word which we sang  
over, o over  
the thorn.

# *Alchemical*

Silence, cooked like gold, in  
charred  
hands.

Great, grey  
sisterly shape  
near like all that is lost:

All the names, all those  
names  
burnt with the rest. So much  
ash to be blessed. So much  
land won  
above  
the light, so light  
rings  
of souls.

Great, grey one. Cinder-  
less.

You, then.  
You with the pale  
bit-open bud,  
you in the wine-flood.

(Us too, don't you think,  
this clock dismissed?)

Good,

good, how your word died past us here.)

Silence, cooked like gold, in  
charred, charred  
hands.

Fingers, insubstantial as smoke. Like crests, crest of air  
around --

Great, grey one. Wake-  
less.  
Re-  
gal one.

*. . . Plashes the Fountain*

You prayer –, you blasphemy, you  
prayer-sharp knives  
of my  
silence.

You my words being crippled  
together with me, you  
my hale ones.

And you:  
you, you, you  
my later of roses  
daily worn true and  
more true –;

How much, O how much  
world. How many  
paths.  
You crutch, you wing. We. –

We shall sing the nursery rhyme, that one,  
do you hear, that one  
with the hu, with the man, with the human being, the  
one  
with the scrub and with  
the pair of eyes that lay ready there as  
tear-upon-  
tear.

## *Radix, Matrix*

As one speaks to stone, like  
you,  
from the chasm, from  
a home become a  
sister to me, hurled  
towards me, you,  
you that long ago  
you in the nothingness of a night,  
you in the multi-night en-  
countered, you  
multi-you -:

At that time, when I was not there,  
at that time when you  
paced the ploughed field, alone:

Who,  
who was it, that  
lineage, the murdered, that looms  
black into the sky:  
rod and bulb -?

Root.  
Abraham's root. Jesse's root. No one's  
root - O  
ours.)

Yes,  
as one speaks to stone, as  
you

with your hands grope into there,  
and into nothing, such  
is what is here:

this fertile  
soil too gapes,  
this  
going down  
is one of the  
crests growing wild.

## *Afternoon with a Circus and Citadel*

In Brest, before hoops of flame,  
in the tent where the tiger leapt,  
there, Finite, I heard you sing  
there I saw you, Mandelshtam.

The sky hung above the roadstead,  
the gull hung above the crane.  
What is finite sang, what is constant –  
you, gunboat, are called 'Baobab'.

I saluted the tricolore  
speaking a Russian word –  
things lost were things not lost,  
the heart was a place made fast.

## *In the Daytime*

Hare's pelt sky. Even now  
a clear wing writes.

I too, remember,  
dust-  
coloured one, arrived  
as a crane.

## *Crowned Out . . .*

Crowned out,  
spewed out into night.

Under what  
stars! So much  
grey-beaten heart-hammer silver. And  
Berenice's head of hair, here too. – I plaited,  
I unplaited,  
I plait, unplait.  
I plait.

Blue chasm, into you  
I drive the gold. Bringing that too  
wasted on whores and harlots  
I go and go. To you,  
beloved.

And with curses and prayer. And with each  
of the cudgels whirring  
over me: they too fused  
into one, they too  
phallically bunched towards you,  
both sheaf and word.

With names, watered  
by every exile.  
With names and seeds,  
with names dipped  
into all  
the calyxes that are full of your

regal blood, man, – into all  
the calyxes of the great  
ghetto-rose, from which  
you look at us, immortal with so many  
deaths died on morning errands.

(And we sang the Warshawyanka  
with lips grown reedy, Petrarca.  
Into tundra-ears, Petrarca.)

And an earth rises up; ours,  
this one.  
And we'll send  
none of our people down  
to you,  
Babel.



from *Atemwende* (1967)

## *To Stand. . .*

To stand, in the shadow  
of the scar up in the air.

To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.  
Unrecognized,  
for you  
alone.

With all there is room for in that,  
even without  
language.

## *Thread Suns*

Thread suns  
above the grey-black wilderness.  
A tree-  
high thought  
tunes in to light's pitch: there are  
still songs to be sung on the other side  
of mankind.

## *Etched Away From*

Etched away from  
the ray-shot wind of your language  
the garish talk of rubbed-  
off experience – the hundred-  
tongued pseudo-  
poem, the noem.

Whirled  
clear,  
free  
your way through the human-  
shaped snow,  
the penitents' snow, to  
the hospitable  
glacier rooms and tables.

Deep in time's crevasse  
by the alveolate ice  
waits, a crystal of breath,  
your irreversible  
witness.

## *On the White Philactery*

On the white philactery – the  
Lord of this hour  
was  
a winter creature, for  
his sake  
happened what happened –  
my climbing mouth bit and locked, once again,  
looking for you, smoke trail  
above me, you,  
in the shape of a woman,  
you on your way to my  
fire thoughts in the black shingle  
on the other side of dividing words, through  
which I saw you walk, long-  
legged and  
your thick-lipped own  
head  
on my body  
alive  
by dint of my deadly  
accurate hands.

Tell your fingers that  
accompany you down into  
chasms even, how  
I knew you, how far  
I pushed you into the deep, where  
my most bitter dream  
slept with you from the heart, in the bed  
of my undetachable name.

## *Go Blind Now*

Go blind now, today:  
eternity also is full of eyes –  
in them  
drowns what helped images down  
the way they came,  
in them  
fades what took you out of language,  
lifted you out with a gesture  
which you allowed to happen like  
the dance of the words made of  
autumn and silk and nothingness.

## *In Prague*

That half-death,  
suckled big with our life,  
lay around us, true as an ashen image –

we too  
still drank, soul-crossed, two daggers,  
sewn on to stones of the sky, born of word blood  
in the night bed,

bigger and bigger  
we grew interlaced, there was  
no longer a name for  
that which drove us (one of the how many  
and thirty  
was my live shadow  
that climbed the delusory steps towards you?),

a tower  
the halved one built for himself into where,  
a Hradshin  
made of pure gold-makers' No,

bone-Hebrew  
ground into sperm  
ran through the hourglass  
through which we swam, two dreams now, chiming  
against time, in the squares.

## *Once*

Once  
I heard him,  
he was washing the world,  
unseen, nightlong,  
real.

One and Infinite,  
annihilated,  
ied.  
Light was. Salvation.

from *Fadensonnen* (1968)

## *You Were My Death*

You were my death:  
you I could hold  
when all fell away from me.

## *To My Right*

To my right – who? The deathwoman.  
And you, to my left, you?

The travelling-sickles at the extra-  
celestial place  
mime themselves whitish-grey  
into moon swallows,  
into star swifts,

I dip to that place  
and pour an urnful  
down you,  
into you.

## *Irish*

Give me the right of way  
over the corn steps into your sleep,  
the right of way  
over the sleep path,  
the right to cut peat  
on the heart slope,  
tomorrow.

*Dew. . .*

Dew. And I lay with you, you, amid garbage,  
a mushy moon  
pelted us with answers,

we crumbled apart  
and crumbled into one again:

the Lord broke the bread,  
the bread broke the Lord.

*Powers. Dominions.*

Behind them, in the bamboo:  
barking leprosy, symphonic.

Vincent's posted  
ear  
has reached its destination.

## *Think of It\**

Think of it:  
the bog soldier of Massada  
teaches himself home, most  
inextinguishably,  
against  
every barb in the wire.

Think of it:  
the eyeless with no shape  
lead you free through the tumult, you  
grow stronger and  
stronger.

Think of it: your  
own hand  
has held  
this bit of  
habitable  
earth, suffered up  
again  
into life.

Think of it:  
this came towards me,  
name-awake, hand-awake,  
for ever,  
from the unburiable.

\* The poem associates a remote event in Jewish history, the last attempt of the Jews to hold out against the Romans at Massada in 70 A D, which ended with the suicide of those besieged in the fortress there, with the Prussian concentration camp at Börgermoor, whose inmates composed a song known as the *Börgermoor-Lied*. This song gave them a sense of identity, of home, and it was finally adopted even by the guards at the camp.



from *Lichtzwang* (1970)

## *Night Rode Him*

Night rode him, he had come to his senses,  
the orphan's tunic was his flag,

no more going astray,  
it rode him straight -

It is, it is as though oranges hung in the privet,  
as though the so-ridden had nothing on  
but his  
first  
birth-marked, se-  
cret-speckled  
skin.

## *I Can Still See You*

I can still see you: an echo  
that can be groped towards with antenna  
words, on the ridge of  
parting.

Your face quietly shies  
when suddenly  
there is lamplike brightness  
inside me, just at the point  
where most painfully one says, never.

## *Wide-Open Tomorrow*

I bite my way into you, my silence nestles into you,

we sound,  
alone,  
pastily  
eternity's tones drip away,  
croaked at by  
the hodiernal  
yesterday,

we travel,

largely  
the last amplifier  
received us:

the boosted heart pace  
outside  
in space,  
brought home to the axis  
of Earth.

## *Sprinkle Ochre into My Eyes*

Sprinkle ochre into my eyes:  
no longer,  
you live in them,

be sparing,  
of graveside  
supplements, be sparing,

walk up and down the stone rows  
on your hands,

with their dream  
graze the debased coinage,  
the scale of  
my temporal bone,

at the  
great  
road fork tell  
yourself to the ochre  
three times, nine times.

## *Leap-Centuries*

Leap-centuries, leap-  
seconds, leap-  
births, novembering, leap-  
deaths,

stacked in honeycomb troughs,  
'bits  
on chips',

the menora poem from Berlin

(Unasylumed, un-  
archived, un-  
welfare-attended? A-  
live?),

reading stations in the late word,

saving flame points  
in the sky,

comb lines under fire,

feelings, frost-  
mandrelled,

cold start  
with haemoglobin.

from *Schneepart* (1971)

## *The Broached Year*

The broached year  
with its mouldering crusts  
of delusion bread.

Drink  
from my mouth.

# *Illegibility*

Illegibility  
of this world. All things twice over.

The strong clocks justify  
the splitting hour,  
hoarsely.

You, clamped  
into your deepest part,  
climb out of yourself  
for ever.

## *I Hear that the Axe has Flowered*

I hear that the axe has flowered,  
I hear that the place can't be named,

I hear that the bread which looks at him  
heals the hanged man,  
the bread baked for him by his wife,

I hear that they call life  
our only refuge.

## *Largo*

You of the same mind, moor-wandering near one:

more-than-  
death-  
sized we lie  
together, the time-  
less one teems  
under our breathing eyelids,

the pair of blackbirds hangs  
beside us, under  
our whitely drifting  
companions up there, our

meta-  
stases.

## *A Leaf, Treeless*

A LEAF, treeless  
for Bertolt Brecht:

What times are these  
when a conversation  
is almost a crime  
because it includes  
so much made explicit?

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