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A SMALL WAR

and

other poems

translated from

the Catalan

by

ARTHUR TERRY



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Arthur Terry was born in York in 1927. He read Modern Languages at Cambridge from 1944 to 1947 and in 1950 joined the staff of Queen's University, Belfast, where he is now Professor of Spanish.

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"A Small War", "The Sisters" and "Told after Brueghel" originally appeared in *THE NORTHERN REVIEW* and are reprinted here by permission of the editors.

A SMALL WAR

They were carrying anti-tank mines,
heavy and useless, like historic symbols,
covered in blankets thick with the timeless smell
of herbs and mule-sweat. Also machine-guns
and Stens made in England.
In twos and threes, at straggling intervals,
minute and diligent as lice on a fallen tree,
the maquis were crossing the Pyrenees.
It was one of the smallest wars we have ever known.
Only a single body came my way. That of
a country girl from Aragon, who got a lift
in an army truck, and became another
obvious symbol. The driver and mechanic
were careless, and the three of them went through a bridge.
The girl had a simple lesion, nothing of interest,
but the doctors who did the post-mortem
found on one ankle a remarkable growth
of hereditary origin, rooted deep in the tree of her race.
And a moment's pain, and the pleasure before it,
seemed small when compared with that defect of centuries,
working in silence. Nothing personal, mind.
It was a war, though a small one.
And, though it was strange, there was nothing personal, either,
in the shock that I felt for a moment during the inquest,
feeling the sun beat down on the shed by the wall,
on the tangled stubble of crosses and bones
in that village cemetery, where the stench of death
smelt like an unwashed crotch.
It just meant I was young, like most who go to wars,
who are scared of the flesh, and destroy and abuse it.
All, in a word, emblematic, eternal.

GABRIEL FERRATER (born 1922)

THE SISTERS

Yellow portraits
of First Communion, dead cousins'
wedding-groups, wait
as you fall asleep
for the delicate feet of spiders
to cross their frozen smiles.
You have looked after me well:
a single light-bulb casts
its idiot stare from the ceiling,
as though set for a crime.
I am so ill these days,
I cough with fatigue,
tracing the stains
on the ten-cent wallpaper.
As my sickness mounts,
I climb out of bed,
so as not to disturb you,
and creep to the window
where I see in reflection
your face, our two lives together,
the eternal black dresses.
Our heartbeats pound in my ears,
with the slamming of doors at first light,
the slow bell ringing for Mass.

SALVADOR ESPRIU (born 1913)

TOLD AFTER BRUEGHEL

When the light slants
on the fields, and the oxen
come home to the stable
after their long day's ploughing,
hordes of blind eyes
witness the leaping
of dancers in wooden clogs,
shod by our gay familiar,
Mistress Death.

Why do I stay in this place
where each movement I make
in the dance is laid bare
and confined in the order
of these featureless eyes?

The bagpipe drones. I leap in
with woman and serving-spoon,
and teeth like a wolf's.
I shall be lost for ever, no doubt,
in this fever of prancing.
Already I feel myself
turning to darkness
trapped behind empty stares.

SALVADOR ESPRIU

ON SUNDAY EVENINGS

On Sunday evenings in the poor quarter
of Santa Marina, on the tiny, birdless avenue
with its sooty trees and ten-cent cinema,
in the bar called "The Grape Vine", the children of the workers
dance to a hired record-player, before the approving eyes
of their enormous mothers.

Boy clings to girl, his refuge from the fear
of another week that is already here. The boys don't speak.
Smiling, the girls yield discreetly in their arms
to the beat of a fox-trot. Sadly they change partners
or wander off... "until eternity!"

The sky is grey, as always, above the poor, smoky quarter
of Santa Marina and above the partners
who wander off into eternity.

MIQUEL BAUCA (born 1940)

TIME WAS

Let me escape into your old domain.
Our ghosts still drift about the usual place.
I see the winter sky, the metal footbridge
with its blackened struts, the scurf of grass
along the burnt-up track. I hear the express whistle.
Its gathering thunder rocks the ground we stand on
till we have to shout. We watch it pass.
Your soundless laughter sets me laughing too.
I see your dove-grey blouse, the blue
of your short flared skirt, the red scarf bunched
around your neck, the one I used to call
your country's flag.
All's as it was that day. The words we said
come back, and now, the one bad moment.
Something has silenced us. You've hurt your hand.
Remember how it fluttered and hung limp,
nervously fingering your cycle-bell.
It's just as well we're interrupted.
Now, as before, the tramp of metal heels,
the outsize chant of men in battledress,
steel-helmeted, surrounds us. A command
darts out like the savage glitter of a snake,
and we hide our faces in the lap of fear
till they have passed. Now we've forgotten
how we were: their unreflecting movement
restores us to ourselves, and we are glad
to be together in this place, not caring if we speak.
So we may kiss. We're young: those distant silences
have no authority;
the fear of others kills our private fears.
Freewheeling down the avenue, we feel the cold
as each tree spreads its heavy mass of shade.
We glide from chill to chill, unconsciously.

GABRIEL FERRATER

THE APPOINTMENT

I shall not stop; and you must pass me by,
as if we did not know each other.
The tangled voices and the intricate signs
of the city disturb me;
in other eyes,
in mirrors,
death lays me bare
and asks its questions.
Woman, pass by.

On the far side of the railway track
the road slopes down.
Then you come to the bend.
Crossing the stone bridge,
you go up by the short-cut.
Don't turn to the left
till you see the enclosure
planted with cypresses,
with living trees
and dead crosses.
Perhaps I shall be there before you;
if not, wait for me.
Not sitting: straight,
vertical, intact, not like the others.

A clear sky would be best,
a midday sky rinsed clean
by the wind of long journeys.
Night is too pious: we should choke.
So many stars would only make us dream.

Woman, life goes in fashions, as you know.
From this day is decreed
the hidden style of nakedness,
down to the bone's profile,
to the first and final dust.

Unprotected and deceived,
let's part and each forget the other,
with empty, marble gestures.
There's no escape from gravity.

Who knows if, just before the end,
they'll come to furnish us with wings?
I've never claimed to answer mysteries.
Armed with almighty laws,
I hoard my ignorance
with mortal sense.

Now, woman, pass by.

PERE QUART (born 1899)

BY NATURAL PIETY

Is it the work of an instant, merely,
this shifting, many-sided crystal,
hard as a diamond? A trick of light,
sculpting your neat cap of hair?

No. Such resilience has taken years to form.
Days of reflection, nights of unquestioning
assurance, countless departures,
leaving the valley at dawn for the scorching uplands;
later, cold crags of unrest
where travellers founder at nightfall.
Your body has climbed this far.

Now take me back
to the valley. Show me the places you can still
remember, that now remind you
of your gradual birth. Show me
the millponds where you learned to swim,
those rockpools where the spray
burst into rainbows as you dived.
Let's lose our way beneath the roof of oaks
which scared you as a child. Or take the road
you cycled down when they sent you to the village
to fetch the bread for unexpected guests.
Here are the crossroads where you used to catch
the bus that took you back to town. Get in.

It will leave us at the small, suburban bar
where we shall find important exhibits:
the tall glass case where you bought chewing-gum,
the scales which registered your healthy summers.
Nearer the centre, there are streets
where every object is engraved upon your senses,
the originals still there for me to view.

The chemist's window, like Aladdin's cave,
with cut-glass jars once full of solemn dreams,
now your accomplices, those early forecasts
of your future self, your secret,
all-sufficing woman's nature.

Let's go in here and drink a glass of milk.
Or perhaps you'd rather have a monster ice,
try one of those absurdly-tinted minerals,
all primary colours, like the bright red stockings
of these little girls, your representatives,
who run off now, just as you used to do,
through the gleaming door which still preserves
its innocent black magic.

Slowly we walk towards those streets
where only your most personal images
survive. The shutters close, the fading sun
is only for ourselves as we stroll past
unlighted walls, Red Seas of tiles
which part to admit us, smelling of aquariums
and rancid smoke, and, suddenly,
the cool, green breath of pine.
Give me your hand. Confess you're scared
to go back further, past the gates
of your first school, re-entering
the strange, forgotten games beneath the pines,
here on the edge of time, or under time.
The moment barely holds. Already it tears across,
like threadbare silk upon an ancient sofa.
You have been lost enough. Give me your hand,
in which the past survives as wholly you.

GABRIEL FERRATER

MY SKELETON

You live in the narrow dark
of my total presence,
clothed and watered
by well-trained attendants
likewise mine: in short, by me.

My skeleton,
my supporting cast and chief designer,
still rattle-free,
unsplintered, succulent,
rich Eldorado
sunk in juicy clay,
my third dimension,
unseen assurance
in the skull's sanctum,
in the breast's cage,
breezy factotum
of the hands,
obedient pacemaker,
faithful retainer
of the central zone,
where hangs a mystery
fertile in strategy.

My skeleton,
though I have never seen you
and know you only
in your padded cell of flesh,
I depend on you and trust
my very soul
to your firm scaffolding.
Although I must confess at times
I feel constrained
by your rigidity
stuffed tight with heart
and other soft commodities.

My skeleton,
when death releases you
from ticking pulse and well-drained substances,
you take a holiday,
lounging at ease
in the penultimate hygiene.
For you are made to last,
my all but sacred ivory relic,
final guarantee
of the man I am
or now appear to be.

PERE QUART

ONCE THEY WERE IN LOVE...

Once they were in love; they knew
the vehemence of sex, the way
one's veins can fill quite suddenly
with August sun, salt water, leaping fish.

They liked to hide
in sunless pinewoods
or in mild refuges of shade.
Resting, they listened
to the rising wind
or the distant ground-swell of the city.

Next day, she seemed to smell
roses in her bedroom; he thought
of the first line of a poem
he never managed to write.

They had a white wedding.
They have a son who is a solicitor on the mainland
and a daughter engaged to be married.
A respectable family, one might say.

They walk home slowly though the fading light,
these tired connoisseurs of evening.
Sometimes their pulses stir, their eyes
go wandering through the branches
of the tree-lined street, as if
to catch a final memory of green, a kiss.
They see the years, the sky, the empty hours,
the clock, the dust. They pass and never speak.

JOSEP M. LLOMPART (born 1925)

BEGINNINGS

A poor stall in the second-hand book mart.
Flipping through a tray of useless junk,
I come across the number of an old review
containing the first published verses of the major poet.
I buy it, aware that I shall throw it away
unread. It is soiled and unappetizing,
printed in absurd, archaic type.
The verses themselves are clearly bad.
Am I to believe this stuff I find so painful
once had some value for the poet?
With pathetic frankness he recounts
a momentary joy sincerely felt:
the review was highly thought-of at the time.
If he had seen no merit in these verses,
would he have tried to make the later ones so good?
Or conversely, perhaps: without the groping
labour which came after, should we have needed
to imagine his youthful raptures, to distil
such pious tributes from his past?

GABRIEL FERRATER