

## Further Reviews

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### Ishikawa Takuboku

*On Knowing Oneself Too Well, Selected Poems*, translated by Tamae

K. Prindle

Syllabic Press

142 pp, paperback, ISBN 978-0-615-34562-8, \$16.95

### Tsvetanka Elenkova

*The Seventh Gesture*, translated by Jonathan Dunne

Shearsman Books

89pp, paperback, ISBN 978-1-84861-084-2, £8.95

### Lars Amund Vaage

*Outside the Institution, Selected Poems*,

translated by Hanne Bramness and Frances Presley

Shearsman Books

104pp, paperback, ISBN 978-1-84861-075-0, £9.95 / \$17

### Andr s Mezei

*Christmas in Auschwitz*, translated by Thomas Orsz g-Land

Smokestack Books

74pp, paperback, ISBN 978-0-9560341-9-9, £7.95

In this issue's round-up, four distinct and celebrated poets, yet relatively unknown outside their homelands of Japan, Bulgaria, Norway, and Hungary, are brought side by side in a polyphony of spoken and unspoken truths on the texture of existence.

Ishikawa Takuboku's selected poems *Knowing Oneself Too Well* poignantly illuminates the private self; its revelations, its discomforts, its ordinary pleasures are succinctly observed, confronted and brought home to rest in a collection of tanka sequences and free-verse poems. Takuboku was born in 1885 in Hinoto Village in Northern Japan, and though widely regarded

as one of Japan's most important modern poets, there is a notable absence of grandiosity in the work. Unfortunately, Takuboku lived only twenty-six years and it is unavoidable that these poems read as a testimony to a life cut short by tuberculosis.

Takuboku's acute sensibility moves through the poems whilst walking through the ordinariness of life. Each short tanka is individually and collectively irresistible and intimate. Each word, each phrase, breathes with a sense of grace and polite candour. Step by step the poems unfold like private daydreams, accumulating like a postcard sequence, depicting a state of knowing, an amused self gently awakening. Takuboku's impassioned, unquestioning soul leaves footprints on invisible paper:

The blue ink  
Split on the frosted flagstone  
Below a bank's window . . .

In the morning air of October,  
For the first time,  
A baby breathed.

The pacing to and fro  
In the long wet hallway  
Of a gynecologist's office in October . . .

There was a thought  
Tender like the touch of an infant  
When I walked alone in the park.  
(‘When I take my gloves off’)

A state of translucency has been quietly achieved in these sensitive translations by Tamae K. Prindle, her careful rendering in English of these works has not disturbed Takuboku's original interests and intentions: quietly bleeding through rice paper Takuboku's soothing voice confirms that there is a knowing self

that delicately endures whilst bearing witness to the fullness and emptiness of life, until it ceases to be.

Holding hands with Death, each thumb and finger tightly locked, is the overriding action that resonates most strongly in Tsvetanka Elenkova's *The Seventh Gesture*. Despite this collection appearing in its original tongue in 2005, Elenkova's concerns still appear lively. Elenkova was born in Sofia in 1968 on the threshold of Bulgarian Orthodox tradition and contemporary culture, painful transitions and transformations come as second nature.

In his enigmatic Translator's Foreword, Jonathan Dunne sets the tone for meeting these poems head on: ‘This book taught me to find life in death, a dead tree bathed in light. This book taught me to follow the diffraction of light in a bruise . . .’ Dunne's translations occupy a sense of duality; he operates on the cusp of prose and poetry, on the hinges of an English welcome and Bulgarian hospitality. The poem's dual nature dances delightedly through each imagistic discovery as if by magic as in the opening poem: ‘Poetry's tail’:

You wave the wand and know exactly where the wave will end. As the artist strokes a brush across the canvas, as the conductor signals *allegro vivace*, as the godmother turns the pumpkin into a carriage. You stop suddenly but smoothly, gradually tapering off.

The closing sentence of the poem offers a wry glimpse of Bulgarian humour: ‘But what's most important – the curve at the end. The Bulgarians incorporated it into the buckles of their belts . . .’

Reading *The Seventh Gesture* is a cinematic experience. From a close shot to a long shot, a wider action takes place in each of these breathless prose poems, extending beyond the *now* into the residues of time, the throb of each moment is palpable as well as its demise:

They find dead victims like this, with legs outstretched and arms to the side. Children sleep like this in their sweetest dreams. Like this, hung on a hook against you, I writhe at your every touch.

(‘Day Four – Leonardo’s Cross’)

The reader is asked to temporarily suspend any form of knowingness and surrender disbelief, giving over to Elenkova’s imagistic sensibility, which twists and unfolds with full confidence in its linguistic responsibilities and pulsating actions.

Lars Amund Vaage’s much-awaited *Selected Poems* is the first translated collection to appear in English; it contains selections from Vaage’s most recent book *Outside the Institution* and poems from his first collection *The Other Room* (2001). Vaage was born in 1952 in Sunde on the west coast of Norway and is one of the country’s highly regarded, award-winning novelists. Vaage’s oeuvre stretches beyond prose to playwriting, a jazz requiem and several translations of works by Lorine Niedecker and Joy Harjo.

Arguably, the poems that continue to linger in the mind are from Vaage’s first collection. The poems in *The Other Room* are lined with crystal clear imagery that glides effortlessly on ice aided by the sharpness of the short line and the well-observed enjambment. The poems appear to love movement backwards, behind, and inwards as in the opening short poem:

Behind the word there is a shadow  
 Behind the shadow a farm with house and trees  
 Behind the trees a bright, green field  
 Thought cannot reach

(‘Behind the Word there is a Shadow’)

Vaage’s rooms are self-sufficient and have porous walls that welcome loss easily. Each line acts as a glacial layer, transparently adding weight to the whole:

You do not need to build  
 anything for me  
 I built these rooms myself  
 from nails and snow  
 I would rather you shut out the day  
 Took rooms away

(‘You Do Not Need To Build’)

Alongside shorter lyrics is a lengthy sequence that follows the internal and external unfolding of the life of a sheep farmer in the wilds of Norway. This reclusive figure never outstays his welcome:

Ask for the farmer  
 he is invisible  
 He is gone just like his animals  
 They are inside the half-darkened  
 cold room  
 Where is the farmer?  
 His traces are in the snow  
 His boots  
 are clean as air

(‘The Sheep Farmer’)

The later poems ‘From the Institution’ are just as hauntingly simple. Vaage continues to build corridors of self-contained rooms within a sequence of fifteen prose poems:

The car charged the roof and walls in the old house with energy. It sprayed an innocent foam into the empty spaces so I could settle down. But the peace the car gave me was only temporary. I could stand stillness for a while because the car promised motion. Small bubbles emerged from the wires long after I parked.

(‘The Car Ride’)

One of the recurring enigmatic figures from *Outside the Institution* is the absent father. The translators Hanne Bramness and Frances Presley capture the parental relationship precisely with the minimized use of punctuation, most notably full stops; the effect collaborates with the line break to invite the silence in. The unpunctuated images of the father float upwards after each reading and relocate elsewhere reinforcing the father's standing in other poems from across the selected collection. The subject of the poem is connected and yet removed, this sense of closeness and otherness is what makes Vaage's poetic process compelling:

My father has gone to the other side of the valley,  
 He calls from the old phone booth by the village road  
 The red metal booth no one uses any more  
 The phone in the booth still works  
 Blind, my father searches for change in his pockets  
 He drops coins down through the bars of the floor  
 My father searches for coins with  
 His thin fingers with nails that are too long  
 ('My Father Has Gone')

Charismatic, with a strong dose of humility are the defining qualities of András Mezei's poetry in *Christmas in Auschwitz*. In his valuable introduction Thomas Ország-Land recreates the blueprint behind the poems, navigating through Mezei's own survival of the holocaust and their meeting and recovery in the Hungarian Holocaust camp for Jewish children, to the translating of Mezei's Holocaust poetry towards the end of his life. A literary journalist most of his career, Mezei made a substantial contribution to Hungary's cultural and social development: 'Like many Holocaust survivors of his generation he embraced enthusiastically the ideal of Communism in the hope of building a just society free of racial, religious and class prejudice.'

On first handling, *Christmas in Auschwitz* appears to be a slim volume, yet within its pages is a deep cavern containing fifty-one poems. The verses form crevices in an echo chamber where the

language is deceptively still. Mezei's poems are starkly convincing in their imagery and moral stance and operate with such a light touch and yet the backdrop of suffering is always present and in conversation with the poet's tone.

. . . She stands outside by the well-wrung mop  
 that she has placed before her threshold,  
 she goes on rinsing the long red passageway  
 to welcome a new arrival.  
 She will never leave the ghetto  
 Not till her younger son returns  
 . . . although she knows he will not.  
 ('Blanche Schwarcz')

Mezei's genteel tone is in keeping with the piece-making approach of these poems. The poems were cut from a tattered cloth of collected facts, records, correspondences, interviews, post-war criminal proceedings, and personal experiences. Mezei handles each fragment with such spareness and measures images against an exacting rhythm. The finished poems are unrelenting acts of remembrance. The lines reverberate alongside deafening silences, and deafening heartbeats:

It doesn't matter which wagon it was, and  
 whose lips held fast against the crack  
 between the planks of the cattle truck,  
 who sucked clean air through that tiny space,  
 which district filled his lungs with the fragrance  
 of rain-soaked hay, of snow on the meadows  
 it no longer matters who found that teat,  
 in that crowded box-car amidst the putrid  
 steam of urine and stench of excrement,  
 who found it crawling among sore feet,  
 that nipple bursting through the crack  
 to feed him on oxygen-enriched air,  
 who feasted like a babe on the breast,

which prisoner's life was thus extended,  
 whether it was a Jew or a Serbian  
 whether a Russian or a Hungarian  
 whose heart at last could beat more calmly,  
 who has gained strength whilst surrounded by death –

and whose eyes have locked on to an unearthly crack  
 ever since then, in this blinded wagon  
 which is our world, that crack, that crack  
 admitting a light beyond our reality,  
 a light through which the whole train of cattle-trucks  
 passes forever with all the prisoners –  
 a light that burns like a beam from hell.

(‘Cattle Trucks’)

With many of the Hungarian Holocaust poets largely ignored in their own towns and with the absence of a comprehensive anthology of Hungarian Holocaust poetry, there is a real danger of the local populations being desensitized and misinformed about the experiences of the survivors and of the legacy of the victims of the Holocaust. Ország-Land's translations are an urgent contribution to the painstakingly gathered histories that continue to erode with each coming generation, who without just cause unwittingly fail to re-ignite, to re-imagine the hidden, and the disavowed poetries from our most hellish times.

See *MPT* 3/8 for more poems by Tsvetanka Elenkova and *MPT* 3/13 for more from *Christmas in Auschwitz*.

*Saradha Soobrayen*

(Correction: Please note *MPT*3/13 ‘Transplants’, page 232, last two lines, the quotation should read: ‘It was the little tongue that struck me most/ in mum’s last hours, tiny like a bird’s.’)