

P/P | r2c | August: "Big Blue" and Poetry as Natural History



"Ashen is between white and black,
Tough is between soft and hard,
Tepid is a property between hot and cold.
But between curse and blessedness
there is no byway which divides them.
One must flee that which the other must have."

from **Two Ways**, a poem
by *Jacobus Revius* (1586-1658)

This week, an image of one of the signature species
of the North American Tallgrass Prairie, **Big Bluestem**
(*Andropogon gerardi*). Also: eight new translations
of Lowland poems.

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Acht Gedichten; Eight Poems

The guest poems for this week are new English translations of a set of eight Dutch pieces.
The eight featured poets are, **Albert Verwey**, **Gerrit Achterberg**, **Jan Hanlo**,
Ed. Hoornik, **Hendrik Marsman**, **Pol de Mont**, **Ida Gerhardt**, and
Jacobus Rivius.

Poetry as Natural History

The featured photograph for this week is called "**Big Blue**." It shows
the August aspect of Big Bluestem, one of the most striking signature
species of the former tallgrass prairie of North America. Growing in
large clumps of dense sod and standing as tall as a man, it offers
the observer a constantly changing display of natural color, the entire
plant modulating from the blue-green of spring to shades of red, brown
and amethyst purple in fall to the light tan of tall, dry reeds in winter. In

flower, the inflorescence divides itself into three or more branches, each of which is about a finger or so in length.

Just as much of the very finest music is found not in concert halls or on recordings, but rather in the sounds of a summer meadow or forest, so too much good poetry is to be had outside of contexts we normally consider literary. Personally, one of my favorite places to look for the sonorous and yet precise use of language is in botanical field guides, especially when read out loud or studied out-of-doors. *Calyx; bract, sepal; petals*—words that seem to have an ancient ring to them. Perhaps it is this perennial challenge of description that brings out the poetry in us. For how are we to describe the song of a bird, or the form of a plant? What are the features we find important, and how do they work together to compose the whole?

The eight Dutch poems I've brought together in translation for this week all in some way are touched by this theme. It is an interesting thought: *poetry as a kind of natural history*. But now not just in the sense of developing descriptive languages for outer, *physical* worlds, but also for those more subtle realities of culture and intimate relationship.

The first two pieces by Albert Verwey and Gerrit Achterberg are both seasonal in character. In **How I Loathe these Days Full of Sun** the poet complains about how the glaring light of long summer days has led to delusion, whereas the long series of short, matter of fact, rather dark and gloomy, descriptive lines of **November** paint, when taken together as a kind of surreal walkabout, a landscape which is uniquely Dutch:

The protestant days of November
fall a good bit apart on the calendar;
widows, existing on meager pensions;
public housing, that does little;
a row of orphan boys with similar features;
open gates in the empty countryside.

The next two pieces, both beautiful and moving in their own way, are love poems. Here we encounter afresh the timeless problem of how to describe one's beloved, *"like milk / like loam / the pale red of faded stones"*, or to describe one's love for him or her, *"To love a woman / is to gently rock with the trees at night / is to...."*

Hendrik Marsman's **Lex Barbarorum** or 'barbaric reading' describes a much more solitary, inward state. Here we are confronted by a kind of inspired despair, one which moves to healing, however, and the full embrace of life by 'cutting out' with a knife the 'bad parts' of his body: "Give me a knife./ i want to cut this sick black / spot out of my body."

In **The Breaker of Stones** by Pol de Mont we find a blow for blow description, one with considerable detail, of an old man working, either literally or metaphorically or both, on the primal task of making big rocks small in a mountainous landscape.

And with each swing of the hands is heard
a hoarse sound, —the rattling of one who is dying,—
out of an old throat, by no drink refreshed....

Higher, up in the mountains, above people and cliffs,
yellow slashed and ripe, the winegrape on its stake.

And lastly, two short poems. One is a simple, yet moving, testament
about death and the loss of close friends in a piece by Ida Gerhardt called
Notice of Death:

Slowly I see them go,
those that I had still with me,
around the turn of the path...

This is followed by a classic piece which describes the logic and nature
of two different life ways, by Jacobus Rivius.

Poetry as natural history, indeed. Perhaps it is this possibility of the
detailed description of the resonance between inner and outer worlds,
that makes this an interesting path to follow. I hope this week's series
of new translations gives the reader something of a sense of where it
might take us:

Ik Walg Nu van die Dagen Vol van Zon

Ik walg nu van die dagen vol van zon,
Van die zon zelf, die niet wil ondergaan;
Wanneer het nacht was zou ik naast hem staan
En zeggen: Vriend, 't was waar, eerst nu begon

Mij 't leven, al wat ik eertijds verzon
Was logen, wat ik zei van zon was waan,

En van genot en liefde, - maar, welaan,
Vergeef mij dat ik zoo dwaas dwalen kon.

Dan zou ons zijn een zoet verkeer van leed,
Zeer innig, als van zielen, nu ontdaan
Van trots en ijdelheid en klein belang;—

En elk van ons zou 't zijn of naast hem schreed
Zijn eigen ziel, op 't eind geheel verstaan,
Naakt en een glorie, van eenzelfden rang.

Albert Verwey (1865-1930)

How I Loathe these Days Full of Sun

How I loathe these days full of sun,
Of the sun itself, that does not wish to set;
And if it were Night, I would stand next to him
And say now: Friend, it is true that my life first

Began here, everything that I then dreamed up
Was a lie, what I said about the sun delusion.

And of pleasure and love,—but, very well,
Forgive me that I so foolishly could stray.

Then for each, sweet intercourse of sorrow would be
Most intimate, as with souls, now unburdened
By pride and vanity and petty interest;—

And for each would be as if next to him walked
His own soul, at the end completely understood,
Naked and glorious, of same and equal rank.

November

De nederige dagen van november
zijn weer gekomen, grijze als een emmer;
tevreden met het licht dat minderde
op de gezichten van de kinderen.

De wereld heeft derde dimensie over.
Stakerig staan de bomen zonder lover.
Door iedereen van ver te onderkennen,
moeten wij aan het nieuwe platvlak wennen
en lopen hoog voorbij de kale heg.

De fietsen rijden groot over de weg.
Verwintering gaat zienderogen door.
De eerste kouwe handen komen voor.
Geslachte varkens hangen te besterven;
ontnuchteren de paarse boerenerven.

De protestantse dagen van november
wijken een stuk uiteen op de kalender;
weduwen, terend op een schraal pensioen;
gemeentewoningen, die weinig doen;
een rij weesjongens met gelijke trekken;
in 't lege land opengebleven hekken.

Toon van november knalt het jagersschot.
Verder en verder valt een deur in 't slot.
Eerlijke kerken houden voor het gewas
dankstonden achter dun, armoedig glas.

Alles wordt enkeling. Een eigen graf
wacht op het kerkhof zijn bewoner af.
Huizen verwijderen zich van elkaar.
Wij kijken in de gaten van het jaar.

Gerrit Achterberg (1905-1962)

Zo meen ik dat ook je bent

zoals de koelte 's nachts langs lelies
en langs rozen
als wit koraal en parels diep in zee
zoals wat schoon is rustig schuilt
maar straalt wanneer ik schouwen wil
zo meen ik dat ook jij bent
als melk
als leem
en 't bleke rood van vaal gesteent
of porselein
zoals wat ver is en gering
en lang vergeten voor het oud is
zoals een waskaars en een koekoek
en een oud boek en een glimlach
en wat onverwacht en zacht is en het eerste

November

The low days of November
have again returned, gray as a pail;
at ease with the lessening light
on the faces of children.

The world has third dimension still.
The trees stand pitifully without cover.
By distinguishing everybody at a distance,
we must get used to the new flat surface
and walk high past the bare border.

The bicycles ride large along the way.
Winter passes along before our eyes.
The first cold hands appear.
Slaughtered pigs are hung out to die;
sobering the purple nerves of farmers.

The protestant days of November
fall a good bit apart on the calendar;
widows, existing on meager pensions;
public housing, that does little;
a row of orphan boys with similar features;
open gates in the empty countryside.

Sound of November explodes in the hunter's shot.
Further and further a door sinks into a ditch.
Honest churches hold services of thanksgiving
in front of the wash behind thin, poor glass.

Everything becomes singular. A grave
awaits its owner at the churchyard.
Houses grow further apart from each other.
We look into the holes of the year.

So I believe that also you are

like the coolness of night upon lilies
and roses
like white coral and pearls deep in the sea
like something beautiful peacefully hides
yet is radiant when I wish to look
so I believe that also you are
like milk
like loam
and the pale red of faded stones
or porcelain
like the way that what is far is close
and is long forgotten before it's old
like a wax candle and a skylight
and an old book and a smile
and what is unexpected and soft in the beginning

en wat schuchter en verlangend en vrijgevig
gaaf maar broos is
zo meen ik dat ook jij bent

Jan Hanlo (1912-1969)

Een Vrouw Beminnen...

Een vrouw beminnen is de dood ontkomen,
weggerukt worden uit dit aards bestaan,
als bliksems in elkanders zielen slaan,
te zamen liggen, luisteren en dromen,

meewiegen met de nachtelijke bomen,
elkander kussen en elkander slaan,
elkaar een oogwenk naar het leven staan,
ondergaan en verwonderd bovenkomen.

‘Slaap je al?’ vraag ik, maar zij antwoordt niet;
woordeloos liggen we aan elkaar te denken:
twee zielen tot de rand toe vol verdriet.

Ver weg de wereld, die ons niet kan krenken,
vlak bij de sterren, die betoovrend wenken.
‘t Is of ik dood ben en haar achterliet.

Ed. Hoornik (1910-1970)

Lex Barbarorum

Geef mij een mes.
ik wil deze zwarte zieke plek
uit mijn lichaam wegsnijden.

ik heb mij langzaam recht overeind gezet.

ik heb gehoord, dat ik heb gezegd
in een huiverend, donker beven:
ik erken maar één wet:
léven.

allen, die wegwijnen aan een verdriet
verraden het en dat wil ik niet.

H. Marsman (1899-1940)

and what is shy and full of longing and generously
bestows but is fragile
so I believe that also you are

To Love a Woman...

To love a woman is to escape death,
to be torn away from this earthly existence,
like flashes of lightning in each other's souls,
to lay together, listening and dreaming,

to gently rock with trees at night,
kiss each other and have at each other,
in a blink of the eye to stand together in hardship,
to go under and come back up amazed.

"Asleep already?" I ask, but she doesn't answer;
speechless, we lie thinking about each other:
two souls filled to the brim with sadness.

Far away is the world, that cannot touch us,
close are the stars, that enchant as they sparkle.
It is as if I am dead and have left her behind.

Lex Barbarorum

Give me a knife.
I want to cut this sick black
spot out of my body.

I have slowly turned myself upright.

I have heard, what I have said
in a hesitating, dark trembling:
I recognise but one law:
life.

all who waste away with sadness
betray it and I don't want that.

De Keiklopper

De zak op de gekromde rug, de kleren
ontnaaid, gescheurd, en haar nog baard gekamd,
staat, naast een steenhoop, vlak in 't zonnegloên,
een stokoud man. Met stramme handen zwaait hij
zijn ijzeren hamer, die met doffe slag
bonst op een rotsklomp, dat de splinters knetrend
in 't rond vliegen. Met zijn hemdsmouw wist
de grijsaard 't zweet, dat op zijn voorhoofd blinkt,
en slaaft maar voort, met doffe slag op slag,
de grove keien, scherf om scherf, vermorzlend.
En hoorbaar klinkt, bij elke zwaai der hand,
een schor geluid, —reutlen van een, die sterft, -
uit 's ouden gorgel, door geen drank gelaafd....

Hoog, op de bergen, boven rots en mensen,
kerft geel en rijp de wijndruif aan de stok.

Pol de Mont (1857-1931)

Het Doodsbericht

Langzaam zie ik hen gaan
Die ik nog bij mij had,
de bocht om van het pad.
Wat gouddoorschenen stof,
dan wordt het in de hof
nog stiller dan voorheen.
De liefsten. —Eén voor één.

Ida Gerhardt (1905-1997)
(uit: *De Ravenveer*, 1970)

Twee Wegen

Het vaal is tussen wit en zwart,
Het taai is tussen week en hard,
Het lauw een eigenschap tussen hitte en koude.
Maar tussen vloek en zaligheid
En is geen bijweg die ze scheidt.
Het een hij vlieden moest die 't ander hebben zoude.

Jacobus Revius (1586-1658)

Please follow **r2c** {Straight ROADS.
Slow RIVERS. Deep CLAY.]
on twitter . . .

The Breaker of Stones

With a sack on the bent-over back, clothes
frayed, torn, neither beard nor hair combed,
stands, next to a pile of stones, in the burning sun,
an old man. With rigid hands he swings
the iron hammer, that with a thud
rebounds from the block of rock, splinters crackling
as they scatter. With his shirt sleeve the hoary man
wipes the sweat that on his forehead gleams,
and slaves away, blow upon dull blow,
crushing the rough boulders, shard by shard.
And with each swing of the hands is heard
a hoarse sound, —the rattling of one who is dying,—
out of an old throat, by no drink refreshed....

Higher, up in the mountains, above people and cliffs,
yellow slashed and ripe, the winegrape on its stake.

The Death Notice

Slowly I see them go,
those that I had still with me,
around the turn of the path.
A bit of gold translucent cloth,
then the garden becomes
more quiet than it was before.
Most dearly beloveds. —One by one.

Two Ways

Ashen is between white and black,
Tough is between soft and hard,
Tepid is a property between hot and cold.
But between curse and blessedness
there is no byway which divides them.
One must flee that which the other must have.

(all tr. Cliff Crego)

See
also:
new



*"Straight roads,
Slow rivers,
Deep clay."*

A collection of contemporary Dutch poetry
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