My Tongue in Other Cheeks

* A Selection of Translations

by James Sallis
My Tongue in Other Cheeks
My Tongue in Other Cheeks

* 

A Selection of Translations
by James Sallis

Obscure Publications / 2003
To David,
who knows
the same parlor tricks
## CONTENTS

### Blaise Cendrars
- At the Heart of the World 1
- The Bowels of My Mother 3
- Hotel Notre-Dame 5

### Jacques Dupin
- Air 7

### Andrei Voznesensky
- Family Graveyard 8

### Yves Bonnefoy
- Light of Evening 10
- The Art of Poetry 10
- Gravestone 11

### Pablo Neruda
- We Are Many 12
- The Disavowed 14

### Francis Ponge
- Regulation 16

### Boris Pasternak
- Hamlet 17
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apollinaire</td>
<td>White Snow</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raymond Radiguet</td>
<td>Back and Forth</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boris Vian</td>
<td>I Will Die of This Cancer</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Spiders</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I Don’t Want to Die</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To a Brazilian professor who had translated Baudelaire, Annibal sent the following telegram: "Kindly retranslate me back into French immediately. Signed: Baudelaire."

Albert Camus, *American Journals*
At the Heart of the World

Blaise Cendrars

This Paris sky's purer than any winter sky clear with cold.
I've never seen nights more filled with stars and growth than this spring
With boulevard trees like shadows of the sky,
Foliage in the rivers laced with elephant-ears,
Sycamore leaves, heavy chestnuts.

A lily on the Seine's the moon cut loose by water,
The Milky Way swoons down on Paris to embrace it,
Naked and mad and upside down, its mouth sucks at Notre Dame.
The Great Bear and Little Bear growl around Saint Merry.
My severed hand shines in the sky, in the stars of Orion.

In this hard cold light, shimmering, insubstantial,
Paris is like the still image of a plant
Reappearing in its ash. Pitiful phantom.
Perfectly straight and ageless, houses and streets are just
Piles of stone and steel in an unreal desert.

Babylon and Thebes are no more dead, tonight, than this dead city of Paris
Blue and green, ink and tar, bones bleached by starlight.
Not a sound. Not even a footstep. The heavy silence of war.
My eye goes from urinals to the streetlamp's violet eyes.
That's the only place I can focus my dread.
Every night like this I cross all Paris on foot
From the Batignolles to the Latin Quarter, same way I’d cross the Andes
Under the fire of news stars, larger and more alarming,
The Southern Cross more prodigious with each step towards it, emerging from
the ancient world
Onto a new continent.

I’m the man with no more past. --But my stump aches.--
I’ve let a hotel room, better to be alone with myself.
I’ve a brand-new wicker basket filling with manuscripts.
No books or pictures, not a single artsy trinket.

Morning papers linger on my table.
I work in this bare room, behind a smeared window;
Bare feet on red linoleum, playing with balloons and a child’s toy trumpet:
I’m working at the END OF THE WORLD.
The Bowels of My Mother

Blaise Cendrars

That was my first house
It was all round
And I often think
How well-off I was...

My feet on your heart mama
Knees against your liver
Clutched hands at the spout
That ran out to your belly

My back twisted into a spiral
Ears full eyes empty
Tightly curled
Head almost out of your body

My skull at your cervix
I had your own health then
Easy heat of your blood
My father’s embraces

Often stray passions
Lit up my darkness there
A knock at my skull loosened me
And I kicked out at your heart
The strong muscles of your vagina
Clamped down then
I let go sadly
Your blood annointed me

My face still a washboard
From the rub of my father
Why do we have to let go
Half-strangled that way?

If I could have opened my mouth
I would have bitten you
If I could have spoken then
I'd have said:
Shit, I don't want to live!
Hotel Notre-Dame

Blaise Cendrars

I've come back to the Quarter
The days of my youth
I think it's a waste of time
There's nothing left now
Of my dreams of my despairs
What I'd become at eighteen years

They're breaking up the blocks of houses
Changing street names
Saint-Severin's stripped bare
La place Maubert is larger
Rue Saint-Jacques widened
The neighborhood looks good
New and older at the same time

I'm getting torn down and changed myself
Beard and hair cut short
Wearing today's face
And my grandfather's skull

That's why I don't regret anything
And I call to the wrecking crews
Knock my childhood to the ground
My family and habits
Put up a train station in its place
Leave only an empty lot
To mark my origin
I'm not my father's son
And I love only my great-grandfather
I'm making a new name for myself
Prominent like a billboard
Put up on a scaffold
Behind which they go on building
Novelties tomorrows
Air

Jacques Dupin

The body and dreams of the lady
We whirled the hammers for--
And now they're lost, returning
From the clouds only
A few tatters of lightning
And the dew to come.
Family Graveyard
In memory of Robert Lowell

Andrei Voznesensky

You came through the gate at Peredelkino,
Head to one side, cheek pressed to your shoulder
As though supporting an unseen violin.
A lost violin. And now I want to hear it.

At Peter's house you went in squinting,
Stood by a notch hacked on the door there
And fit yourself under it,
Trying on what remained of great Peter.

How emptiness resounds where a body was!
A new shadow stands under the notch now.
Boughs above the graveyard are bare.
And that lost violin cries out.

Cloaked in woods, a family graveyard.
Your mother and father. But where are you?
As in books with markers removed
We can no longer find our place.

How is it, Robert, in your new wilderness?
We all carry our graveyards within us.
And how can we name the center of sorrow
In this void that rushes so quickly by?
The name you wore is worn by stone.
So you've won your way through the maze.
And that shadow under the notch, is it you?
From Pasternak's rowan tree I bring this branch
For whatever good such things may do.
Light of Evening
Yves Bonnefoy

Evening,
These chittering, uncertain birds
Snapping at one another, light.
Hand that passed over this bleak edge.

We have been still for a long time.
We speak quietly.
And time stays around us, pools of color.

The Art of Poetry
Yves Bonnefoy

Out of the night the eyes were dredged.
The hands held still and dried.
You reconcile the fever. Tell the heart
To be the heart. In the veins a devil
Fled screaming.
In the mouth a sad voice heavy with blood
Has been washed and restored.
Gravestone

Yves Bonnefoy

He wanted, without knowing,
He has died, without having.
Trees, smoke,
Every kind of wind and disillusion
Sheltered him.
Infinitely -
He has known death alone.
We Are Many

Pablo Neruda

Of the many men I am, we are,
I can’t turn up a single one:
they lose themselves in my clothes,
‘flee to far cities.

When everything’s set
to make me look smart
the fool I keep hidden
takes the words right out of my mouth.

Other times I’m sleeping among
distinguished company
and when I go looking for my brave self
a coward I don’t know appears
whispering to my skeleton
that he must be careful.

When a decent house starts burning
instead of the firemen I call
an arsonist runs up
and turns out to be me. I’m in disorder.
What must I do to settle my mind?
How can I redeem myself?
* * *

All the books I read
celebrate bright heroes
forever sure of themselves:
I die of envy for them,
and at movies filled with wind and bullets
watch the horseman jealously;
I'm even jealous of the horse.

But when I call for a hero
out comes my old lazy slobbering self,
and I never know who I am,
ever know how many I am or will be.
I'd like to ring a bell and summon the real me.
When I'm needed
I shouldn't disappear.

When I write I'm absent
and when I come back I've gone:
gone off to see if other folk
go through what I go through,
if they've got so many others inside them,
if they see themselves the same.
And when I've found out all this
I'll know so much about everything
whenever I talk about my problems
it's geometry I'll be speaking.
The Disavowed

Pablo Neruda

I left her waiting in the doorway
and went away never to return.

She didn't know I wouldn't come back.

A dog went by, a nun went by,
a week and a year went by.

Rain scrubbed away my footprints
and grass grew in the street
and one after another like stones,
like heavy, slow stones, the years
came down on her head.

Then the war came,
'came like a bloody volcano.
Children and houses died.

And that woman did not die.

The whole of the landscape burned.
Peaceful yellow gods
who'd spent a thousand years meditating
got cast from the temple in pieces.
They couldn't be allowed to go on dreaming.
Cool houses and the veranda
where I slept on a hammock,
rosy plants, leaves
shaped like huge hands,
chimneys, marimbas,
all were crushed and burned.

Where the city had been
only ashen things remained,
twisted iron, hellish
heads of dead statues
and a black stain of blood.

And that woman waiting.
Regulation

Francis Ponge

Enough of this snow
beloved
for postcards.

Choose frost instead,
frost and wind
with no cloud in the sky,

serum, acid
and the charged cool air
for your glassy eyes,

for your fragile fingers,
for the discreet
snail of sex.
Hamlet

Boris Pasternak

The rumble subsides. I have my cue.
Pausing for a moment backstage
In echoes I seek a clue
To how the play's going.

A thousand opera glasses
Aim their darkness at me.
If there's any way, Father,
Please let this glass pass by me.

Your will I cherish;
I thank You for the role.
But now the part's been rewritten:
I pray You'll release me.

The play's set, of course,
The end waiting. Pharisees
All around me, life's plot
hard to follow.
White Snow

Apollinaire

Angels angels in the sky
One is dressed as a soldier
One as a cook
And the rest are singing

To you blue soldier
Long past Christmas gentle spring
Will present you a bright star
   A shining sun

And now the cook is plucking geese
   Ah! fall of snow
   Falling, no
Girl for my arms
Back and Forth

Raymond Radiguet

Eros stitched on the embroidered square
Quiver hiding other attributes

Worse
Than by bullets
This body shot with sadness
Hemmed in by 4 walls

The sun
Has eaten away part of the head that weeps
on
the rocking chair

Sorrows
Unfold in the desk
That singing
You have locked
I Will Die of This Cancer

Boris Vian

I will die of this cancer climbing my vertebrae
It'll be one horrible evening
Clear, warm, scented, sensual
I will die from the rotting
Of cells I hardly knew I had
I will die, one leg torn away
By a giant rat sprouting from a gigantic orifice
I will die the death of a hundred cuts
The sky will come down on me
Dash me to pieces like a dull windowpane
I will die of the roar of voices
Bursting my ears
I will die of insensible wounds
Inflicted two hours before dawn
In the general slaughter
I will die unaware
That I am dying, I will die
Swallowed up by dry rot
Mummified in meters of decaying cotton
I will die drowned in midnight oil
Trampled under the feet of indifferent beasts
Then by different beasts
I will die naked, swaddled in bloody linen
Or sewn in a sackcloth belly with the gills of razors
I will die perhaps without anyone's making much fuss
Over polishing my toenails
Hands filled with tears
Hands full of tears
I will die when they slice away
The lids of my eyes under a raving sun
When they hold my ears and pour in slowly
Their boasts of vile accomplishments
I will die of seeing children tormented
And men gone pale with shock
I will die eaten alive
By worms, I will die
Hands bound beneath the cataract
Burned to a crisp in this dismal fire
I will die, some of me, more,
Dispassionate yet fascinated
Then when it's all done
I will die.
The Spiders

Boris Vian

Into houses where children are dying
The old people lug their bodies
They sit in the waiting room
Canes between black knees
They listen, shaking heads
Whenever the child coughs
Then their hands snatch at their hearts
And become huge yellow spiders
Rising feebly like butterflies
And stumbling against one another on the ceiling
Faintly they smile
And the coughs of the child stop
And those huge yellow spiders
Rest trembling
On handles of polished boxwood
On the canes between their hard knees
Then when the child is dead
They get up and go somewhere else
I Don’t Want to Die

Boris Vian

I don’t want to die
Before I’ve seen
The black dogs of Mexico
Sleeping without dreams
Bare-assed apes
Who devour the tropics
Silver spiders acrouch
On their nests of bubbles
I don’t want to die
Without knowing
If the moon’s round face
Beneath its fake nickel look
Has a point
If the sun is cold
If there are really
Just four seasons
Without having gone out
On the town
Wearing a dress
Without having peeked
Into sewers
Without having poked
My dick where it doesn’t belong
I don’t want to hit the end
Ignorant of leprosy
Not knowing
The seven diseases
One catches down there
Good or bad
What do I care
If if if I knew
Got it firsthand
Not to mention
All I've learned
All I like
Everything that's pleased me
The sea's green bottom
Where stalks of seaweed waltz
On wavering sand
Burnt grass of June
Earth crackling
Smell of evergreens.
And her kisses
Kisses here and kisses there
My belle's coming
My bear cub, my Ursula
I don't want to die
Without having consumed
Her mouth with mine
Used up her body with my hands
The rest with my eyes
Respectfully
I won't say any more
I don't want to die
Till someone's invented
Immortal roses
Two-hour days
Seas on mountains
Mountains in seas
An end to pain
Newspapers in full color
All the children happy
And so many other tricks
Up the sleeves
Of ingenious engineers
Gay gardeners
Care-full socialists
Urbane urbanists
And thoughtful thinkers
So much to see
T'see and t'hear
So much t'look forward to
There in the night

Myself, I see the end coming
Grumbling as it hauls itself along
Rotten jaws
Taking me in
Its froglike embrace

I don't want to die
No sir no ma'am
Before I've tried
The taste that torments me
The strongest taste of all
I don't want to die
Till I have on my tongue
The tang of death....
This edition is limited to 60 copies.

This is number 6.