

**ANDRÉ BRETON, RENÉ CHAR,  
PAUL ÉLUARD**

**RALENTIR TRAVAUX (SLOW UNDER CONSTRUCTION)**

**TRANSLATED BY KEITH WALDROP**

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In March, 1930, André Breton, René Char, and Paul Éluard--together in Avignon--wrote these poems in collaboration, attempting to merge their individual personalities into a poetry-in-common. The result is one of the most distinctive books of the surrealist years, not quite like those of any one of its authors working separately. The poems were written rapidly--the whole book in five days--each made of lines by at least two, often all three, of the poets.

Driving through the nearby countryside, the three friends saw the road repair sign that provided the title.

*for Benjamin Péret*

Everybody has seen a table but when we say table the *trouble* is that right now this table is for M. Breton a café table (because he drinks), for M. Char a gambling table (because he does not gamble), for M. Éluard an operating table (because this morning he passed by the Place de l'Opéra). If any one of these gentlemen says table, you see what comes of it. Having once made tabula rasa of whoever listens to them saying the word table, one after the other, poetry goes its own way, like the Tarn as it delightfully floods the Southwest.

--André Breton

If, rather than turn pages always towards the reader's eye, we cast our gaze behind and precisely in *somebody's* wake, we should be systematically engendering the *bad impression*: point of arrival, not point of departure. At that moment poetry, at a standstill, tired of *playing dead*, begins to put on disguises. But skill catches fire like straw. All around, little bundles of firewood, hastily bound together but trusty and pliable, watch for smoke to appear in the open sky, signal that they're doing all right. Collective utility silences reproach and dissolves hesitations. In the head, narrow as space, elbows have no place, hands leveled, the horizon vertical and underneath everything. That's when we hear words at liberty but under the lash.

It's all free.

--René Char

Our covert idea of poetry does not necessarily hold poetry to it. But like dreams we can't admit to, it can trouble the memory and hinder orderly formation of a world superior to the one in which forgetting helps discreetly to conserve the individual.

Reflection of the personality must be effaced for inspiration to spring unendingly from the mirror. Let influences play at will, invent what has already been invented, what is beyond doubt, what is unbelievable, give spontaneity its sheer value. Be the one who is spoken to and who is heard. A single vision, raised to infinity.

The poet is rather one who inspires than one inspired.

--Paul Éluard

## BRANDING IRON

The glance that will cast about my shoulders  
Night's undecipherable net  
Will be like a rain in eclipse  
Will fall slowly from its solar rim  
My arms about its neck

## THE USE OF FORCE

Don't shake your hair like that we can't see ourselves anymore  
It's all of a sudden full of workmen

Don't shake your hair like that or else the traveler north  
Disappointed may turn up in the south again

But do learn to curl your hair  
For the benefit of stones



## BLANK PAGE

The marble of palaces today is harder than the sun  
First proposition

The second is a little less stupid  
The fast of vampires will result in blood thirsty to be drunk  
Blood thirsty to wed the form of brooks  
Blood thirsty to gush from desert places  
Blood thirsty for the knife's cool water

Body and soul are re-united by an accolade  
Third proposition this one of dubious character  
Because body and soul are compromised together  
Because they serve as excuse each for the other

## ETCETERA

They are madmen  
They are dead men  
They have their head at the base of the trunk

We do not recognize them

They are madwomen  
They are dead women  
Their head is no longer inside us

Obsession empty bottle

## THE AIR GROWS HEAVY

A checkered handkerchief is hoisted over the house of the Gauls  
Chance capitulates  
Heads for the phosphorescent door  
Thus taking rendezvous  
Tomorrow at a certain hour that skips to a shifting site  
I will come more alone than I am when not with you  
With my unrecognizable face  
In my borrowed clothes  
I am hidden already in the woods in the ditches  
I have already provoked your fear your spite  
This time I will be the one you have not known  
Whose only care is to astonish you  
I will appear to you your hands over my eyes  
And you will take hold of nothing  
Love will spread as I love  
Fog to cut with a knife

## IN RETURN

Cynicism does not suffice nor the two hands  
Circling the body which draws  
Back from clouds pretending frost  
The evening's a show-off we admit that dreamers  
Are elegant all trumps in your game  
The dumb-bells will grow heavier and heavier  
But wrestlers improve with coaching  
Today the flat hand tomorrow the hand cupped  
The reason we come up in the world is the wild man at the party  
The sky is all set

In the day of weeping give indifference its fling  
One of three unspecified days in a week with four Thursdays  
The other two being Fears-day and Refuse-day  
Covered by nights come no morning

We overtake time hugger-mugger in its wheelbarrow  
Then a foreigner gets the notion that there's no more need for couples  
That they sing off key  
A gang of bandits  
Heads off their shoulders

## A SCOUNDREL

The school for the feeble-minded is decked with flags  
And provokes to admiration the coffins piling up in the street  
With the good will that always distinguishes love of advertising  
I will make sure you catch my name  
What virtues I possess and how many years now I have refrained from stealing

The udders of the shadow cow  
Give out incendiary milk  
That snakes treasure four steps at a time like a staircase of terror

I'll show you what ideas I can pull out of my hand  
I no longer scratch my scalp with my nails  
But with the lifelong foetus  
Packed into the jar with my ancestors  
Now in my family  
I am the hot shit of the twentieth century

## HOOKY

You went in by a secret door  
There was a heart on the blackboard  
And a dowser's wand on the desk  
You could hear a pin drop

It was love first taught  
Lovers good behavior  
Stones followed their bittersweet shadow  
The eye never relaxing its hold

And if she ask of me my life  
He wondered  
And the light made its only leap like roots  
And set traps of dew

Your hair he wondered  
And the silence was enthralled

## ALWAYS THE SAME

People are too brave  
Some are under the bed the rest in the wardrobe  
And those who have a candle instead of a brain  
Do not offend these with frilly hearts  
When they say we must make an end  
You must realize they mean of fear  
All sweetness bravery then blames the other virtues  
Calmly ill-temper favors risk corrupts distrust

Society activities

## FAÇADE

I give onto the heart  
Wherever your shadow has overshadowed mine  
Blood is vision's thrust like a rapier's  
And the dew comes to wake you with unique dreams  
Which challenge love's right to be love  
As nightshade's to be deadly



## **BOUND HAND AND FOOT**

If I've trouble following you  
I kindle the lips  
I enflame the silence

## BEGINNING AND END

Merely the shadow of a tear on a lost face  
The hands of the clock rusted  
And footsteps retire turned on their heel a bit it's awful  
Eyes the color of air of the abyss  
Two lion-headed fire-dogs gleam in the almost extinct sun  
Merely the shadow of a tear memory's stake  
Ignorance the head abandons hands and eyes  
Laughs at warnings of a death-trap ahead  
The rags of childhood no longer curtain any landscapes  
Any temptation  
Stubborn ruins  
A windfall horizon rising like a scorchmark  
The toppled head gives in completely to the first sea passing  
Is named without being recognized

## LOVE'S ENVIRONS

I will bury you in the sand  
For the tide to dig you out

Freedom for the dark

I will dry you in the sun  
Of your hair where the phoenix is entrapped

Freedom for prey

## DELIGHTFULLY ISOLATED

She heaved a bridge of sighs  
Across the uninhabitable sea  
She took off her dress of earth  
Put on a dress of sand  
She speaks a cork tongue  
Wears out time in a single season  
She dances to packed houses of pebbles  
Under tear-drop chandeliers

One day she came back from a foreign trip  
Her suitcases covered with orange-colored stickers  
One after another her luggage-bearers fainted  
Overcome by the dawn she had caught in her swirling underthings  
She has come back to filter out the cool from her hot-and-bother  
No longer the only one to curse fire

Original

## JACK-IN-THE-BOX

Fire reduced to desert winds  
My eyes before no matter whom  
Rather than believe my own eyes  
Laughter like a snail Like a stone underneath the water

Rather than believe my own eyes  
I prefer to lose your image  
Under my trove of faces

On what horizon would you like it to appear

## OTHER POEM

I will remove my shoulders  
Each step provokes a misfortune

To be lost in the vast of my temples

## A DESTINY SPURNED

This great storm cranky with lightning  
The hand reduced to its fate  
And its fingers to trunks of highway  
You rule over this broken mirror  
Over those birds that you slaughter  
You stow the last cartridge  
In a cellar of nitrate  
With the ear of love  
Your echo in the heart

The habit of showing one's teeth

## ON A FALSE SCENT

The weeds have reached the highway-hair  
Speech has switched mouths  
Shadow has snuffed one by one the candles  
That celebrated fatal accidents  
At dangerous curves  
So many birds dead for having wings  
In the cages of the landscape  
Who speaks it's no longer likeness or knowledge  
But the ignorant caress parasite of pleasure  
Caress with a mouth of scarlet pimpernel  
My my it's snowing  
But no it's a sunbeam a little paler than the rest  
Another one to get the third degree



# SUCCESS

My harshest words

Insolence

Calling the beasts to witness

What follows resembles one who splits

Valid reasoning

## ORDER OF THE DAY

If we ever shake hands again  
More will lack arms than eyes  
I say nothing of our mothers' good sense  
Pulling gee and haw the threads of conversation  
With not an inkling they've brooded a whole arsenal

Whenever we pass by someone  
His face is replaced by a sign Aid For The Drowned  
But as for artificial respiration and rhythmical traction  
As we understand them the rope and a branch  
Suffice  
We accept gladly sincerelys and yours trulys

## DISCOVERY OF THE EARTH

The statue of Echo cries for help  
We enter the fire by a raging fountain  
Exposing its face free of the slightest splash

The human dust feels its way along  
A rocket at finger-tips  
It regains the furrow as night falls  
Moles are hitched to the invisible sledge  
Driving underground treasure to treasure  
Beauty of the borderline-unknown

## A WALK

We passed by the pharmacy  
Its flasks were day and night  
Someone was brought in wounded  
And in the crowd there was a woman singing  
A wilted bouquet over her ear  
Her face was a great deserted square  
That drink ripened  
And bohemians tracked down  
Her song conjured up oddments of our life  
To come  
A terrible odor of cut hay hung about  
But the others heard nothing felt nothing  
Their mob was a train blocked by a thousand blasts of the whistle  
Train blocked by bodiless madness  
A great mystery like a lost child  
With those dirty tears that would prefer to be blood  
And which are nothing but oats  
Close all the doors all the windows  
Nobody leave  
Are the signals functioning  
Where is this woman taking us  
The coral pharmacy crumbles  
The woman spits on the wounded  
Amorous bushes cast their love-blossoms into the blaze  
  
Déjà-vu out of control

## NATURAL HISTORY

Sea-horses are the animal most to be pitied  
And ferns gave rise to anthropometries  
As for the eye-agate mere accident places it in the mineral kingdom  
Whose entry lurks behind a pin-cushion  
In groan-shops

Royal diadems are no longer bumpers  
The heart-rending spectacle of the dog lifting his hind leg in the caserne parade-ground  
Brings to mind old men kept on a leash by uniforms

Good soup for beautiful people in the slaughterhouse

## CLOSING TIME

We have retained nothing  
Of our lessons on the rut and on splotches  
On rhythm and on arithmetic  
The resembling pillow  
Will play hell of hollowing under our head

We have lost nothing  
There's nothing for us to get out of  
We let our bangs grow on purpose

We have been nothing  
We toted misery's sack of coal  
Before the magic lantern

We never woke up

## SCENERY

The great painters of letters love  
The word painting  
On the wall opposite  
They have written that we are at home for no one  
Elsewhere from window to window  
Hands clasp  
We've lobbed the house out the window  
An interior garden  
Here roses are traced with a knife on the bodies of women  
It's more certain  
And then it's one's own place  
The latest fanatics are brought in  
With their catapults they launch the latest ball of images  
Still on the roll

At last report the earth would just have been laid

## WORD OF HONOR

There are flames  
More clairvoyant than the hands that roll nightmares  
Across memory

We gain the sun by enchantment  
Love has quite a pronounced taste of glass  
Coral that comes from the sea  
Lost perfume gone back to the forest  
Transparency paying the uttermost farthing  
Always this head  
The lips deliciously parted  
This side of the wall  
And on the other side perhaps stuck on a pike



## IVY

The eternal woman on a park bench  
Nameless woman her arms in a clock  
As in a muff  
The woman who murders work  
The woman-lightning-bolt and you go by you are the sound of her thunder  
On earth no longer inhabited the earth of rootlessness  
Of deforestation of nest-wrecking at the foundations  
At the precise point in time marked by the fingers of the destitute woman  
You pass through condemned doors  
Without protection against shocks of encounter  
You visit apartments where people have played  
Where they have fought where sometimes they've killed  
You prefer flowered wallpaper way down in wells  
You always want the view you can't get  
From the windows the view of all four sides of the sinister bystander  
Whom you love even to the sword's edge  
Your wrist fires a stray shot  
Beauty whose history draws a blank

## SHARES

The pretty white beasts that eat your cheeks  
Impatient stones that hollow out your eyes  
This sky in ruins that you point out you the mute woman  
To the characters on the ceiling trembling with night's street noises  
This wall that every night sheds your portrait  
Crumbles into the sea that you loved  
The veins in your neck fade out  
Subjected to my gaze

The glass punchinello called air  
Dances lightly on your somber breast

## USELESS STAKE

The world overturned would be charming  
In the anti-man's eyes  
What an hourglass the earth  
What communicating vessels birth and death  
Appearance of metal in the mists of agony  
Murderous outbursts in a forgotten man  
The whole world falls into ruin the elements cannot prevent it  
Falls into ruin from constancy and order the idea of man  
Is worthless his enemies have bested that phantom  
Nourished in espresso-bars a bit after closing-time  
The bridge over everyone is a cry you will hear  
Without taking life's word for it and passing through the closed eyelid  
Of earth a cry forever deafening death and its doings

## LISTEN TO MYSELF STILL TALKING

Mad as I am  
I am not at death's door  
I tear out the shrubs arresting the suicide at cliff's edge  
Animals in my traps decay where they're caught  
It's practically only dusk that gets their scent  
Dusk riddled with shot that my exhausted hounds can't catch

I hold in my arms women who want only to be with another  
Women who in love hear wind crossing the poplars  
Women who in hate are taller and slimmer than praying mantises  
It's for me they invented unbuilding blocks  
A thousand times more beautiful than card games

And I laid the blame on absence  
In all its shapes  
And I held in my arms apparitions under the mark  
Of ashes and loves newer than the first  
That ever closed my eyes my hope my jealousy

*Avignon, 25-30 March 1930*

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