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
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
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
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
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
DELTFULLY 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
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
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
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

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