

Q U A R T E R L Y
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FOR ADVANCED EFL LEARNERS

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Correspondence: tarisz@hotmail.com

Living in the Country

by James Stern

I had the good fortune to live in the country until after I came of age. I could recognize and name most of the wild flowers of Ireland, ride a horse and milk a cow, before I went to school. I believe that to have had no kinship with nature in childhood, no relationship with the earth or animals, with growth and the seasons, is a serious, even dangerous privation. As is that even rarer commodity, silence.

Silence, God knows, is hard to find anywhere today, and to live peacefully in the country is becoming increasingly difficult. By country I mean an area not isolated yet removed from the sight of a car park, the roar of helicopters, fro canned music, and the fumes of petrol.

For the past fifteen years my wife and I have lived on a lane in a hamlet (adult population: 20) one hundred miles south-west of London. And three hilly miles from shops and a railway station. Even so, we are continually cursing the machine. And not only for the din it creates, the tree-felling electric saw being the

most recent, most unforgiveable offender. The farm combine (probably made in the USA for domestic use) is so wide that it has twice smashed our roadside railings. Only very rarely is a hedge laid in the traditional fashion, by hand: it is chopped off square and left bleeding by a machine the size of a tractor. Some machines even curse each other, which in turn provokes howls of rage from viewers of television in this house. When the herd of cows is being milked (electrically, I hate to think what our cowman in Meath would have said to that!), it snows and crackles with lightning on the Box. Of course we curse the motor car as well, but *sotto voce*, for we are obliged to keep one. I say obliged because we are now reduced to one delivery a week, from the grocer. I also have an elderly bicycle on which I can reach the nearest of six public houses in fifteen to twenty minutes, depending on the wind. Pub life in the country is most important. Here in half an hour, from men he sees at no other place or time, the Regular can learn the local opinions of the Prime Minister, of inflation, of Great Britain and the Common Market; he will hear who has just given birth, gone bankrupt, married, died, been killed or maimed in a car crash, who taken to the hospital ('they didn't say what with, mind!'): whose wife has run away with whom; the condition of the surrounding soil and crops; with shop or cottage is up for sale, plus approximate prices – 'Course, that's only what I 'eard, mind!' – 'Ah,

and you be ‘ard o’ ‘earing, or so I’ve ‘eard! (Roars of mirth.) After a beery, smoky, informative, cheerful, almost embarrassingly masculine half-hour, I have to push a bike a good three-quarters of the way home, the hills are that long. Actually, whenever possible I prefer to walk. It is good country walking provided one is not inclined to run short of breath. From my study windows in winter, when the one great walnut is naked, we can see across the valley over field after field of grass, as far as the horizon of blue, the distant downs. And up there, on the Roman road, stands a solitary milestone: HYDE PARK CORNER XCVII MILES.

Some years ago a novelist from New York City paid us a visit. After standing at the windows for a couple of minutes he finally declared ‘Golly, all that *green!* Say, what do you do when you want to talk to someone?’ My wife, I said, solves that problem. Anyway, we do have neighbors. Our nearest on one side (until her recent untimely death) was a widow whose love of talk was surpassed only by her hatred of work. On the other side lives Harold, son of a retired gamekeeper, an eminently useful self-employed jack-of-all-trades, whose countryman’s ear and eye are as alert as mind. He and the farmer up the hill, who owns all the land in the immediate neighborhood, are the only natives. The cowman and his wife are evacuees from the Blitz. Of the three cottages beyond Harold, one is a survivor

from the 1830’s; another, not so long ago, was a pub. Today – transformed out of all recognition, covered in clematis and roses and surrounded by lawn and flowering shrubs – each cottage is inhabited by a widow, the one a highly-valued ex-matron of the hospital, the other an indefatigable pony-club-committee lady rarely seen out of her garden or her car. The third cottage, after the death three years ago of a dear man whose one passion, to the delight of us all, was the growing of vegetables, has been bought by an urban architect, who converted it into something for which today only an architect could obtain permission. The building is left uninhabited except for possibly three weeks a year. Finally, round the corner from us in what was once the bakery, lives another lone lady, a passionate lover of animals and a voracious reader. A semi-recluse save when someone is ill, she keeps a rare species of sheep with four curving horns, pigeons, mina birds, several large ducks, a beautiful cat, and a very jealous parrot whose single greeting is a harsh: ‘Get-outa-here!’ This neighbor is also the grateful customer of the miraculous Mobile Library, that huge brown book-filled room on wheels which pulls up in the mud outside the cowman’s thatched cottage on the morning of every other Monday. Like everyone else bar the farmer and his family, she gardens when whether permits and talks gardening when it doesn’t. And everyone except ourselves owns at least one barking

dog.

What we do own is a small sixteenth-century manor house with an acre or two on both sides of the lane. On the south side is an orchard of ancient apple trees and a paddock on which our farmer grazes his heifers and his eldest daughter-in-law, when grass is scarce, her two young bay horses. On the north side, on a well-drained slope of greensand facing south, lies the kitchen garden where we used to grow not only most of the vegetables we needed, but soft fruit (for the freezer) as well. Until we ourselves grew old.

It was at about this time that the 'media' began to inform us all that we were living in an Affluent Society. I used to think that as a child before the Kaiser's War I had witnessed some effect of affluence at close quarters. But on my knees in the fruit-cage here one hot summer's afternoon, I began to wonder. Hearing the cowman's two boys talking a few yards down the lane: 'How about picking some strawberries?' I canned. The familiar local grunt meant that they were not interested.

'You can have as many as you can eat,' I said.

Grunt.

'Where are you going?'

'Up ver hill.'

'What for?'

'Watch ver traffic.'

There's the rub. Next season we abandoned the fruit-

cage.

As recently as fifty years ago this hamlet provided the labour for several large estates, notably those of a Palladian mansion a couple of miles to the north of us and an eighteenth-century castle an equal distance to the south. Today the mansion has been converted into flats for retired Gentle Folk, and the castle has become a thriving public school for Girls. Between them these great houses, which were empty when we arrived, absorb almost all the labour in the area.

One of the very few echoes of those all-but-forgotten days can still be heard on Saturday afternoons in the season, when the country calm (assuming it is not already being shattered by combines and tractors) is punctured by gunfire, and the skyline above us becomes suddenly alive with both birds and beaters. Many of the surviving pheasants, sailing noisily downwind, take refuge on our land. Here, at various times during the 1960's I have seen deer, snipe, woodcock, partridge, hares, and thousands of pigeons. During the last five years only the deer (to the farmers' fury) have increased. Woodcock, snipe and partridge are seldom seen, while the hare has vanished to be replaced by the rabbit. A feeble breed, this post-myxomatosis animal lives largely above ground until the doe is about to litter, whereupon she tunnels a few inches below the surface of the garden's best weeded bed, gives birth, surfaces, carefully blocks the entrance

to her nursery, and returns under cover of night. What remains a mystery is this rabbit's diet. The most conspicuous shallow burrow is between our perennial spinach and the most succulent lettuce, both of which are ignored.

Rare or seemingly extinct are also many wild flowers, butterflies and moths, once the glory of childhood summers. I cannot remember when I last picked a cowslip in this region. In fifteen years I have not seen a swallow-tail or a fritillary. Even five seasons ago on a warm afternoon one could count, aflutter on the drooping lilac buddleia, half-a-dozen peacocks and tortoise-shells, the odd red or white admiral hovering for space. Today the once-despised and persecuted cabbage white provokes a nod of recognition, a lone early brimstone a gasp of joy.

How is it that we happen to live in the West Country, or for that matter in England, and not in France or North America, where we have spent so many years of our lives? To answer this question the clock has to be turned back to the year 1919, when my mother's one sister and her husband left Ireland for the latter's home in Dorset. Three years later my family followed them, to settle in the same county. Shortly before my father's death in 1958 we returned to this region in order to be near my mother, who was then alone and eighty years old. After a long search and many misadventures we acquired the house, at a price which

today would not buy a two-room bungalow. At ninety my mother died. And we have stayed on.

In four decades it is the only place we have been able to call our own, the first time I have had space for the only possessions I would be sad to lose: the books. We often yearn for the sun, for friends far away, and I for the sea, but neither of us, ever, for the city.

On arrival the first think we decided to do was reduce the size of the garden, and so (I liked to think) the endless distractions of the land. We did numerous flower beds and one large herbaceous border back to grass. But grass has to be cut, and everything man-made – from roofs to fences and oil-tanks to gutters and woodwork – has to be repaired or painted, or both. A detester of barbed-wire, I insisted on hedges – thorn, privet, viburnum. All these hedges are now so high, so wide, so thick, they can be cut only from a ladder. True, Harold is friendlier towards a ladder than I am, but Harold – well, he does not exactly give his services away.

From our predecessors we inherited a full-time gardener to whom needless to say we had bid goodbye. We also inherited five snow-white fantail pigeons – whereby hangs a tail which, irrelevant as it may be, fits so beautifully William Sansom's dictum about the short story spreading 'beyond its economy'; short, it should be enormous', that I plead permission to tell it here. In eight years those five fantails had become five-

and-fifty. At that time our Sunday newspaper used to be delivered by an enchanting innocent of ten, named Barry. One blissful Sabbath morning in September I found him standing outside the front door, gazing up longingly at the fluttering line of birds on our roof.

Barry: 'Coo, I'd love to look after pigeons, I would!'

J.S.: You can look after them to your heart's content, Barry. We're fed up with them. They're dirty, they eat the young cabbage, they love petunias. What's worse, there's no *end* to them!

Barry (eyes popping): You mean – ! You mean you want to get rid of 'em? *That-I-can shoot-'em?*

The delivery of the Sunday paper reminds me of another, more important delivery: the mail. In this age of tele-communication I still insist on correspondence, even at its present exorbitant price. In fact, as I long ago discovered, that is was I am: a letter-writer. Now here in 1960 the postmen made their rounds on foot. They delivered unfailingly within a few minutes of 8:30 in the morning not only the mail but the daily newspaper as well, usually with a smile and a word about the weather. In hard frost or snow they often stopped for a short one. In 1965 they arrived on scarlet bicycles, around nine o'clock, with, (it seemed to me), fewer smiles. Since 1970 they have been turning up in scarlet vans between 10 and 10:30, evidently in a tearing hurry, banging the front door behind them. And the newspaper, with petrol at 72p a gallon, arrives

in a separate van, around 11 o'clock. The morning, the so-called writer's time, has been destroyed. Such is life at seventy.

Although I consider myself a countryman, I often say (mostly to myself) that the only places where I feel at home, where on arrival I am promptly overwhelmed by the human element, by the familiarity of sounds and smells, are in Dublin and Paris. To this day, above all in reveries and dreams, Ireland still is Home. Dublin was my first city, the centre of life. From the beginning – in peace, in the Troubles, in wars – it was from Dublin that we always took off across the sea and on each return knew we were home. Dublinese, moreover, was my first adopted speech, the language of the rebel. Imagine the surprise and delight when, soon after moving into this house, I detected the very idiom on the tongue of the man at my bedside! In a flash we were off together down Sackville Street bound for a 'jar' at the Pearl, the reason for his presence by the bed vanished from both our minds. This Irishman's practice runs into thousands, by many of whom he is seriously named a saint. Of our local friends we count him the bravest, as well as the busiest. It was he who said to me one day of his native city: 'You'd know you're there, simply from the Stout on the air.'

As once upon a time coffee and *Caporale* told me I was in Paris. No longer, alas. The stink of *essence* has years ago taken over. The French capital at an early

age was my liberation from authority. France was freedom, the deliverer from caution, the key which at last unlocked the floodgates and let the imagination soar. Intensity of living does not depend on place: it is when absorption is such that even silence is superfluous. For twelve months I lived alone on a narrow street down which at four in the morning horse-drawn lorries started clattering over the cobbles on their way to Les Halles. The traffic continued all day. What now would drive me insane, I then barely noticed, for while in that room I was so absorbed in the farm in Matabeleland that all I heard above the roar of Paris was the occasional momentous chanting of Africans down in the valley. Such is youth.

Never since that far off *annus mirabilis* has the world beyond the window been so easily excluded. Soon the impersonal hoot of a barge on the Seine, the siren of an ambulance on Third Avenue, were enough to scatter in fragments the fragile drift of thought. Cursing the telephone, the doorbell, the Devil secretly welcomed the voice invading the vacuum of the mind. To earn the needed dollar, to stave off despair, fiddling jobs were silently accepted; the reviewing; ghosting, translating of books (often from German of dreadful difficulty) were almost welcomed; while all the time the dirt and distractions of the city bore the brunt, and the country grew into an increasingly romanticized dream. I am amazed, looking back and taking careful count,

that out of the seventy years as many as thirty have been spent miles from a cow, from the miracle of the cuckoo.

There it came, this very dawn, the first of the year – the effortless, ineffable coo heralding the perfect day. Who, asks the Devil, save the deaf or demented, would sit indoors on such a morning?

For sanity's sake I try to live according to the climate. Fine: walk. Rain: work. In England, in theory, this should not be difficult. I guess it's mostly a question of character. And of remembering to count one's blessings. Think, you might – still you may – have to end up in the Old Folks Home. Or in a city. ♦

My Secret Agent

by *David Burke*

On 11 September 1999 Mrs. Norwood, an eighty-seven year old grandmother, woke up to find the world's press occupying her front garden. 'The game's up,' she thought, as she made her way downstairs to put the kettle on and fry her customary bacon. That morning *The Times* newspaper carried the banner headline, 'The Spy Who Came In from The Co-op'. The longest serving KGB agent in Britain had been exposed. The notorious great granny spy, who had passed Top Secret material on Britain's atomic bomb programme to the Soviet Union, prepared for her comeuppance.

I had been introduced to Mrs. Norwood two years earlier by the librarian of the Russian library at Brixton where I consulted Russian newspapers in a dingy atmosphere reminiscent of an episode of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. My interest in Mrs. Norwood was sparked by research into the Tsarist political emigration to Britain at the turn of the last century and, in particular the activities of her Latvian-born

father, Alexander Sirnis. Sirnis, a disciple of Tolstoy who became a Bolshevik, had lived in a Russian colony at Tuckton House, Pokesdown, on the outskirts of Bournemouth where under the guidance of Tolstoy's literary executor, Vladimir Chertkov, he translated Tolstoy's diaries into English. He also made the acquaintance of the philosopher of anarchism, Peter Kropotkin, and worked with two of Lenin's most successful spies, Theodore Rothstein and Jacob Peters, the latter an accomplished executioner. In 1919 Peters told the American journalist, Louise Bryant, that: It was his duty to see that prisoners were quickly and humanely disposed of. He performed this grim task with a dispatch and an efficiency for which even the condemned must have been grateful, in that nothing is more horrible than an executioner whose hand trembles and whose heart wavers.

As a child Melita Norwood played happily with two of Tolstoy's grandchildren, Sonya and 'Lulu', in surroundings as idyllic as Peter's was efficient. The trees were so tall, she told me, although her mother remembered them as small. Gertrude Stedman, an English suffragette, took to cobbling and repairing the boots of Tuckton's Russian colony where she met her husband-to-be, Alexander, their eyes presumably meeting over a cobbler's anvil. The Brixton librarian insisted I took Mrs. Norwood's telephone number and I was told to make contact with her. On phoning I

received an invitation to Sunday lunch at her home in Bexleyheath. When I arrived I was struck by the well-kept rose bushes in her front garden and the CND poster in her living-room window. It was a frugal lunch, fish fingers and greens from her kitchen garden washed down by tea served in Che Guevara mugs. Over the coming weeks I enjoyed many such lunches where Melita reminisced about her enchanting seaside childhood spent among a band of dedicated Russian revolutionaries. At the time I was teaching in Leeds and would travel to London once a month to enjoy a Sunday lunch of fish fingers and greens (or the occasional kipper) and read through Melita Norwood's private papers. They were enjoyable outings. Melita Norwood had a good sense of humour, and kept up with current affairs. Her favourite television personality was Jeremy Paxman, and she rarely missed an edition of Newsnight.

On 11 September, the morning that Mrs. Norwood woke to find that her 'kerfuffle', as she called it, had caught up with her, I discovered for the first time that she had been a major Russian spy. It happened at Milton Keynes coach station (in those days an isolated bus stop next to a smoke-filled cafeteria). I was on my way to visit Mrs. Norwood when the National Express bus from Leeds to London pulled up at the Milton Keynes stop to drop off and pick up passengers. It was a routine event and there wasn't anything unusual

about the day. I had five minutes before the coach continued on its way to Victoria. I got off the bus and went into the shop and cafeteria by the bus shelter to buy a newspaper and there, to my astonishment, I came face to face with Melita Norwood staring at me from the front page of The Times newspaper. She had been accused of passing on Britain's atomic secrets to the Russians, the longest-serving female Soviet agent in the West, the spy who came in from The Co-op. I was a little shocked, to say the least. When I got to London I immediately telephoned her. She sounded a little vague:

'Who is it?'

'It's me. Lunch, remember?'

'Oh, yes! You'd better come next week. The world's press has found its way to my doorstep. You see, I have been rather a naughty girl. Never mind. Come next week.'

When I arrived the following Sunday Melita came to the door positively beaming, looking very relaxed and mischievous. She was wearing a long, tatty, old-fashioned brown woollen man's overcoat. A hat of sorts was perched precariously on her head, and she clutched a knife in one hand and sprouting broccoli in the other. She ushered me into the backroom next to the kitchen. For the first time I noticed the spartan nature of her surroundings which, to be honest, took me aback somewhat. It was rather a bare room consisting of a

large kitchen table, an armchair, a television set and a Utility sideboard. French windows looked out on what was still an attractive garden. Lying on the kitchen table were copies of the Communist Party's newspaper *The Morning Star*. At the age of eighty-nine, every Saturday she still delivered thirty-two copies of the paper to friends and supporters of the Party alike. I picked up the one she saved for me and read. The tin kettle on the stove began to whistle, increasing in shrillness as she reached down the two Che Guevara mugs she used for serving up Co-op tea. She shuffled back into the room, put the mugs down unsteadily and began. I asked her if I could record the interview but she said that she'd rather I didn't although I could take notes if I liked. It was a strange interview. It was obvious that she was still in a state of shock, and her eccentric, mischievous manner was her way of coping. I just listened. I hadn't prepared any questions, so I just let her talk, jotting down notes as quickly as I could. It was fascinating. As she spoke she became more animated, younger even, the mischievous woman that she once was, her confidence regained. When I left she told me I was to come back in a couple of weeks.

'I thought I'd got away with it,' she kept muttering to herself as she led me to the door. 'What a kerfuffle.'

Her 'kerfuffle' began in the South East London borough of Woolwich where she assisted a communist spy ring working inside the Woolwich Arsenal. Her

security depended on a parallel agent network centred upon the Lawn Road Flats in well-heeled Belsize Park. Inside the Flats, the first modernist block of flats to use reinforced concrete in domestic architecture, Austrian and German Jewish Communists, escapees from Fascism, recruited and controlled an assortment of leading spies, including Kim Philby and the atom bomb spy Klaus Fuchs. Among the Flats more respectable creative inhabitants were Agatha Christie, Walter Gropius, Moholy Nagy, Marcel Breuer and Henry Moore, to name but a few. The residents had their own bar and restaurant situated on the ground floor presided over by Philip Harben, who would become TV's first celebrity chef. Here Agatha Christie dined with known German communists and wrote her best spy novel *N or M?* Mrs. Norwood's 'kerfuffle' kept good company.

The recruitment of spies is no easy matter as Jeffrey Meyers made plain in his essay on John Le Carré and Graham Greene in the February/March edition of this magazine. Discussing the spying careers of Philby and Le Carré, Meyers emphasised the influence of both men's essentially eccentric and overbearing fathers in preparing them for the secret world. Melita Norwood's father, the first person in England to translate Lenin into English, was a member of the Russian Social-Democratic Party (Bolshevik). At a time when the socialist press was continuously raided by the

authorities, its machinery dismantled and access to paper denied, Alexander Sirnis supplied both from the printing presses housed at Tuckton House. An avowed Bolshevik, he taught his young daughter the following maxim: that 'socialism meant down with everything that's up and up with everything that's down.' A phrase she often repeated during her conversations with me. Following his death from TB on Armistice Day 1918 Melita kept the memory of her father alive, and told me that his teachings had guided her principles throughout her life. The influence of her mother, Gertrude Sirnis, was no less memorable for its persistent utopianism and communist idealism, finding an outlet in the world of espionage. Gertrude's home address became a secret contact point between Moscow Centre and British communist party headquarters in King Street, and it was used to recruit British communists wanting to train as wireless operators at the Wilson School in Moscow. It was Gertrude who groomed Melita for a career in intelligence, making the arrangements for, and accompanying her to, her first meeting with her agent recruiter, Andrew Rothstein.

Following Melita Norwood's outing as a spy on 11 September 1999 the British Government and the Security Service, MI5, devised a media strategy to handle the fallout from Mrs. Norwood's 'kerfuffle', and decided to portray her as rather a daft old lady. The fact that she was first outed as a spy in *The Times*

newspaper came about as a result of that paper buying the serialisation rights on a book written by Cambridge academic Christopher Andrew and ex-KGB archivist, Vasili Mitrokhin. The Mitrokhin Archive, as the book was entitled, was to be serialised in *The Times* over the coming week and Melita Norwood was to be its lead-in story. The 'grandmother spy' from Bexleyheath who spied for the Soviet Union from 1934 until her retirement in 1973 had topped master spy Kim Philby when it came to length of service. She was not only excellent headline material but she seemed to be enjoying herself. Her fellow spy, who worked with her controller Ursula Kuczynski (codename Sonya), Alexander Foote, had concluded in his autobiography that: 'The only excitement that a spy is likely to have is his last, when he is finally run to earth – a similar emotion to that experienced by the fox.' On the morning of 11 September Mrs. Norwood decided that this was her 'fox-like' moment and sat down after her breakfast and penned a few lines explaining why she had spied for the Soviet Union over a thirtynine year period. The Soviet Union she portrayed would be little more than the embodiment of Clement Attlee's post-war Labour Government; atomic espionage analogous facing up to New Labour or Conservative Party attacks on benefit scroungers, illegal immigrants and the National Health Service. Then kitted out spotlessly in a white blouse and beige skirt she carefully applied her lipstick before

making a dramatic entry into her cherished rose garden resplendent in its second autumnal bloom. The gasp from the assembled press crew emboldened her. You could have heard a pin drop when she read her statement to the press:

I'm eighty-seven, and unfortunately my memory is not what it was. I did what I did not to make money, but to help prevent the defeat of a new system which had, at great cost, given ordinary people food and fares which they could afford, given them education and a health service. . . . In general I do not agree with spying against one's country. My late husband did not agree with what I did.

She smiled graciously before posing for the cameras, sniffing her roses and looking very much the bee's knees, as images on Google verify. 'The Mole Who Came Into The Garden' was the headline chosen by The Independent. The Sunday Telegraph quoted her as saying 'I would do everything again.' One Sunday newspaper told the story of a recent spy convention at the former NATO listening station on Teufelsberg, near Berlin, where retired members of the CIA, KGB and MI5 raised their glasses to the little old lady from Bexleyheath. 'Cold War Club Welcomes A New Member,' smiled the headline: To absent friends they raised their glasses: to George Blake, who sent greetings from Moscow, and then to the pensioner whose name they didn't know, unmasked as one of

their own for more than forty years.

'I never had heard of this lady before', Major General Oleg Kalugin, formerly of the KGB and creator of a computer game called Spycraft, told the Independent on Sunday: But I knew from some sources that there was a lady involved in atomic espionage. I think there is a tendency here to overstate the efficiency of Western intelligence, and underestimate the achievements of the KGB. Certainly in the late 1940s, we were the best outfit in the world.

Clearly the British Government and MI5's media strategy was not working and was in danger of spinning out of control. The British have an ambivalent attitude towards spies oscillating between fascination and approval to extreme horror. The day after Melita's outing as a spy an editorial in The Independent on Sunday described her story as 'classically British in more ways than one'.

The eighty-seven year old great-grandmother, whose wispy grey-haired exterior masks a life of studied betrayal, was for forty years one of Russia's most effective Cold War spies. There has been a characteristically British touch of ambivalence in the reaction to the news: the old lady is simultaneously dubbed a 'great' spy to rank with the 'Magnificent Five' of Burgess, Maclean, Philby, Blunt and Cairncross, and yet there are calls for her prosecution on the grounds that 'treachery is never forgivable.'

The Shadow Home Secretary Ann Widdicombe led the charge. Comparisons were made between Mrs. Norwood's spying activities and the atrocities committed by the Chilean dictator, General Pinochet, then being held in Britain pending a claim for extradition to Spain for crimes against humanity. If Mrs. Norwood was too old to be prosecuted, then so too was the kindly old General. The Home Secretary, Jack Straw, was accused of double standards. Others asked why she had been allowed to get away with it for so long. Had the security services no inkling of her activities or even of her existence over the four decades that she spied for the Soviet Union? Yes, they did. Mrs. Norwood had been investigated by MI5 on no less than six occasions, including an extended investigation in 1965. Her "kerfuffle" had obviously ruffled more feathers than MI5 was prepared to admit in 1999; nor was she simply a dotty old lady. 'I thought I'd got away with it,' she would often repeat shaking her head. The truth of the matter was she had. ♦

Baudelaire's Mistress

by *James MacManus*

The Eurostar from London to Paris takes just over two hours and in that time the elderly man in the seat opposite consumes a bottle of Côte du Rhône. He's an academic going to what he calls a 'mumbo-jumbo' two-day conference. I get the impression the train trip is going to be the best part of his weekend. My time in Paris is partly to be spent finding out what is left of the nineteenth-century city that created and shaped France's greatest poet, Charles Baudelaire. More importantly I want to try and throw light on the central mystery of Baudelaire's life: his long and passionate affair with the woman he called his Black Venus, Jeanne Duval. The most unlikely lovers in literature lived together for twenty years from 1842 in a relationship which destroyed Baudelaire as a man but made him a great poet.

The woman who became such a creative and disruptive force in Baudelaire's life was a voluptuous Creole beauty whose origins are as mysterious as the hypnotic effect she had on the young poet.

Most historians conclude that she came from the Caribbean, possibly Haiti, the progeny of a mixed race marriage, perhaps between a French planter and a slave. What we do know is that she arrived in Paris in 1840 when she was about twenty years old.

Baudelaire first saw his Black Venus on stage in a small cabaret club at the bottom end of the Champs Élysees one night. She only had a one line part but it was enough. He was captivated. The next day she agreed to move into his apartment on the Île Saint-Louis.

It was not long before Duval introduced her lover to opium, then fashionably taken in liquid form as laudanum. He rapidly became an addict and the two lovers embarked on a lavish lifestyle that quickly depleted the substantial fortune Baudelaire had inherited from his father. Duval also started a long series of affairs in which she betrayed him both with his friends and complete strangers.

Why then did Baudelaire remain with her? Why did he say, as he was dying, that he had had only two responsibilities in his life – to his art and to his Black Venus?

Above all what was it in Jeanne Duval that inspired the poet to place at the heart of *Les Fleurs de Mal*, the cycle of sensuous poems which are all about her and describe her in explicit terms?

Was it just lust for a voluptuous woman who

attracted the attention of all who saw her? His poems tell us he was enraptured with her sensuality, by her prominent breasts, her tresses of long black hair, and by the dark eyes that he described as ‘black chimneys that vent fire and smoke from the furnace of her soul.’

History has not been kind to Jeanne Duval. She has been dismissed as a wanton, a slut and little more than a thief and prostitute by literary critics and Baudelaire’s biographers.

But to his dying day Charles Baudelaire remained loyal to his Black Venus. Even when on his death bed he was trying to borrow yet more money to pay for her medical bills.

Why?

That is the question that has brought me to Paris.

We reach the Gare du Nord station where in 1864 Charles Baudelaire had taken the train to Brussels in a futile attempt to find some respite from creditors, illness and artistic failure. Paris was then at the height of its Second Empire fame as Europe’s City of Light. The poet returned from his self-imposed exile two years later, a hollowed out, shrunken figure known only, if at all, for his translation into French of Edgar Allan Poe. As his life drew to a close Baudelaire found only darkness in a city that he had loved from childhood and that had inspired much of his great poetry. In lines dedicated to the great Victor Hugo he described Paris as:

*Pulsating city overrun with dreams
Where phantoms tug your sleeve by day
And the city's deepest secrets stream
Like the lifeblood of a sleeping giant.*

Paris was Baudelaire's lifeblood, his passion, his paradise of pleasure as a young man and, as he grew up, the source of the artistic genius that gave us *Les Fleurs du Mal*, a slim volume of poems that is as breathtakingly original and shocking today as it was when published – and banned – in 1857. Yet Paris was also the poet's downfall. The teeming slums of the left bank in the 1840s when the poet reached his majority were notorious for brothels whose women were riddled with venereal disease. In the bars and cafés opium and hashish were taken openly and sexual favours exchanged for a glass or two of wine. Baudelaire, like most of the writers and artists of the days, loved the sleazy charms of the tangle of streets and alleyways on the Left Bank. Their evenings were spent in cafés such as *Le Procope* in the Rue de L'Ancienne Comédie in the 7th Arrondissement.

To my surprise *Le Procope* still exists. It was there I head first to find a fashionable tourist restaurant adorned outside with national flags and prominent claims that Robespierre, Napoleon and Balzac are among former patrons. But when I enquire about

Baudelaire, the smart young Frenchman on reception denies that the poet had ever visited the establishment.

Wondering at such nonsense – how could he possibly know? – I walk the short distance to Baudelaire's birthplace, No 17, Rue Hautefeuille, in the 6th. The street is still there but it was bisected in the 1850s by Boulevard Saint-Germain when Paris was brutally but brilliantly remodelled by Baron Haussmann. The house where Baudelaire was born is long gone. There is not even a plaque to mark where it once stood.

At the end of a dispiriting day in a city that seems to have become a metro Disneyland for tourists I finally find part of an answer to my question at No 1, Rue de Dôme close to the Place de L'Étoile, in the 16th. In this very house Baudelaire died, with a smile on his face we are told, in the arms of his mother in August 1867, aged fifty. He was bankrupt, his poetry scorned and his publisher in gaol. Even his translations of Poe were out of print. There is a fine plaque here, the only one in Paris as far as I could discover, to a man that his fellow poet Rimbaud called 'a True God.'

If Baudelaire did indeed smile at the approach of death it was because he was with the woman he adored above all other, his mother, Caroline Aupick. For two of the happiest years of his life, from the age of five to seven, after the death of his father, he lived alone with her. Mother and son did everything together from breakfast to the goodnight embrace before she would

depart for dinner, the theatre or the opera.

It was to this enchanted period of his life that Baudelaire would return with longing in later years, torturing himself with the memory of a childhood fairyland as he struggled against poverty and ill health.

Baudelaire's obsession with his mother and the sheer intensity of his filial devotion, were unusual even in a child of his age. When she remarried a handsome army officer the young Baudelaire was devastated and is said to have locked their bedroom door and thrown the key away. He could hardly bring himself to forgive his betrayal by a woman he loved so deeply.

Caroline Baudelaire was an attractive woman with a good figure who delighted in dressing in her finery when going out at night. Her six-year-old son drank in the sight of velvet, silk and satin dresses, the sparkle of her jewellery and scent of her perfume, the flutter of the ribbons in her hair, the soft feel of the furs she wore, and the mammary warmth of the goodnight kiss as he buried his face in her bosom.

These were Baudelaire's years of paradise, until the spell was broken when his mother remarried. And when he looked back with longing at his childhood it was Duval who helped him recreate the joy he had experienced there.

Jeanne Duval was no fool despite the vilification she received both from her contemporaries and has suffered

from literary historians ever since. She understood that the well spring of Baudelaire's creative art lay in his recall of the sensual pleasures of childhood, when he and his widowed mother spent every waking hour together.

In a famous poem that was to be banned, 'Les Bijoux', the poet describes almost despairingly his pleasure at seeing light refracted through jewellery on his lover's brown skin, hearing soft music as her jewels moved against her naked body, and the delicate aromas he found when inhaling the milky perfume of her breasts.

But whether she knew it or not, Duval was much more than a reminder of the scented memories of Baudelaire's childhood. She invoked in him feelings of pity, despair, lust, and betrayal – the commanding themes of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

Baudelaire's poetry flows from the dark corners of the human heart and shows us the shame, the squalor and the vice that he found there. He recognises human frailty and the power of evil, which is why he is so unpopular with the liberal-minded thinkers of the nineteenth century who believed in the essential goodness of mankind.

As one of his contemporaries said: Dante only visited hell once – Baudelaire came from there.

And onstage in a little cabaret theatre at the wrong end of the Champs Élysees he may have seen the twin

forces of the divine and the devil personified in the shapely form of an unknown actress. In Duval he certainly found the means to recall his years of paradise as a child. Without her I think we would have been denied the glory of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. And as T. S. Eliot said without that poetry he would have been bereft of the inspiration for his own masterwork, 'The Waste Land.'

So the influence of a semi-literate woman, whose life and death are largely mysterious, ripples down through the years.

History has indeed damned Baudelaire's Black Venus but as I returned on Eurostar with a bottle of claret for company I reflected on the words of the poet's great biographer, the late Dr. Enid Starkie, who said of his mistress and muse:

No one is justified in judging Jeanne Duval since Baudelaire was able to understand and forgive her. It is best to think of her as she had been in the days of her flaming youth, when she kindled the passion in him which is responsible for the magnificent cycle of sensual love poems. ♦

Disbelief

by *Millicent Dillon*

There are three of us in here: my mother, my sister, and I.

By *here* I do not mean a space measured in yards or inches or feet but a region in time where events took place often, though not always, in rooms.

Mother died in 1983.

Rosalind died in 1996.

I have been granted survival to old age, for perhaps a day, a week, a year more, to tell of those events.

In truth I have told this tale before to myself and always ended in a rage.

Now it is time for a different kind of telling, one that is out loud and in front of others.

There is, of course, no written evidence of what happened. Still, I trust Memory not to stack the deck in favor of one or the other of the three of us, to stick to the facts.

Unfortunately, in this world of 2018 the very idea of fact has come into disrepute. Many lies are now being called facts. Like many others, I am in a rage at these

“facts.” It is not the same rage as the one I have fallen into when I’ve told my tale to myself. That was an inside rage, a rage at the past, at events long bypassed by time. This outside rage, shared with many others, seethes with the power of the present. Will it affect my story?

The first event took place in the depth of the Depression when I was five or six years old.

Poverty stricken though we were, Mother arranged to take Rosalind and me to a dance class. I was excited at the thought of throwing myself heedlessly into space, of doing backbends and cartwheels, of showing off before others.

After the first few lessons, the teacher, who was as well the director of the school, announced that the students would be putting on a show for families and friends. He chose me to do one of the numbers, to sing and dance to a popular song of the time that began, “I ain’t nobody’s darling, I’m blue as can be, ’cause I ain’t got nobody to fuss over me.”

Elated by this newfound recognition, I practiced and practiced, at the same time teaching Rosalind the song and dance.

The next week at the dance class Mother went to the director and told him that Rosalind knew the number, as she had been practicing with me. He then decided that Rosalind should perform the piece instead of me.

Not a word was said to me, not by Mother nor by the

director, about why this decision had been made, except that I was told that it had been made.

I did not complain, I did not scream, I did not cry.

Did I tell myself that she was younger and cuter than I, with her blond curls and her docile smile, while I was dark, intense, and not at all docile?

I doubt that I said that to myself then, trapped as I was in an inner and outer wordlessness.

I could not ask Mother, Why?

Instead I fell into accepting, as I had accepted it when my father in a drunken stupor at night cried out, “No! No! No!” As I accepted it when he lost his job as a salesman and the rent could not be paid and we packed up and moved to another place.

If I accepted these events, I believed, the family would survive and I would survive.

Yet so malleable was my belief that now and then another possibility surfaced: Did what happened to me and what happened to my family stem from a judgment by some god or other?

Since I didn’t know anything about God or the gods, only that we were Jews who were not religious, I dismissed that possibility. Only years later did I learn that Mother, who was very secretive about her earlier life, had grown up in an Orthodox Jewish family in Russia, and when she emigrated to America at twenty, she thought she had left those beliefs behind.

Is it possible that, as a child, always observing her

closely, I picked up shreds of her discarded belief in a judging God and made them, even tentatively, my own?

It is possible.

It has been many years since I accepted acceptance as a way of being. In fact, at this very moment I am berating myself for bringing up an unimportant event that happened so long ago, a trivial event about a part in a children's musical production. It has already lingered too long in memory, taking up space that should be devoted to more important things.

You're right, I say to myself.

Yet I cannot help myself.

I have been compelled to tell it in this place where I am one of three and now must go on to the next small incident in expiation of some guilt, in pursuit of a small redemption.

I was twelve years old and in the last grade of junior high school, preparing after graduation to be a sophomore in high school.

Our teacher was Mr. Mandelstam, a man of middle age, fussy but kind. He advised us at the beginning of the year that our class would be responsible for putting out the yearly edition of the *Laurel Leaf*, a magazine containing poems, stories, and jokes.

I was appointed coeditor of the magazine. My coeditor was Jerome Rich, a tall, handsome boy of fifteen, whose self-confidence intimidated me. Though we were called editors, Mr. Mandelstam made all the

editorial decisions.

Early on he announced that each student was to bring fifteen cents to class for an end-of-year project. Whoever couldn't bring the money – it was still the Depression – would be excused. I don't remember what that project was to be, but I do remember that when all the money was collected – it was three dollars and fifty-eight cents – Mr. Mandelstam gave it to me and told me to hold it until the end of the year. I had never had such a large sum of money in my possession and I was terrified lest I lose it, so I asked Mother if she would keep the money safe for me.

Toward the end of the year, though Mr. Mandelstam had not yet asked for the money, in preparation for his asking, I went to Mother and asked her for the money.

"I spent it," she said and turned away.

I did not scream, I did not cry out, What am I supposed to do when he asks me for the money?

Instead, I kept waiting each day for Mr. Mandelstam to ask.

The end of term came and he never did ask.

I did not remind him.

Nor did I know what I would have done if the crime – for so I judged it – was discovered.

What would I have said?

There was still the question of why Mother had done what she had done. I knew of course that there was never enough money in the house.

Had she spent it on food?
Food that I ate?
Then wasn't I complicit in the crime?
Did this sharing of guilt bring me closer to Mother in my mind? Were we now, as never before, secret sharers?
No, I did not think that thought then.
Nevertheless, I am convinced that afterthoughts have validity in any telling.

There is a small coda to the *Laurel Leaf* incident.
When Rosalind was in her first year at Julia Richman High School, she had to write a poem to be submitted to a school contest.

I do not know how it came about that the poem she submitted was one I had written when I was editor of the *Laurel Leaf*. Was I asked? I only know that she entered my poem and won first prize in the school contest.

The one memory I have of that incident is of going with Mother and Rosalind to the lobby of Julia Richman and seeing the poem, enlarged to poster size, hanging on the wall. The superscription was "First Prize." The title of the poem was "The Palisades." The name of the author, listed at the end of the poem, was "Rosalind Gerson."

Did I cry, did I scream, did I complain that I had to witness Rosalind's triumph with my poem? I did none of those things. I simply embedded the image of the poem on the poster on the wall in my mind:

*Across the river Hudson
The Palisades stand
Majestic, inspiring
Fashioned by Nature's hand.
In the harbor factories are
Dulling the beautiful scene
But even here there is something
For this is part of God's scheme.
There they stay
Shall ever stay
Till Man has crumbled into dust.
There they stay
Shall ever stay
For forever stay they must.*

Not a good poem, I admit. Still, it was my poem, except for that one line about God's scheme.

How did God get into the poem?

I knew nothing about God and never spoke of God in ordinary life. But memory is revealing that the day I was writing the poem I told Father I was struggling with the line. It was one of the rare days when he was sober. It was the only day I ever asked him for help. He suggested "God" to me and I accepted his suggestion. That seems very odd to me now, as in my school life I was guided by the principle that my work must be entirely mine, with no contribution from anyone else.

In fact, I carried this principle so far it was a commandment to me.

One day, when I was taking a multiple-choice test in junior high school and was faced with two alternative answers that seemed equally plausible, my eyes fell inadvertently on the test of the student across the aisle from me and I saw her answer to the question.

Say it was *a*.

Assailed by the thought that, if I now chose *a* as my answer, it would be cheating, I chose *b*.

When my paper was returned, my grade on the test was 100.

What did I learn from this incident? I had felt compelled not to use the other student's answer, so intimidated was I at the thought of being accused, of accusing myself of cheating. Yet through this reasoning, which even then I realized was convoluted, I had gotten a grade of 100.

So was it Fate that decided my grade?

Was it Fate that decided everything?

What then about the placard with my poem on it but with Rosalind's name as the prize-winning poet?

Had Fate decided that?

I only knew that in the lobby of Julia Richman I was once again accepting as Rosalind gazed proudly at her prize-winning poem, and Mother smiled as if she herself had won the prize.

Last night, in a dream, a man, an official of some

sort, asked me how old I was. I hesitated but finally came up with, "Sixty-two."

When I awoke, I wondered, Why did I say that?

I am, after all, ninety-two. Yet when I said sixty-two, I believed I was telling the truth.

So what about this tale I have been telling, this tale that has been preoccupying me at all hours of the day and night?

Is it true or not true?

I believe I have not lied – certainly I had no intention of lying – but I have to admit there has been an omission.

In my ordinary daily life, when I was not confined to a situation with Mother and Rosalind, I was not a victim. I was not a scapegoat, I did not grovel, I did not submit.

Indeed, in ordinary daily life I thought of myself as brash, daring, impulsive, feisty.

In fact, one of my nicknames in the family was the Borge, a name bestowed upon me when I was three or four by Father, likening me to Lucrezia Borgia, after I hit another child on the head with a small hammer in retaliation for what I saw as unprovoked aggression. He laughed when he said it.

I had another nickname too, Goodles.

Why Goodles?

Did it have something to do with being good? If so, how could I have also been the Borge?

Didn't anybody notice a disparity between the two?
I didn't.

One day, when I was eight or nine, the mother of a boy named Boppo knocked on our apartment door and, when Father opened the door, she complained bitterly that I "beat Boppo up." I don't remember what the fight was about, only that Boppo was an overweight boy my age, considerably bigger than I was. Did he start the fight? Did I?

I remember that Father laughed when she left and shut the door. I remember too that at that moment I took pride in his laughter.

But there was a problem in holding on to that pride, as there was a problem in holding onto anything having to do with my father. He was a being who, from one day to the next, even from hour to hour, was unrecognizable, as if he were a collection of beings, not one being.

My confusion about him was worsened by confusion about his name. During the Depression there were so many apartments available for rent, many landlords offered a concession, three months or more of free rent when you signed a lease. Our family would stay in the new place we had moved to until the end of the concession, and then we would move again to another place with another concession. It puzzled me that in each new place the mailbox would show a different first name for the renter. My father's first name was

Ephraim. I remember his being Elliot at one place and Edgar at another and Everett at another.

I went to see the movie *The Invisible Man*, starring Claude Rains. Afterward, before I went to bed, I checked behind the door of the room to make sure there was no invisible being hiding there.

There was no one there.

Yet I could not help myself, I had to look again, to make sure.

There was still no one there.

Wait a minute, I said to myself. If the being is invisible, you can't see it, whether it's there or not there.

But my trust in logic, my reliance on the dictates of mind at the core of my being, was overpowered by a nameless fear.

I looked behind the door again.

On yet another night, when I was ten or twelve, as I lay in bed, just about to fall asleep, I opened my eyes and looked in the half dark at the closet door. It was narrower than it had been and much farther away than it should be.

How could that be? Eyes saw what was. They didn't see what wasn't.

I cried out in terror.

Mother came in and turned on the light. I saw that her face was not what it had always been. It too had narrowed and was at a distance.

“What’s the matter?” she asked me.

I tried to explain what was happening but I could not find the right words. I could only say that things were farther away and smaller than they should be.

“It’s because of something you ate,” she said.

After she left I kept staring into the corner, testing to see if what I saw was as it should be. Each night thereafter I went through the same testing but everything seemed usual. But then suddenly one night the distortion returned and once again I cried out in fear.

When Mother appeared, she said, “Peanuts, again?” She laughed as if I were making it all up.

Others, liars or storytellers, could make things up. I could not.

I knew I had not made up “Peanuts.”

Nor had I made up the terror that enveloped me at the moment it appeared, a terror that came to signify a flaw in me, in my mind, in the absolute reliability of the real.

Now, so long after the fact, now that I am telling this tale before others, a question has arisen about my mother’s laugh as she said, “Peanuts again?”

Was she laughing at my fear to hide her own fear? Was there something so fearful about “Peanuts” that she had to make a joke of it?

Did I think that thought then? Where, if anywhere in our brains, are the synapses that record the time

when a thought has first appeared to us? Do thoughts as well as memories appear and disappear by chance or in accord with given laws?

On the occasion of my fifth birthday, Mother announced that I would have a birthday party. I could hardly contain my excitement at being the one to be feted and celebrated.

Two boys my age, with whom I played, Allan and Louis, were invited, as well as their parents. (Surely other children and their parents were invited but they do not signify in my memory. Nor do I remember Rosalind being present, though she must have been there.)

Two scenes from that party have remained indelible in my memory. The first takes place in a room – the living room of our apartment.

Someone – Allan’s father? Allan’s mother? – tells Allan to “kiss the birthday girl, kiss Millicent.”

I do not want him to kiss me. He always has a runny nose and I see it is running at the moment.

I stand ramrod straight, enduring the kiss, as the parents laugh and clap.

The second scene is just after the party.

I am in the hallway outside the kitchen, leaning against the wall, holding my two coveted presents. One is a book of poems, *A Child’s Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson. The other is a book of tracing paper, its delicate leaves waiting to be drawn on. In the

kitchen Mother is doing the dishes. She has just said to me, "Since Louis couldn't come to the party because he is sick, you will give him one of those two presents."

Grasping both books tightly in my arms, I have taken refuge in the hallway.

I do not ask myself whether it is usual for the birthday girl to surrender one of her two cherished presents to the sick child who could not come to the party. I do not know what is usual.

I press my back hard against the wall; the wall presses hard against me.

I choose to keep the book of poetry.

It feels like a fateful decision.

Now in here, before others, as I recall Mother's voice when she ordered me to surrender one of my presents, I remember an incident she told me in her old age about resisting a command from her father when she was a child.

He had called her into the room in their house where he sold liquor to men in the village. (He had permission to sell vodka and other spirits because he had bribed a public official.)

Once she was in the room he announced to the men sitting at the tables, "My daughter Clara is five years old today and she can already read."

He put a book before her and said, "Read."

She said, "No."

"No?" he said. "I said 'read' and you are going to

read."

"No," she said again.

He shouted, "You are going to go to bed and stay in bed without food until you read when I say 'read.'"

She went to bed and stayed without food for many hours. Finally her mother persuaded her father to let her eat, but she still would not read before the men. When she told me of the incident, there was a note of pride in her voice that she had won out against her father.

Her father's name was Louis.

What am I to make of these weird coincidences between these two incidents, hers and mine?

In her story, it is the day of her birthday, she is five years old, and her father, Louis, orders her to read before the men. In my story, I am five years old, and after my party Mother insists that I give one of my two presents to Louis.

In her story she refused and she won out.

In my story I did not refuse and I did not win out.

Was a drama being enacted that day, far beyond my comprehension or hers, in which some unacknowledged need to placate her father, Louis, was being fulfilled by me as her surrogate, through this gift to the boy Louis?

Or was it all simply a matter of coincidence, with no need to explain it by conjuring up invisible presences from the past?

Fifteen years ago, when I resided briefly in a small

town in the South, I met a woman who belonged to a group devoted to “talking to the dead.”

“You must come to one of our meetings,” she insisted.

“I don’t believe in such things,” I said.

“You should come anyhow. See for yourself what can happen.”

The meeting – of women, mostly of middle age – took place on a Saturday morning in the living room of one of the member’s houses. I had expected a serious if not ponderous atmosphere but I was wrong. On that spring morning, as the sun shone through the large windows facing the patio, the women exchanged warm greetings as the hostess served coffee and doughnuts.

Beyond that, what little I recall of the rest of that meeting remains an unresolved duality. One part was like an ordinary social gathering. In the other part each of the women, with eyes closed, was striving separately to make contact with her dead.

Now and then, I opened my eyes and looked at the others around me. I kept shifting in my seat. I told myself I shouldn’t have come. I felt I had come under false pretenses, though I had explained beforehand to the woman who had invited me that I was not a believer. Maybe, I thought, I should just get up and go.

But at that moment a woman began to speak hesitantly of hearing a voice. It was not clear, not clear at all, she said, but she sensed that it was the voice of her father, who had died the year before.

“Don’t give up,” one woman said. “You have to keep listening.”

“I won’t give up,” said the woman who heard the voice.

“Yes, keep listening,” another women encouraged her.

Just let it go, I said to myself. People believe what they want to believe.

But today as I recall that event, I cannot let it go.

What about you? I accuse myself. Aren’t you making the same claim that you are talking to the dead?

It’s not the same, I insist.

Three nights ago, soon after writing those words, I fell ill. The illness began with a sore throat that developed rapidly into other viral symptoms. All I could do was lie about, sneezing, coughing, aching, too preoccupied with my aches and pains to even think of telling.

I know that there are some tellers who are not at all daunted by illness, who can in fact go on with their telling at a faster, even fever, pitch.

I am not one of those.

For me my sense of my body and my sense of my words are inextricably tied. A disorder in one is a disorder in the other. So for three days a fog of telling descended on me.

Each night, however, I kept falling in and out of a dream. It always seemed to be the same dream, even

though, once I was awake, I could recall none of the details except that it involved stumbling between believing and not believing.

Believing in what, I did not know.

Now that I am better, now that my symptoms have eased, I am ready to go on. But I cannot go on. Why am I telling this tale? I rage at myself.

Take it easy, I try to calm myself. Don't go to pieces. This has happened to you before. You temporarily lose the thread of what you're saying and you have to take a step back and –

No, no, that is not what is happening. Something else, something from outside is affecting my telling. Can it be that the torrent of fake words and fake facts flooding our world is impeding the fragile truth of fiction?

I refuse to believe that.

When the very first words of this tale came to me, they came like a gift, like a dispatch from the universe. No matter that they were strange. I accepted them with what Coleridge called the “willing suspension of disbelief.”

After all, what I am doing here is not all that unusual. Many tellers before me told of speaking to the dead, beginning with those in the ancient world and continuing right up to the present, with all the videos about the dead that stream on our devices.

And then there was Dante.

The little I know about Dante comes from a study group I attended many years ago on *The Divine Comedy*. I was awed by his poetic genius but as the universe he presented demanded assent to his religious belief and I did not share that belief, I was constantly being torn between belief and disbelief in his narrative.

As for my tale, it certainly is not based on any systematic belief. Instead it weaves in and out of chance recollections and alternative possibilities. Right now, for example, it occurs to me that Dante, guided by Virgil, not only encountered the dead but also listened to his dead as they spoke.

My dead have given no indication that they wanted to be heard. But then in life neither Rosalind nor Mother ever spoke about the events I have depicted. Whatever talk there was in the family during my childhood, usually at the dinner table, was about ordinary daily things, about food, about chores that had to be done, about school.

I would never have asked or even tried to guess what the others might be feeling about anything else. Mother was Mother, Rosalind was Rosalind, Father was whoever he was at the moment, and I was, sort of, I. Each one was separate, inviolate. No borders were to be crossed even, especially in imagination. It was as if there was a law –

“THERE WAS NO LAW!”

It is Rosalind, shouting. “You're still the way you

always were, going on and on with one of your half-baked theories that has nothing to do with what was really happening.”

“What do you mean by ‘what was really happening?’”

“Just what I said. You hadn’t a clue. You weren’t paying attention.”

“How could I not pay attention? It was my life.”

“Other people had lives too. You wouldn’t know it from listening to your tale. Every word in it is about ‘poor little me,’ as if you alone suffered.”

“I didn’t say that. But you do remember that you were chosen to do the part, though it was my part.”

“I didn’t ask for it. It was given to me.”

“You could have refused. You could have said it wasn’t fair.”

“Fair? What was fair in that life? I just did what I was told to do.”

“So did I.”

“Are you kidding? I can remember a lot of times you would do things you weren’t supposed to do. Then Mother would find out and she’d start yelling at you. And what would you do? You would hold out your hand for her to hit.”

“It seemed to happen by itself, my hand holding itself out. I heard the suffering behind her rage and I thought putting out my hand for her to hit would –”

“Would what? Appease her? Make her suffer less?”

“There was the law that you had to obey your mother and another law that was hidden but –”

“There was no law, I told you. There was only the question of how to get through each day. Do you know how I got by? I believed I was a princess who had ended up in the wrong family by mistake and that someday in the future I would be rescued.”

“I never thought about the future.”

“How could you not think about the future? No wonder you keep going over and over about my being the favorite. Some favorite. The Favorite in Hell.”

“You thought of it as Hell?”

“I wouldn’t call it Paradise. Look, my advice to you is to stop complaining about how you were mistreated. Instead think about the way you brought it on yourself, the way you never wanted to be petted and hugged like an ordinary child. All you cared about was having your way. But Mother was like any other mother. She wanted a child who would give her pleasure by clinging to her for comfort, who would give her the sense that she was the protector. I must have been born knowing how to lean into the power of another, how to let my body fall into agreement to being held. You wouldn’t do that.”

“I wanted independence.”

“A weird kind of independence that made you put your hand out to be slapped. And what about the time Aunt Ro came to visit and she brought twin sweater

sets for each of us and after she left, Mother took them back to the store and got the money instead? Then the next time Aunt Ro came, Mother told you that if she asked where the sweaters were, you were to say they were lost in the closet. And you did just that. What kind of independence was that?"

"She told me to say it. It was a totally unbelievable lie but I had to do it, even though I hated lying."

"She couldn't do it so she had you do it instead. And you were perfectly willing to be used."

"I didn't think of it that way."

"Do you remember that rope game Double Dutch that we used to play on the street, the one where two turners turned two ropes at the same time and the jumper had to jump between them?"

"I remember."

"The rule was that if the ropes got caught in your clothing while you were jumping, you weren't out, you could keep on jumping. I would jump and I would miss and I would always say, 'Clothing,' even though it wasn't clothing. That was because I knew you would make the others listen to me."

"It never would have occurred to me that you wouldn't tell the truth. It was the law, to be obeyed."

"There you go again, harping on the law when there was no law. There was only what happened from day to day."

"But at any moment that life we had could fall apart,

and so I made a bargain. I would accept whatever happened in exchange for survival. Survival for all of us."

"What are you saying? That you thought of yourself as a sacrificial victim? I don't have to listen to this. I'm leaving."

"Don't go. Please stay. We can talk about other things." I remember that Dante talked to his dead about politics. "We can talk about what's going on in politics. You were always interested in politics."

"Of course. I was married to a political reporter."

"Politics now is not what it used to be. Our president –"

I can hardly say his name so I make myself go on.

"Our president started out as an investor in shady real estate deals, promoting his image as a player, and went on to gain fame as a fake reality-TV performer. And now he is a fake reality president."

"We had terrible presidents before, like Nixon."

"Nixon was not like this. Nixon was a lawyer. He understood the law, though he tried to circumvent it. Others stopped him and forced him to resign, including those in his own party. But Trump's supporters cheer him on even as he destroys trust in the office he holds."

"Aren't you going too far?"

"I'm not going far enough. He lives in a bubble, toadied to by those around him, getting his information by watching right-wing talking heads on TV. Every

morning he sends out messages to his supporters, attacking his opponents and praising himself. He is a bully with enormous power for whom others exist only to inflate his self-regard. Whenever I see him on TV, basking in the adulation he sees as his due, when I read in the newspapers how he is using his enormous power to recklessly lay waste to our institutions, I am overwhelmed by disbelief. But then I say to myself, You better believe it.”

I turn to Rosalind to hear what she has to say but Rosalind is gone and Mother is gone. I alone am in here.

It's your own fault, I rage at myself. You have not guarded your own telling. You have allowed what is going on in the world to take over. No wonder they left. What you should have done when you had the chance was talk to Rosalind about things you shared when you were young. Like that time you went to that movie in a big movie theater downtown when you were in your early teens. It was a very sad movie about a young woman who died and when you came out of the theater the both of you wept and wept, you couldn't stop weeping. Or maybe you could have reminded her of how, when you were teenagers, you would go into hysterics about the rayon panties you wore, how they were either “falliedownies” or “fallieinnies.” You could have laughed together at that. But instead you have allowed powers that have nothing to do with your tale

to run away with it.

And now your tale is finished, over, done with, kaput.

No, not just yet, I insist.

Though Mother has not spoken, even in death choosing not to reveal herself, there has come to me a memory like a gift, the memory of a time fifty years ago when I was visiting her in New York.

She asked me if I'd like to come to the hospital where she was working once again, as she had in her youth, as a nurse on a pediatric ward. I went to visit her on the ward and she showed me around and introduced me to the young patients. Then she said there was a little baby in the neighboring ward she'd like me to see, and she took me next door to a small bed in which lay one of the most beautiful babies I had ever seen. She was lying there without moving. It was the child, my mother whispered to me, of one of the doctors in the hospital. The baby had been born without a functioning brain. At first, the baby had been placed in the communicable disease ward, the parents hoping – without official sanction – that the child would become ill and die. But the child had not become ill and was now almost six months old and no one knew what to do with her. My mother looked at the baby. I looked at my mother looking at the baby. There was in her face a tenderness I had never seen before, tenderness mixed with wonder. Or was it awe? ♦

Dylan Thomas: Poem in October

Tárnok Attila

Chaucer verses zarándokénekeiben a társasággal tartó (egyetemista) 'deák' azzal dicsekedhet, hogy otthonában mintegy húsz könyv gazdája. Ha Chaucer ezt kiemeli, az nyilván azért történik, mert húsz kötetnyi irodalommal egyszerű családok nem rendelkezhetek az ezerháromszázas évek derekán. A húsz kötetnyi könyvgyűjtemény tekintélyesnek volt mondható, tulajdonosáról következtetni engedte, hogy nagytudású, sokat olvasott ember.

Gimnáziumi 'deákéveim' alatt, talán tizenhat évben, abban a kegyben lehetett részem, hogy angoltanárnóm a saját könyvei közül egy verseskötetet adott kölcsön. A könyv Dylan Thomas válogatott verseit tartalmazta. Magyarországon, az 1970-es években még gimnáziumi nyelvtanárok könyvespolcain sem sorakoztak bőségben angol nyelvű kiadványok, főként, hogy az én tanárom, friss diplomásként, még épphogy csak elkezdhette a nehezen beszerezhető kötetek gyűjtését. Hogy mennyi könyvvel rendelkezett Miss Illés az otthonában, azt ekkor még nem tudhattam. Később, a nyári

szünetben, amikor meglátogattam a Gellérthegyen, ahol a nálam csak néhány évvel idősebb tanárnő kétrészes fürdőruhára vetkezve fogadott, volt alkalmam tapasztalni, hogy angol nyelvű könyveinek száma igen csak korlátozott. Talán alig volt több húsznál. Hogy nyári olvasmányként D. H. Lawrence *Lady Chatterley's Lover* című regényét kaptam, abban semmi különöset nem éreztem, ahogy a kánikulában az erkélyen napozó fürdőruhás nőről sem regisztrált agyam semmi csiklandozót, és bár – ha nyelvtudásom nem szabott volna gátakat a megértésben – joggal várhatta a kedves hölgy, hogy ez majd nagyon fog nekem tetszeni, hetekkel később sajnálattal adtam vissza a regényt, mondván, unalmasnak találtam.

Mindebből könnyen megítélhető, milyen gyatra színvonalon állhattam ez idő tájt az angollal, de a regényolvasásban(?) elszenvedett 'kudarc' sem tántoríthatott el attól az elképzelésemtől, hogy Dylan Thomas néhány versét magyarra fordítsam. Miss Illés utóbb a fordításaimat nagyszerűnek találta, továbbá ösztönzést leltem abban az általánosan osztott hitben, hogy Arany János sem tudott rendesen angolul, mégis kiváló Shakespeare-fordításokat készített, szótár segítségével. (A tévhitet, miszerint Arany Shakespeare-fordításai, ahogy Karinthy *Micimackója* vagy Romhányi József *Frédi és Bénéje* túlszárnyalja az eredetit, bár ez utóbbiról nincs pontos képem, csak sokkal később sikerült levetköz-

nöm, de sajnálattal tapasztalom, hogy a magyar olvasói köztudatban a tévhit még jelenleg is él.)

Egykori Dylan Thomas-fordításaim természetesen azóta rég elvesztek. Túl sokszor cseréltem időközben nyelvet, hazát, főleg lakást, hogy egyáltalán emlékeznek rá, mikor váltam meg tőlük. Azonban a centenárium kapcsán felmerült bennem, hogy egy versét mindenképpen újr fordítom, azért is, mert ha születésének kerek évfordulóját ünnepeljük idén, ez a vers, a *Poem in October*, éppen idevág, hisz itt a költő saját (harmincadik) születésnapját köszönti. Csiholom, csiszolom, morzsolom a szavait, szinte már kívülről tudom az egészet, mert amúgy húsz éve tanítom is angol szakos tanárjelölteknek, de sehogysem sikerül Tellér Gyula fordítását meghaladnom. A feladat ezek után kézenfekvő: megpróbálom néhány mozzanaton bemutatni, miképpen szárnyalja túl az eredeti az egyébként kiváló Tellér-fordítást.

Jómagam már a vers második soránál kudarcot vallottam. Miképpen adható vissza magyarul a szójáték: *Woke to my hearing from harbor and neighbor wood?* Nem csupán a *harbor-neighbor* belső rímre gondolok, hanem arra az áthallásra, amit az eredeti ki sem mond, de amit nincs józan anyanyelvű olvasó, aki meg ne hallana: a *neighborhood* (környék) kifejezés akkor is ott rezonál a sorban, ha helyette 'szomszédos erdő' szerepel, persze az is nyelvtanilag helytelenül, mert helyesen *nearby wood* kéne álljon, csak hogy Dylan Thomas

verset ír, nem nyelvtankönyvet. Vagy jeleznem kellett volna a magam fordításában, hogy az eredetiben, nyelvhelyesség szempontjából szintén helytelenül, elmarad az alany: *I woke* lenne a helyes formula, vagy hogy amire ébredtem, tudniillik a kikötőből és a közeli erdőből érkező neszekre, szintén kimondatlan marad. Az első sorban már szereplő egyes szám első személyű birtokos névmás (*my*) megismétlése jelzi, ki a cselekvő alany. És akkor még nem is érintettem, hogy a tárgy is hiányzik az eredetiből, nincs nesz, csupán a helyszínek, ahonnan a neszek érkehetnek és a tárgyas ige (*hear*) tárgy nélkül.

A következő versmondat, jóllehet az eredeti szöveg csupán egyetlen mondatzáró pontot használ, többnyire a versszakok végén, vélhetőleg az ötödik sorban kezdődik: *The morning beckon*. Itt van újra alanyunk (reggel) és állítmányunk (hív, köszönt), de nincs egyeztetve, és nem áll múlt időben. (Jelen időben az egyes szám harmadik személy jele hiányzik, *the morning beckons* lenne helyesen, ha pedig múlt idejű, a múlt idő jele hiányzik: *the morning beckoned*.) Így, ahogy az eredetiben szerepel, legfeljebb felszólító alak lehetne, ám ez eléggé ellehetetlenítené az értelmezést. Valószínűbb a szándékosan elhagyott múlt idő, de felteszem, az olvasó, a vers alaphelyzetéből kiindulva, múlt idejüként érti az igét. Tellér Gyula fordításában az ötödik sor az eredeti hatodik sorából (*With water praying and call of seagull and rook*) átemelt tárgy

(‘miséző hajnal’, t.i. az vert fel), ami így értelmet ad az eredetileg tárgy nélkül álló *hear* igének. Felismerését, hogy a *call of seagull* kifejezés belső rím, kiválóan érzékelteti a ’sirálysikoly’. Ám az első versszak utolsó versmondatóban (a szakasz utolsó három sora) a fordítás félresikerült. *To set foot*, éppen mert az állandóan áthallásokra hagyatkozó Dylan Thomasnál az utolsó sorban szereplő *set forth* kifejezésre rímel, itt azt jelenti, elindulni, útra kelni. ’Hogy lábraálljak’ ezzel szemben lábadozást, betegségből, tragédiából történő felépülést jelez, amiről itt szó sincs.

A versbeli én, akit jelen esetben nyugodtan tekinthetünk a költőnek, hisz a harmincadik születésnapján önmagát ünneplő költő szólal meg, tehát: a költő, születésnapja reggelén, rögtön ébredés után, sétára indul. A színhely egy tengerparti város, eszerint nyilván New Quay, a Nyugat-Wales-i apró, alig ezer lakosú városka, ahol a költő családjával 1944 szeptembere és 1945 májusa között élt. Itt kezdte el írni a BBC számára a walesi miliőt humorral bemutató sikeres rádiójátékot, melynek későbbi változata ismertebb, mint az eredeti: *Under Milkwood* (magyarul: A mi erdőnk alján), továbbá itt forgatták a Thomas életét megjelenítő 2008-as nagyjátékfilmet, *The Edge of Love*, magyarul A szerelem határai címen került forgalomba, Matthew Rhys a költő szerepében, feleségét pedig a gyönyörű Kiera Knightley alakítja. Versünkben a sétára induló költő először maga mögött hagyja a középkori városfalat,

majd a várost körülölelő dombok felé veszi az útját. „S felkeltem / A lucskos őszenben” (*And I rose / In rainy autumn*) – a ’lucskos’ itt indokolatlanul erős jelző. „S baktattam mindennapjaimnak záporán. / De már az ár s a vizimadár letűnt, ahogy kiléptem” (*And walked abroad in a shower of all my days. / High tide and the heron dived when I took the road*). Valami alapvető félreértésről lehet szó. Az eredeti itt idézett két sora között nem áll fenn ellentét, sem időbeli jelzése bármilyen késlekedésnek, így a ’de már’ sorkezdet teljesen szükségtelen. A ’*high tide*’ azt jelenti: dagály, és a gém sem ’letűnt’, sokkal inkább nyilván halászik, ezért: lebukott, vagy hogy ne legyen félreérthető: alábukott. Tellér Gyulát talán az az igény vezette, hogy érzékeltesse Dylan Thomas örökös belső rímeit, hangzóinak összecsengését: *High tide and the heron dived*. Ehhez az összecsengéshez igyekszik közelíteni a ’De már az ár s a vizimadár’.

A dombról, ahonnan az ébredő városka templomtornyára már csak akkora, mint egy csiga óvatosan kinyújtott szarva, a költő visszatekint, nemcsak a lenti tengerparti tájra, de az időben is, gyermekkorra meséire, tavaszra, nyárra, és itt teremődik meg az ellentét a gyerekkor napsütötte emlékei, melyeket itt a dombtetőn a felhők fölött megidéző és a jelen, a lenti esőáztatta város komorsága között. Ekkor, mintegy az emlékek hatásának ellentétéként hangsúlyozódik a lenti, a kikötőbeli komor idő, bár ezt Tellér Gyula egyáltalán nem érzékelteti. *There could I marvel / My birthday /*

Away but the weather turned around. „Ím, csodálhattam / Születésnapom, / Habár ború kerített távolabb” – írja, tehát időváltásnak nyoma sincs (*the weather turned around*), jöllehet az eredeti következő sora megismétli: *It turned around*. A fordításban két sorral később jelenítődik meg az idő jobbra fordulása („és a kékre vált égbolt / Ontotta már a nyári csodát”).

Az utolsó versszak első sorai megismétlik az időváltás mozzanatát: *And there could I marvel my birthday / Away but the weather turned around. And the true / Joy of the long dead child sang burning / In the sun.* („Ím, csodálhattam születésnapom, / Habár ború kerített távolabb. S a rég halott / Gyerek igaz öröme lángolt és dalolt / A napban.”) Tellér Gyula mindkét alkalommal a *weather turned around* kifejezést a „habár ború kerített távolabb” kifejezéssel fordítja, holott az utolsó versszakban egyértelműen az idő jobbra fordulásáról van szó: a derült, napos időben énekelni támad kedve a költőnek, mert visszaréved felhőtlen gyerekkorára. Arra gondolok, hogy a fordító esetleg félreérthette a kifejezést: *the weather turned around* (megfordult / változott az idő), mert következetesen kissé enigmatikusan fordítja: „habár ború kerített távolabb”. Nem kizárt, hogy az eredetit olvassa félre és akként értelmezi, mintha az állna ott: *the weather turned around me*. A „habár ború kerített távolabb” sor miatt – habár hangzásra tetszetős – elveszik a lenti esőáztatta város, a je-

len és a napsütötte dombtető, a kószálás közben visszaidézett múlt, a gyerekkor ellentéte.

Tudom, hogy lehetetlent várok el. Hogy is várhatnánk el, hogy egy versfordítás sorról sorra adja vissza ugyanazt és ugyanott, amit az eredeti? Ám az eredeti szövegből a derüs gyermekkor *versus* komor jelen, napsütötte dombtető *versus* az esőáztatta lenti város ellentéte kis odafigyeléssel kihámozható. Ezt az ellentétet a fordító kissé egyértelműbbé tehetné volna, ha a *weather turned around* kifejezést tükörfordítással adja vissza: 'fordult az idő'.

Azt hiszem, szükségtelen az egész verset sorról sorra összehasonlítani a fordítással. Az már ennyiből is nyilvánvalónak tűnhet, hogy Dylan Thomas pontos magyarázata lehetetlen feladat (vajon nem így van-e ez minden versfordítás esetében?), még akkor is, ha Tellér Gyula számtalan kiváló megoldással áll elő. Nagyon sok hangzásbeli játékot észrevesz és jelez. Például a *rain wringing* nála 'záporba pergő', a *brown as owls* nála 'barna bagoly', a *size of a snail* nála 'csigányi csak'. Mindezek a hangkapcsolatok telitalálat a részéről. Szükségtelen a további részletezés azért is, mert mindenkor a vers egésze számít, és Tellér Gyula fordítása versként olvasható, és a versegész akkor is szép marad, ha néhol a fordítás pontatlan. Amit nem tudott visszaadni egy bizonyos ponton, azt később pótolja. Például a *Pale rain over the dwindling harbor* előtagjának belső

rímét (*pale rain*) csak késleltetve jelzi, de jelzi: 'Fakó esőbe mosódott a móló'.

A vers utolsó sorai részben megismétlik az első sorokat, másrészt a költő ama kívánságának adnak hangot, bárcsak módját ejthetné, hogy az elkövetkező születésnapokat is verselve ünnepelje. Csak itt jelenik meg, átvitt értelemben és csupán érintőlegesen a vers körülményeit, a kort megidéző mozzanat. 1944-ben a Thomas család azért költözött vissza Walesbe, mert London-beli, Chelsea-ben bérelt garzonlakásukat nem érezték többé biztonságosnak. (A németek korábbi stratégiai bombázásának Dylan Thomas szülővárosa, Swansea is áldozatul esett; Swansea-nk halott, sóhajt fel.) A nagyvárossal szemben egy Nyugat-Wales-i, tengerparti városka békésnek tűnhetett, több biztonságot nyújtott. Az őszi természeti képen túl, a metaforában talán megjelenítődik a költő emlékeiből előhívott bombázás borzalma is, amikor így ír: *the town below lay leaved with October blood* („a városra lombot szórt az októberi vér”).

Az én szememben vagy hallásom szerint Tellér Gyula magáévá tette Dylan Thomas versét, kiváló érzéssel adta azt vissza, messze felülmúlva nemcsak az én kamaszkori, de minden későbbi próbálkozásomat. De hogy jobb lenne, mint az eredeti? Ne áltassuk magunkat! Jobbnak érzi, akinek a magyar az anyanyelve, és aki az angolt idegennyelvként kezeli. Ne legyünk ünneprontók: az alig több mint száz éve született Dylan

Thomas csodálatos természeti képei, nyelvi leleménye nem csupán a kortárs és a számára közelmúlt angol költészet hideg, logikus képviselőivel, Auden és Eliot szárazabb stílusával veszi fel a versenyt, de közel áll, és nem kizárólag neo-romantikus hangvétele okán, nagyobb elődeihez is, Keatshez, Shelleyhez, Byronhoz vagy Wordsworth-höz és Coleridge-hoz. ♦

Side by...

Poem in October

*It was my thirtieth year to heaven
Woke to my hearing from harbor and neighbor wood
And the mussel pooled and the heron
Priested shore
The morning beckon
With water praying and call of seagull and rook
And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall
Myself to set foot
That second
In the still sleeping town and set forth.*

*My birthday began with the water-
Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name
Above the farms and the white horses
And I rose
In rainy autumn
And walked abroad in a shower of all my days.
High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
Over the border
And the gates
Of the town closed as the town awoke.*

...by side

Októberi vers

*Már harminc év emelt az égnek,
Felvert a dokkon s a szomszédos erdőkön át
S a kagylókelyhes, kócsagpapos
Partokon
Miséző hajnal
Vízmormolás, sirálysikoly meg szárcsa-szó
S hálós móló-falakra koccanó hajók zajával,
Hogy lábraálljak
Azonnal
S az alvó városon útra váljak.*

*Indult a nap: vizimadár-sereg
És szárnyas fák madárhada surrogta nevem
Tanyák s fehér lovak felett
S felkeltem
A lucskos őszben
S baktattam mindennapjaimnak záporán.
De már az ár s a vizimadár letűnt, ahogy kiléptem
Túl a mezsgyéken
S kapuin át
A városnak, mely ébredezett éppen.*

*A springful of larks in a rolling
Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling
Black birds and the sun of October
Summery
On the hill's shoulder,
Here were fond climates and sweet singers suddenly
Come in the morning where I wandered and listened
To the rain wringing
Wind blow cold
In the wood faraway under me.*

*Pale rain over the dwindling harbor
And over the sea wet church the size of a snail
With its horns through mist and the castle
Brown as owls
But all the gardens
Of spring and summer were blooming in the tall tales
Beyond the border and under the lark full cloud.
There could I marvel
My birthday
Away but the weather turned around.*

*Pacsirta-zuhatag a hömpölygő
Felhőben és bokrok csordultig füttyögő
Rigóval és az októberi nap
Nyári-mód
A dombok vállán:
Lágy évszak kelt elő édesded dalosokkal
E reggelen, hol bandukoltam és figyeltem
Záporba pergő
Szeleket
Az erdőn messze lent alattam.*

*Fakó esőbe mosódott a móló
S a tengernyirkos templom, mely csigányi csak
Ködökbe tolva szarvát és a kastély
A barna bagoly –
De minden kerten
Tavaszi meg nyári virult mágius meséken át
A mezsgyén túl, pacsirtabujtató felhők alatt.
Ím, csodálhattam
Születésnapom,
Habár ború kerített távolabb.*

*It turned away from the blithe country
And down the other air and the blue altered sky
Streamed again a wonder of summer
 With apples
 Pears and red currants
And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's
Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother
 Through the parables
 Of sun light
And the legends of the green chapels*

*And the twice told fields of infancy
That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart burned
 in mine.
These were the woods the river and sea
 Where a boy
 In the listening
Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy
 To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.
 And the mystery
 Sang alive
Still in the water and singingbirds.*

*De elkerült a fénylő táj felől.
És lent az új fuvalom és a kékre vált égbolt
Ontotta már a nyári csodát,
 Sok almát
 Körtét és ribizkét –
S oly tisztán láttam bennük egy gyerek
Elfelelt reggeleit, midőn anyjával lépkedett
 A napsugár
 Árkádjain
És zöld kápolnánk legendáiban*

*A kétszer mondott gyerekkori tájon,
Hogy könnye elöntött s szive megmoccant szívemben:
Ez a folyó volt, ez a tenger és az erdők,
 Hol a gyermek
 A holtak fülelő
Nyarában fáknak és halaknak és köveknek
Suttogta el boldogsága igazát.
 És a volt-varázs
 Élve zengett
Az árban és dalos madárban.*

*Autumn
2018*

*And there could I marvel my birthday
Away but the weather turned around. And the true
Joy of the long dead child sang burning
In the sun.
It was my thirtieth
Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon
Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.
O may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning. ♦*

by Dylan Thomas

*Ím, csodálhattam születésnapom,
Habár ború kerített távolabb. S a rég halott
Gyerek igaz öröme lángolt és dalolt
A napban.
Már harmincadik
Évem emelt az égnek, álltam a nyári délben,
Míg a városra lombot szórt az októberi vér.
Ó, bár szólna itt
E szív igaza
E dombtetőn az új évfordulón ♦*

Teller Gyula fordítása