Classic Poetry Series

Paul Celan

- poems -

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Paul Celan (23 November 1920 - 20 April 1970)

(born Cernăuţi, Bukovina, Kingdom of Romania, current Chernivtsi, Ukraine - c. , Paris) was a poet and translator. He was born as Paul Antschel into a Jewish family in Romania, and changed his name to "Paul Celan" (where Celan in Romanian would be pronounced Chelan, and was derived from Ancel, pronounced Antshel), becoming one of the major German-language poets of the post-World War II era.

Life

Early life

Celan was born in 1920 into a German-speaking Jewish family in Cernăuţi, Northern Bukovina, a region then part of Romania and earlier part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, among others (now part of Ukraine). His father, Leo Antschel, was a Zionist who advocated his son's education in Hebrew at Safah Ivriah, an institution previously convinced of the wisdom of assimilation into Austrian culture, and one which favourably received Chaim Weizmann of the World Zionist Organization in 1927. His mother, Fritzi, was an avid reader of German literature who insisted German be the language of the house. After his Bar Mitzvah in 1933, Celan abandoned Zionism (at least to some extent) and finished his formal Hebrew education, instead becoming active in Jewish Socialist organizations and fostering support for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. His earliest known poem, titled Mother's Day 1938 was an earnest, if sentimental, profession of love. Paul graduated from the gymnasium/high school called Liceul Marele Voivod Mihai (Great Voivode Mihai High School) in 1938.

In 1938, Celan travelled to Tours, France, to study medicine. The Anschluss precluded Vienna, and Romanian schools were harder to get in to due to the newly-imposed Jewish quota. But he returned to Cernăuţi in 1939 to study literature and Romance languages. His journey to France took him through Berlin as the events of Kristallnacht unfolded, and also introduced him to his uncle, Bruno Schrager, who later was among the French detainees who died at Birkenau.

Life during World War II

The Soviet occupation of Bukovina in June 1940 deprived Celan of any lingering illusions about Stalinism and Soviet Communism stemming from his earlier socialist engagements; the Soviets quickly imposed bureaucratic reforms on the university where he was studying Romance philology and deportations to Siberia started. Nazi Germany and Romania brought ghettos,

internment, and forced labour a year later (see Romania during World War II).

On arrival in Cernăuţi July 1941 the German SS Einsatzkommando and their Romanian allies set the city's Great Synagogue on fire. In October, the Romanians deported a large number of Jews after forcing them into a ghetto, where Celan translated William Shakespeare's Sonnets and continued to write his own poetry, all the while being exposed to traditional Yiddish songs and culture. Before the ghetto was dissolved in the fall of that year, Celan was pressed into labor, first clearing the debris of a demolished post office, and then gathering and destroying Russian books.

The local mayor strove to mitigate the harsh circumstances until the governor of Bukovina had the Jews rounded up and deported, starting on a Saturday night in June 1942. Accounts of his whereabouts on that evening vary, but it is certain that Celan was not with his parents when they were taken from their home on June 21 and sent by train to an internment camp in Transnistria, where two-thirds of the deportees perished. Celan's parents were taken across the Southern Bug and handed over to the Germans, where his father likely perished of typhus and his mother was shot dead after being exhausted by forced labour. Later that year, after having himself been taken to the labour camps in the Old Kingdom, Celan would receive reports of his parents' deaths.

Celan remained in these labour camps until February 1944, when the Red Army's advance forced the Romanians to abandon them, whereupon he returned to Cernăuţi shortly before the Soviets returned to reassert their control. There, he worked briefly as a nurse in the mental hospital. Early versions of Todesfuge were circulated at this time, a poem that clearly relied on accounts coming from the now-liberated camps in Poland. Friends from this period recall Celan expressing immense guilt over his separation from his parents, whom he had tried to convince to go into hiding prior to the deportations, shortly before their death.

Life after the war

Considering emigration to Palestine and wary of widespread Soviet antisemitism, Celan left the USSR in 1945 for Bucharest, where he remained until 1947. He was active in the Jewish literary community as both a translator of Russian literature into Romanian, and as a poet, publishing his work under a variety of pseudonyms. The literary scene of the time was richly populated with surrealists — Gellu Naum, Ilarie Voronca, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, and Dolfi Trost —, and it was in this period that Celan developed pseudonyms both for himself and his friends, including the one he took as his pen name.

A version of Todesfuge appeared as Tangoul Morţii ("Death Tango") in a Romanian translation of May 1947. The surrealist ferment of the time was such that additional remarks had to be published explaining that the dancing and musical performances of the poem were realities of the extermination camp life. Night and Fog, the earliest documentary on Auschwitz (Alain Resnais, 1955), includes a description of the Auschwitz Orchestra, an institution organized by the SS to assemble and play selections of German dances and popular songs. (The SS man interviewed by Claude Lanzmann for his film Shoah, who rehearsed the songs prisoners were made to sing in the death camp, remarked that no Jews who had taught the songs survived.)

Exodus and Paris years

Due to the emerging of the communist regime in Romania, Celan fled Romania for Vienna, Austria. It was there that he befriended Ingeborg Bachmann, who had just completed a dissertation on Martin Heidegger. Facing a city divided between occupying powers and with little resemblance to the mythic city it once was, which had harboured the then-shattered Austro-Hungarian Jewish community, he moved to Paris in 1948. In that year his first poetry collection, Der Sand aus den Urnen ("Sand from the Urns"), was published in Vienna by A. Sexl. His first few years in Paris were marked

by intense feelings of loneliness and isolation, as expressed in letters to his colleagues, including his longtime friend from Cernăuţi, Petre Solomon. It was also during this time that he exchanged many letters with Diet Kloos, a young Dutch singer and anti-Nazi resister who saw her husband of a few months tortured to death. She visited him twice in Paris between 1949 and 1951.

In 1952 Celan's writing began to gain recognition when he read his poetry on his first reading trip to Germany where he was invited to read at the semiannual meetings of Group 47. At their May meeting he read his poem Todesfuge ("Death Fugue"), a depiction of concentration camp life. His reading style, which was maybe based on the way a prayer is given in a synagogue and Hungarian folk poems, was off-putting to some of the German audience. His poetry received a mixed reaction. When Ingeborg Bachmann, with whom Celan had an affair, won the Group's prize for her collection Die gestundete Zeit (The Extended Hours), Celan (whose work had received only six votes) said "After the meeting, only six people remembered my name". He did not attend any other meeting of the Group.

In November 1951, he met the graphic artist Gisèle de Lestrange, in Paris. He would send her many wonderful love letters, influenced by Franz Kafka's correspondence with Milena Jesenska and Felice Bauer. They married on December 21, 1952, despite the opposition of her aristocratic family, and during the following 18 years they wrote over 700 letters, including a very active exchange with Hermann Lenz and his wife, Hanne. He made his living as a translator and lecturer in German at the École Normale Supérieure. He was also a close friend of Nelly Sachs, who later won the Nobel Prize for literature.

Celan became a French citizen in 1955 and lived in Paris. Celan's sense of persecution increased after the widow of a friend, the French-German poet Yvan Goll, accused him of having plagiarised her husband's work. Celan was awarded the Bremen Literature Prize in 1958 and the Georg Büchner Prize in 1960.

Celan committed suicide by drowning in the Seine river around April 20, 1970.

Celan: poetry and poetics

Poetry after Auschwitz

The death of his parents and the experience of the Shoah (or Holocaust) are defining forces in Celan's poetry and his use of language. In his Bremen Prize speech,

Celan said of language after Auschwitz that:

"Only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss. But it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech. It went through. It gave me no words for what was happening, but went through it. Went through and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all."

It has been written, inaccurately perhaps, that German is the only language that allows (us?) to penetrate the horror of Auschwitz, to describe death from within.

His most famous poem, the early Todesfuge, commemorating the death camps, is a work of great complexity and extraordinary power, and may have drawn some key motives from the poem Er by Immanuel Weissglas, another Czernovitz poet. The dual character of Margarete-Sulamith, with her golden-ashen hair, appears as a reflection of Celan's Jewish-German culture, while the blue-eyed "Master from Germany" embodies German Nazism.

In later years his poetry became progressively more cryptic, fractured and

monosyllabic, bearing comparison to the music of Anton Webern. He also increased his use of German neologisms, especially in his later works Fadensonnen ("Threadsuns") and Eingedunkelt ("Benighted"). In the eyes of some, Celan attempted in his poetry either to destroy or remake the German language. For others he retained a sense for the lyricism of the German language which was rare in writers of that time. As he writes in a letter to his wife Gisèle Lestrange on one of his trips to Germany:'The German I talk is not the same as the language the German people are talking here'. Writing in German was a way for him to think back and remember his parents, particularly his mother, from whom he had learned the language. This is underlined in 'Wolfsbohne,' a poem in which Paul Celan addresses his mother. The urgency and power of Celan's work stem from his attempt to find words "after", to bear (impossible) witness in a language that gives back no words "for that which happened".

In addition to writing poetry (in German and, earlier, in Romanian), he was an extremely active translator and polyglot, translating literature from Romanian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Hebrew and English into German.

Germany and German guilt

Recent commentaries on Celan's relationship to Germany (its "irreparable offense", its "guilt" and — for many others — "silence" on the exterminations after 1945, and after the war) often point to Celan's poem "Todtnauberg". This poem was engendered by Celan's meeting and single encounter with the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Celan had read Heidegger beginning in 1951, and exclamation marks in his margin notes testify to an awareness that Heidegger had allowed his remarks on the "greatness" of National Socialism in the 1953 edition of Introduction to Metaphysics to stand without further comment.

Celan visited West Germany periodically, including trips arranged by Hanne Lenz, who worked in a publishing house in Stuttgart. Celan and his wife Gisèle often visited Stuttgart and the area on stopovers during their many vacations to Austria. On one of his trips, Celan gave a lecture at the University of Freiburg (on July 24, 1967) which was attended by Heidegger, who gave Celan a copy of Was heißt Denken? and invited him to visit his work retreat "die Hütte" ("the hut") at Todtnauberg the following day and walk in the Schwarzwald. Although he may not have been willing to be photographed with Heidegger after the Freiburg lecture (or to contribute to Festschriften honoring Heidegger's work) Celan accepted the invitation and even signed Heidegger's guest book at the famous "hut".

The two walked in the woods. Celan impressed Heidegger with his knowledge of botany and Heidegger is thought to have spoken about elements of his press interview Only a God can save us now, which he had just given to Der Spiegel on condition of posthumous publication. That would seem to be the extent of the meeting. Todtnauberg was written shortly thereafter and sent to Heidegger as the first copy of a limited bibliophile edition. Heidegger responded with no more than a letter of perfunctory thanks.

Eserleri:

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Atemwende (Breathturn, 1967)
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Lichtzwang (Light-Compulsion / Lightstrength, 1970)
Schneepart (Snowpart / Snow-Part [posthumous], 1971)

Zeitgehöft (Timestead / Homestead of Time [posthumous], 1976)

Translations

Celan's poetry has been translated into English, with many of the volumes being bilingual. The most comprehensive collections are from John Felstiner, Pierre Joris, and Michael Hamburger, who revised his translations of Celan over a period of two decades. Recently Ian Fairley released his English translations.
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Afternoon Of Circus And Citadel

In Brest, before the Fire-Hoops burning,
In the Tent, where Tigers sprang,
there I heard you, Finite, singing,
there I saw you, Mandelstam.

The Sky hung over the Roadstead,
the Gull, hung over the Crane.
The Finite sang there, the Constant –
you, the Gunboat, Baobab.

I hailed the Tricolor
with a Russian Word –
the Lost was Un-Lost,
the Heart Anchored there.

Paul Celan

Alchemical

Silence, like Gold cooked in
charred
Hands.

Vast, grey,
near as all that is Lost
Sisterly-Shape:

All the Names, all the with-
Burnt up
Names. So much
Ash to be blessed. So much
Land gained
above
the light, so light
Soul-
Rings.

Vast. Grey. Clinker-
less.

You, then.
You with the pale
bitten-out bud,
You in the Wine-Flood.

(Did it not discharge
us too, this Hour?
Good,
Good, that your Word died away here.)

Silence, like Gold cooked, in
charred, charred
Hands.
Fingers, smoke-thin. Like Crowns, Air-Crowns
around – –

Vast. Grey. Track-
less.
Queen-
like.

Paul Celan

Aspen Tree

Aspen Tree, your leaves glance white into the dark.
My mother's hair was never white.

Dandelion, so green is the Ukraine.
My yellow-haired mother did not come home.

Rain cloud, above the well do you hover?
My quiet mother weeps for everyone.

Round star, you wind the golden loop.
My mother's heart was ripped by lead.

Oaken door, who lifted you off your hinges?
My gentle mother cannot return.

Paul Celan

Cologne

In Kohln, a town of monks and bones,
And pavements fang'd with murderous stones
And rags, and hags, and hideous wenches;
I counted two and seventy stenches,
All well defined, and several stinks!
Ye Nymphs that reign o'er sewers and sinks,
The river Rhine, it is well known,
Doth wash your city of Cologne;
But tell me, Nymphs, what power divine
Shall henceforth wash the river Rhine?

Paul Celan

Corona

Autunm eats its leaf out of my hand: we are friends.
From the nuts we shell time and we teach it to walk:
then time returns to the shell.

In the mirror it's Sunday,
in dream there is room for sleeping,
our mouths speak the truth.

My eye moves down to the sex of my loved one:
we look at each other,
we exchange dark words,
we love each other like poppy and recollection,
we sleep like wine in the conches,
like the sea in the moon's blood ray.

We stand by the window embracing, and people look up from
the street:
it is time they knew!
It is time the stone made an effort to flower,
time unrest had a beating heart.
It is time it were time.

It is time.

Translated by Michael Hamburger

Paul Celan

Count The Almonds

Count the Almonds,
count, what was bitter, watched for you,
count me in:

I sought your Eye, as it opened and no one announced
you,
I spun that hidden Thread,
on which the Dew, of your thought,
slid down to the Pitchers,
that a Speech, which no one’s Heart found, guarded.

Only there did you enter wholly the Name, that is yours,
stepping sure-footedly into yourself,
the Hammers swung free in the Bell-Cradle of Silences,
yours,
the Listened-For reached you,
the Dead put its arm round you too,
and the three of you walked through the Evening.

Make me bitter.
Count me among the Almonds.

Paul Celan

Crystal

not on my lips look for your mouth,
not in front of the gate for the stranger,
not in the eye for the tear.

seven nights higher red makes for red,
seven hearts deeper the hand knocks on the gate,
seven roses later plashes the fountain.

Paul Celan

Death Fugue

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink it and drink it
we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents
he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden
hair Margarete
he writes it ans steps out of doors and the stars are
flashing he whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a
grave
he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you in the morning at noon we drink you at
sundown
we drink and we drink you
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents
he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden hair
Margarete
your ashen hair Sulamith we dig a grave in the breezes
there one lies unconfined

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you
others sing now and play
he grabs at teh iron in his belt he waves it his
eyes are blue
jab deper you lot with your spades you others play
on for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at at noon in the morning we drink you
at sundown
we drink and we drink you
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Sulamith he plays with the serpents
He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master
from Germany
he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then
as smoke you will rise into air
then a grave you will have in the clouds there one
lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink
and we drink you
death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete

he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in
the air
He plays with the serpents and daydreams death is
a master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith

Translated by Michael Hamburger

Anonymous submission.

Paul Celan

Flower

The stone.
The stone in the air, which I followed.
Your eye, as blind as the stone.

We were
hands,
we baled the darkness empty, we found
the word that ascended summer:
flower.

Flower - a blind man's word.
Your eye and mine:
they see
to water.

Growth.
Heart wall upon heart wall
adds petals to it.

One more word like this word, and the hammers
will swing over open ground.

Paul Celan

Fugue of Death

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at nightfall
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink it and drink it
we are digging a grave in the sky it is ample to lie there
A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden
hair Margarete
he writes it and walks from the house the stars glitter he
whistles his dogs up
he whistles his Jews out and orders a grave to be dug in
the earth
he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you in the morning at noon we drink you at
nightfall
drink you and drink you
A man in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when the night falls to Germany your golden
hair Margarete
Your ashen hair Shulamith we are digging a grave in the
sky it is
ample to lie there

He shouts stab deeper in earth you there and you others
you sing and you play
he grabs at the iron in his belt and swings it and blue are
his eyes
stab deeper your spades you there and you others play on
for the dancing

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at nightfall
we drink you at noon in the mornings we drink you at
nightfall
drink you and drink you
a man in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith he plays with the serpents

He shouts play sweeter death's music death comes as a
master from Germany
he shouts stroke darker the strings and as smoke you
shall climb to the sky
then you'll have a grave in the clouds it is ample to lie
there

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death comes as a master from
Germany
we drink you at nightfall and morning we drink you and
drink you
a master from Germany death comes with eyes that are
blue

with a bullet of lead he will hit in the mark he will hit
you
a man in the house your golden hair Margarete
he hunts us down with his dogs in the sky he gives us a
grave
he plays with the serpents and dreams death comes as a
master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith.

Paul Celan

Homecoming

Snowfall, denser and denser,
dove-coloured as yesterday,
snowfall, as if even now you were sleeping.

White, stacked into distance.
Above it, endless,
the sleigh track of the lost.

Below, hidden,
presses up
what so hurts the eyes,
hill upon hill,
invisible.

On each,
fetched home into its today,
an I slipped away into dumbness:
wooden, a post.

There: a feeling,
blown across by the ice wind
attaching its dove- its snow-
coloured cloth as a flag.

Paul Celan

I Can Still See You

I can still see you: an Echo,
to be touched with Feeler-
Words, on the Parting-
Ridge.

Your face softly shies away,
when all at once there is
lamp-like brightness
in me, at the Point,
where most painfully one says Never.

Paul Celan

I Hear

I hear, the Axe has flowered,
I hear, the Place is un-nameable,

I hear, the Bread, that looks on him,
heals the Hanged-Man,
the Bread, his Wife baked for him,

I hear, they name Life
our sole Refuge.

Paul Celan

Ice, Eden

There is a Land that’s Lost,
Moon waxes in its Reeds,
and all that’s turned to frost
with us, burns there and sees.

It sees, for it has Eyes,
Earths they are, and bright.
Night, Night, Alkalis.
It sees, this Child of Sight.

It sees, it sees, we see,
I see you, you too see.
Ice will rise again before
This Hour shall cease to be.

Paul Celan

Illegibility

Illegibility of this
World. All twice-over.

Robust Clocks
agree the Cracked-Hour,
hoarsely.

You, clamped in your Depths,
climb out of yourself
for ever.

Paul Celan

In Front of a Candle

I formed the holder of gold,
as you told me to mother,
gold, out of which She comes,
a shade, to me, in the middle
of fracturing hours,
your
being-dead's daughter.

Slender in shape,
a thin, almond-eyed shadow,
her mouth and her sex
danced round by creatures from sleep,
out of the cave of the gold,
she rises up,
to the summit of Now.

With night-dark-shrouded
lips,
I speak the Prayer:

In the name of the Three
who fight with each other, until
heaven reaches down into the graveyard of feeling,
in the name of the Three, whose rings
gleam on my finger, whenever
I loose the hair of the trees into the abyss,
so that the richer floods rush down through the deeps-

in the name of the first of the Three
who shrieked,
when he was called on to live,
where his word went before him,
in the name of the second, who watched it and wept,
in the name of the third, who piles
white stones in the middle –
I say you are free
of the amen that overpowers us,
of the ice-filled light at its rim,
there, where tower-high it enters the sea,
there, where the grey one, the dove
picks at the names
this side and that side of dying:
You still, you still, you still,
a dead woman's child,
sealed to the No of my yearning,
wedded to a cleft in time
to which the mother-word led me,
so that a single spasm
would pass through the hand
that now, and now, grasps at my heart!

Paul Celan

Landscape

tall poplars -- human beings of this earth!
black pounds of happiness -- you mirror them to death!

I saw you, sister, stand in that effulgence.

Paul Celan

Little Night

Little Night: when you
take me within, within,
up there,
three Pain-Inches above
the Floor:

all the Shroud-Coats of Sand,
all the Help-Nots,
all, that still
laughs
with the Tongue -

Paul Celan

Mandorla

In the Almond – what dwells in the Almond?
Nothing.
Nothing dwells in the Almond.
There it dwells and dwells.

In Nothing – what dwells there? The King.
There dwells the King, the King.
There he dwells and dwells.

Jews'-Hair, you'll not grow grey.

And your Eye – where does your Eye dwell?
Your Eye dwells on the Almond.
Your Eye, on Nothing it dwells.
It dwells on the King.
So it dwells and dwells.

Human-Hair, you'll not grow grey.
Empty Almond, regally-blue.

Paul Celan

Night Ray

Most brightly of all burned the hair of my evening loved one:
to her I send the coffin of lightest wood.
Waves billow round it as round the bed of our dream in Rome;
it wears a white wig as I do and speaks hoarsely:
it talks as I do when I grant admittance to hearts.
It knows a French song about love, I sang it in autumn
when I stopped as a tourist in Lateland and wrote my letters
    to morning.

A fine boat is that coffin carved in the coppice of feelings.
I too drift in it downbloodstream, younger still than your eye.
Now you are young as a bird dropped dead in March snow,
now it comes to you, sings you its love song from France.
You are light: you will sleep through my spring till it's over.
I am lighter:
in front of strangers I sing.

Paul Celan

O Little Root of a Dream

0 little root of a dream
you hold me here
undermined by blood,
no longer visible to anyone,
property of death.

Curve a face
that there may be speech, of earth,
of ardor, of
things with eyes, even
here, where you read me blind,

even
here,
where you
refute me,
to the letter.

translated by Heather McHugh and Nikolai Popov

Paul Celan

On my Right

On my Right – who? The Death-Woman.
And you, on my Left, you?

The Wandering-Sickles in extra-
heavenly Place
mime themselves grey-white
Moon-Swallows, together,
Star-Swifts,

I plunge there
and pour an Urnful
down onto you,
in you.

Paul Celan

Only When

Only when
as a Shade I touch you,
will you believe my
Mouth,

that climbs with Late-
Minded things up there
around the
Time-Courts,

you come to the Host
of the Twice-Using among
the Angels,

Silence-Enraged
Stars.

Paul Celan

Psalm

No-man kneads us again out of Earth and Loam,
no-man spirits our Dust.
No-man.

Praise to you, No-man.
For love of you
we will flower.
Moving
towards you.

A Nothing
we were, we are, we shall
be still, flowering:
the Nothing-, the
No-man’s-rose.

With
our Pistil soul-bright,
our Stamen heaven-torn,
our Corolla red
with the Violet-Word that we sang
over, O over
the thorn.

Paul Celan

Stuttered-Over-Again World

Stuttered-over-again World,
where I shall have been
a Guest, a Name,
sweated down from the Wall,
that a Wound licks up.

Paul Celan

Tallow Lamp

The monks with hairy fingers opened the book: September.
Now Jason pelts with snow the newly sprouting grain.
The forest gave you a necklace of hands. So dead you walk the rope.
To your hair a darker blue is imparted; I speak of love.
Shells I speak and light clouds, and a boat buds in the rain.
A little stallion gallops across the leafing fingers--
Black the gate leaps open, I sing:
How did we live here?

(from Mohn und Gedachtnis by Paul Celan, trans. by Michael Hamburger)

Paul Celan

Tenebrae

We are near, Lord,
near and at hand.

Handled already, Lord,
clawed and clawing as though
the body of each of us were
your body, Lord.

Pray, Lord,
pray to us,
we are near.

Wind-awry we went there,
went there to bend
over hollow and ditch.

To be watered we went there, Lord.

It was blood, it was
what you shed, Lord.

It gleamed.

It cast your image into our eyes, Lord.
Our eyes and our mouths are open and empty, Lord.

We have drunk, Lord.
The blood and the image that was in the blood, Lord.

Pray, Lord.
We are near.

Paul Celan

The Poles

The Poles
are within us,
insurmountable
while Awake,
we sleep across, to the Gate
of Mercy,

I lose you to you, that
is my Snow-Comfort,

say, that Jerusalem is,

say, as if I were this
your Whiteness,
as if you were
mine,

as if without us we could be we,

I open your leaves, forever,

you bless, you bed
us free.

Paul Celan

The Straitening

*

Driven into the
terrain
with the unmistakable track:

grass, written asunder. The stones, white,
with the shadows of grassblades:
Do not read any more - look!
Do not look any more - go!

Go, your hour
has no sisters, you are -
are at home. A wheel, slow,
rolls out of itself, the spokes
climb,
climb on a blackish field, the night
needs no stars, nowhere
does anyone ask after you.

*
Nowhere
does anyone ask after you -

The place where they lay, it has
a name - it has
none. They did not lie there. Something
lay between them. They
did not see through it.

Did not see, no,
spoke of
words. None
awoke,
sleep
came over them.

*
Came, came. Nowhere
anyone asks -

It is I, I,
I lay between you, I was
open, was
audible, ticked at you, your breathing
obeyed, it is
I still, but then
you are asleep.

*
It is I still -

years,
years, years, a finger
feels down and up, feels
around:
seams, palpable, here
it is split wide open, here
it grew together again - who
covered it up?

*
Covered it
up - who?

Came, came.
Came a word, came,
came through the night,
wanted to shine, wanted to shine.

Ash.
Ash, ash.
Night.
Night-and-night. - Go
to the eye, the moist one.

*
Go
to the eye,
the moist one -

Gales.
Gales, from the beginning of time,
whirl of particles, the other,
you
know it, though, we
read it in the book, was
opinion.

Was, was
opinion. How
did we touch
each other - each other with
these
hands?

There was written too, that.
Where? We
put a silence over it,
stilled with poison, great,
a
green
silence, a sepal, an
idea of vegetation attached to it -

green, yes,
attached, yes,
under a crafty
sky.

Of, yes,
vegetation.

Yes.
Gales, whirl of part-
icles, there was
time left, time
to try it out with the stone - it
was hospitable, it
did not cut in. How
lucky we were:

Grainy,
grainy and stringy. Stalky,
dense:
grapy and radiant; kidneyish,
flattish and
lumpy; loose, tang-
led -; he, it
did not cut in, it
spoke,
willingly spoke to dry eyes, before closing them.

Spoke, spoke.
Was, was.

We
would not let go, stood
in the midst, a
porous edifice, and
it came.

Came at us, came
through us, patched
invisibly, patched
away at the last membrane
and
the world, a millicrystal,
shot up, shot up.

*
Shot up, shot up.
Then -

Nights, demixed. Circles,
green or blue, scarlet
squares: the

world puts its inmost reserves
into the game with the new
hours. - Circles,
red or black, bright
squares, no
flight shadow,
no
measuring table, no
smoke soul ascends or joins in.

*
Ascends and
joins in -

At owl's flight, near
the petrified scabs,
near
our fled hands, in
the latest rejection,
above
the rifle-range near
the buried wall:

visible, once
more: the
grooves, the

choirs, at that time, the
psalms. Ho, ho-
sannah.

So
there are temples yet. A
star
probably still has light.
Nothing,
nothing is lost.

Ho-
sannah.

At owl's flight, here,
the conversations, day-grey,
of the water-level traces.

*
(--day-grey,
of
the water-level traces -
Driven into the
terrain
with

the unmistakable
track:

Grass,
grass,
written asunder.)

Paul Celan

The Triumph Of Achilles

In the story of Patroclus
no one survives, not even Achilles
who was nearly a god.
Patroclus resembled him; they wore
the same armor.

Always in these friendships
one serves the other, one is less than the other:
the hierarchy
is always apparant, though the legends
cannot be trusted--
their source is the survivor,
the one who has been abandoned.

What were the Greek ships on fire
compared to this loss?

In his tent, Achilles
grieved with his whole being
and the gods saw
he was a man already dead, a victim
of the part that loved,
the part that was mortal.

Paul Celan

The Trumpet-Part

The Trumpet-Part
deep in the glowing
Text-Void
at Torch-Height,
in the Time-Hole:

listen in
with your Mouth.

Paul Celan

There Was Earth

There was Earth in them, and
they dug.

They dug and they dug, and so
their Day went by, and their Night. And they did not praise God,
who, so they heard, wanted all this,
who, so they heard, knew of all this.

They dug and they heard nothing more;
did not grow wise, invented no Song,
thought up for themselves no Language.
They dug.

There came a Silence, there came a Storm,
There came every Ocean.
I dig, you dig, and it digs, the Worm,
and the Singing, there, says: They dig.

O someone, o none, o no one, o you:
Where did it lead to, that nowhere-leading?
O you dig and I dig, and I dig towards you,
and on our finger awakens the Ring.

Paul Celan

This Evening Also

more fully,
since snow fell even on this
sun-drifted, sun-drenched sea,
blossoms the ice in those baskets
you carry into town.

sand
you demand in return,
for the last
rose back at home
this evening also wants to be fed
out of the trickling hour.

Paul Celan

To Stand in the Shadow

To stand in the Shadow
of the Wound’s-Mark in the Air.

For no-one and nothing to Stand.
Unknown,
for you
alone.

With all, that within finds Room,
even without
Speech.

Paul Celan

Twelve Years

The line
that remained, that
became true: . . . your
house in Paris -- become
the alterpiece of your hands.

Breathed through thrice,
shone through thrice.
.....

It's turning dumb, turning deaf
behind our eyes.
I see the poison flower
in all manner of words and shapes.

Go. Come.
Love blots out its name: to
you it ascribes itself.

translated by Michael Hamburger

Paul Celan

When You Lie

When you lie
in the Bed of lost Flag-Cloth,
with blue-black Syllables, in Snow-Eyelash-Shadow,
the Crane through Thought-
showers,
comes gliding, steely-
you open for him.

His beak ticks the Hour for you
at every Mouth – at every
bell-stroke, with red-hot Rope, a Silent-
Millennium,
Un-Pulse and Pulse
mint each other to death,
the Dollars, the Cents,
rain hard through your Pores,
in
Second-Shapes
you fly there and bar
the Doors Yesterday and Tomorrow – phosphorescent,
Forever-Teeth,
buds the one, and buds the
other breast,
towards the Grasping, under
the Thrusts –: so thick,
so deeply
strewn
the starry
Crane-
Seed.

Paul Celan

Whorish Other-When

Whorish other-when. And Eternity
blood-black en-babelled.

Mud-drowned
with your loamy Locks
my Faith.

Two Fingers, hand-far,
row towards a swampy
Vow.

Paul Celan

With Every Thought

With every Thought I went
out of the World: there you were,
you my Gentle One, you my Open One, and –
you received us.

Who
says that for us everything died,
that for us there the Eye broke?
Everything woke, all things began.

Vast, a Sun came swimming by, bright
a Soul and a Soul engaged, clear,
masterfully made a silence for it
a path ahead.

Lightly
you opened your Lap, quiet
rose a Breath in the Aether,
and what became cloud, was it not,
was it not Form, and for us then,
was it not
as good as a Name?

Paul Celan

With the Voice

With the voice of the Field-mouse
You squeak up,

a sharp
Clamp,
you bite through my Shirt into the Skin,

a Cloth,
you slither over my Mouth,
in the midst of my,
to you, Shadow, burdensome,
Speech.

Paul Celan

Your Hand

Your hand full of hours, you came to me – and I said:
'Your hair is not brown.'
You lifted it, lightly,
on to the balance of grief,
it was heavier than I.

They come to you on their ships, and make it their load,
then put it on sale in the markets of lust.
You smile at me from the deep.
I weep at you from the scale that's still light.
I weep: Your hair is not brown.
They offer salt-waves of the sea,
and you give them spume.
You whisper: 'They're filling the world with me now,
and for you I'm still a hollow way in the heart!
You say: 'Lay the leaf-work of years by you, it's time,
that you came here and kissed me.
The leaf-work of years is brown, your hair is not brown.

Paul Celan