

Eugenio Montale

Selected Poems

Translated by A. S. Kline © 2012 All Rights Reserved
This work may be freely reproduced, stored, and transmitted, electronically
or otherwise, for any non-commercial purpose.

(For more Montale translations, see my selection: [Five Italian Poets](#))

Contents

I Recall Your Smile.....	4
To Rest In The Shade	5
Evil, I've Often Encountered.....	6
The Hope Even Of Seeing You Again.....	7
Happiness Is Achieved Walking Thus	8
To Rest In The Shade	9
Perhaps One Morning Walking	10
Day And Night.....	11
The House By The Sea.....	12
Another Effect Of The Moon.....	14
Fresh Stanzas.....	15
Near Vienna.....	17
The Well.....	18
Bagni di Lucca.....	19
The Repertoire	20
Dora Markus	21
The Shadow Of The Magnolia.....	25
Hitlerian Spring	26
News From Mount Amiata	28
Little Testament	30
Index of First Lines.....	31

I Recall Your Smile

For K.

(Ripenso il tuo sorriso, ed è per me un'acqua limpida)

I recall your smile, and for me it is limpid water
witnessed by chance among the stones of a riverbed.
slight mirror in which you see an ivy and its inflorescence,
and over all the embrace of a serene white sky.

This is my recollection; I cannot say, O distant one,
if an ingenuous spirit is freely expressed in your face,
truly you are a wanderer whom the world's ills exhaust,
and who carry your suffering with you like a talisman.

But this I may say; that your thoughtful portrait
drowns anxious inspiration in a wave of calm;
and your aspect insinuates itself in grey memory
pure as the crown of a youthful palm-tree...

To Rest In The Shade

(Meriggiare pallido e assorto)

To rest in the shade, pale and thoughtful,
by a sun-hot garden wall
listening among thorns and brushwood
to the cry of blackbirds, the hiss of snakes.

In cracks in the soil or amongst the vetch
to spy on the files of red ants
now scattering now intertwining
at the top of miniscule mountains.

To observe among the leaves the distant
quivering scales of the sea,
while the tremulous cries rise
from cicadas on the naked hills.

And walking in the dazzling sun
to feel with a saddened wonder
how all of life and its travails
is in this following a wall
topped by bright shards of glass.

Evil, I've Often Encountered

(Spesso il male di vivere ho incontrat)

Evil I've often encountered in life;
it was the strangled rivulet gurgling,
it was the shrivelling of parched
leaves, it was the horse falling heavily.

Good I have not known; except the wonder
that reveals divine Indifference;
it was the statue in the somnolence
of noon, and the cloud, and the hawk flying high.

The Hope Even Of Seeing You Again

(La speranza di pure rivederti)

The hope even of seeing you again
has left me;
and I wondered if what robs me
of all sense of you, screen of images,
reveals the signs of death or is
essentially the past, but distorted, rendered labile,
a bedazzlement of yours;
(at Modena, among the colonnades,
a liveried servant led
two jackals on a leash)

Happiness Is Achieved Walking Thus

(Felicità raggiunta, si cammina)

Happiness is achieved for you, walking
thus, on the edge of a knife blade.
To our eyes you are a wavering gleam,
afoot, tense ice that fractures;
so who loves you most cannot touch you.
If you come upon spirits invaded
with sadness and brighten them, your morning
is sweet and troubled like the nests on high.
But nothing compensates for the cry of the child
whose ball is in flight among the houses.

To Rest In The Shade

(Ti libero la fronte dai ghiaccioli)

I free your brow of all the ice
you have gathered traversing the high
clouds; your feathers lacerated
by cyclones, you woke to lightning jolts.

Noon: the medlar in the square extends
its dark shadow, a cold sun hangs
in the sky; and the other shadows lurking
in the alley do not know you are here.

Perhaps One Morning Walking

(Forse un mattino andando in un'aria di vetro)

Perhaps one morning walking in dry glassy air,
I will turn, I will see the miracle complete:
nothingness at my shoulder, the void behind
me, with a drunkard's terror.

Then, as on a screen, trees houses hills
will advance swiftly in familiar illusion,
But it will be too late; and I will return, silently,
to men who do not look back, with my secret.

Day And Night

(Anche una piuma che vola può disegnare)

Even a flying feather can sketch
your figure, or a ray of light playing hide and seek
among tables and chairs, the signal
from a child's mirror, or the rooftops. Round the circuit
of walls trails of mist lengthen the spires
of the poplars, and down below on its perch
the knife-grinder's parrot ruffles its plumage. Then
sultry night in the little squares, footsteps, and always
the toilsome effort to sink so as to rise again equal
to centuries, moments, to nightmares that cannot
recover the light of your eyes in the incandescent
cave – and still the same cries and the endless
plaint on the veranda,
if the sudden blow falls that reddens
your throat and breaks your wings, O perilous
herald of dawn,
and the cloisters and hospitals wake
to a laceration of trumpets...

The House By The Sea

(Il viaggio finisce qui)

The journey ends here:
in the petty cares that divide
the spirit that no longer utters a cry.
Now the minutes are equal and fixed
like the rhythm of the pump's wheel.
A rotation: a spouting of rumbling water.
Another: more water, sometimes a creak.

The journey ends on this beach
that slow regular tides attempt.
The sea reveals nothing but idle vapours
the vigorous murmurs of shells
conceive; and rarely among the tranquil
mutations of islands of migrating air
Corsica's ridge or Capri appears.
You ask if all things vanish
in this little mist of memories;
if in this torpid hour, or in the sigh
of breakers every destiny completes.
I would say to you, no; the hour
approaches when you will pass beyond time;
perhaps only those who so wish become infinite,
and you may do so, who knows, not I.
I think for most it may be no salvation,
but some subvert every design,
make every crossing, discover what they desire.
First I would grant your crossing yourself,
that way of escape
uncertain as foam or a wrinkle
in the risen fields of the sea.
I grant you my miserly hope as well.
At daylight, weary, I cannot increase it:
my offer as pledge of the fate you evade.

The path ends with the brave
whom the tide gnaws with its ebb and flow.
Your heart close to me that hears me not
already sets sail perhaps for eternity.

Another Effect Of The Moon

(La trama del carrubo che si profila)

The form of the carob tree that looms
naked against the somnolent blue,
the sound of voices, the process
of silver fingers over the doorsteps,
the feather that gets entangled, on the jetty
a trampling of feet that dies away,
and the felucca already falling back in flight
its abandoned sail in tatters.

Fresh Stanzas

(Poi che gli ultimi fili di tabacco)

At last, with a gesture, the last shreds of your tobacco
are extinguished in the glass
dish; towards the ceiling
a slow spiral of smoke rises
that the bishops and knights on the chessboard
gaze at stupefied; and new smoke-rings
follow, more mobile than the rings
on your fingers.

The mirage that freed towers
and bridges in the sky is gone
at the first breath; an unseen window
opens and the smoke stirs. Down there
another herd moves; a storm
of men who cannot comprehend your incense;
that of this board, of which you alone
can make sense.

For a time I doubted if even you perhaps
were ignorant of the game played out
on its squares, now a cloud at your door:
the madness of death is not eased at so slight
a cost; though the gleam in your eyes is subdued
it demands other fires, as well as the dense
cloud that the household gods foment
around you, when they aid you.

Today, I know what you want; the hoarse bell
of the Martinella rings out and frightens
the ivory shapes with the spectral
light of snowfall. But he resists
and wins the prize of the watchful solitary
who, with you, can pit those steely eyes
of yours against the burning-glass
that blinds pawns.

*Note: The Martinella was a bell attached to the door of the Church of
Santa Maria in Florence, rung to signal the outbreak of war.*

Near Vienna

(Il convento barocco)

The baroque convent
of biscuit and foam
hid a glimpse of sluggish water
and tables already set, scattered here and there
with leaves and ginger.

A swimmer emerged, dripping,
in a cloud of midges,
asked about our journey,
spoke at length about his own, over the border.

He pointed to the bridge opposite, crossed
(he informed us) with a single coin as toll.
With a wave of his hand, he sank,
was at one with the current...
And into his place,
from a shed, there leapt our herald,
a dachshund barking joyously,

sole fraternal voice in the sticky heat.

The Well

(Cigola la carrucola del pozzo)

The pulley of the well-shaft creaks,
water rises to the light and dissolves you.
A memory trembles in the refilled pail,
an image smiles in its pure circle.
Touch your face to evanescent lips:
the past wavers, grows old,
belongs to another...
Ah, how the wheel groans
already, returns you to the dark depths,
vision, a distance divides us.

Bagni di Lucca

(Fra il tonfo dei marroni)

Between the thud of chestnuts
and the roar of the torrent,
whose voices unite
the heart wavers.

Precocious winter that the north wind
sets shaking. I advance
on the verge that the dawn
of day dissolves in ice.

Marbled, branched...
and as one I shake down
scrolled leaves, arrows
into the ditch.

The raw ultimate
passes in the fog
of its own breath.

The Repertoire

(Il repertorio della memoria è logoro)

The repertoire of memory is worn: a leather suitcase
that has borne the labels from too many hotels.
Now there remains some sticker I dare not
unpeel. We must think of the porters,
the doorman at night, the taxi-drivers.

The repertoire of your memory
has shown me you yourself before you left.
There were names of various countries, dates
and sojourns and at the end a blank white page,
but with rows of dots...as if to suggest,
if it were possible: 'to be continued'.

The repertoire of our memory cannot be imagined
as cut in two thus by a knife. It's a single sheet with traces
of stamps, abrasions, and a few spots of blood,
It was no passport, not even a testimonial.
To be of service, even to hope, would have still meant life.

Dora Markus

(Fu dove il ponte di legno)

I – 1926

It was where a wooden pier
pushed from Porto Corsini into the open
sea,
and a few men,
almost motionless, let drop
or draw in their nets. With a gesture
of your hand you pointed
to the other shore,
invisible, your true country.
Then we followed the canal
till we reached the city's
docklands, shining with soot,
flat land where inert
spring sank,
without trace.
And here where ancient life
is marked by the sweet
anxiety of the Levant,
your words are iridescent
as the scales
of a dying mullet.

Your restlessness
makes me think
of birds of passage
dashing against the lighthouse
on stormy evenings:
and even your blandness
is a storm
whirling, without striking,
its moments of repose rarer still.
I don't know how, exhausted, you resist
in that lake
of indifference that is
your heart; perhaps
an amulet saves you, that you keep
with your lipstick,
powder puff, and nail-file:
a white mouse made
of ivory; and thus you exist!

II – 1939

Now in your Carinthia
of flowering myrtles and ponds,
you stoop on the brink watching
the timid carp swallowing,
or wander under the limes, among
the ragged peaks, the twilight
lamps, and in the water the glow
thrown by jetties and boarding houses.

The evening that extends
over the damp basin, brings
with the throbbing of engines,
only the cries of geese and the interior
of snow-white majolica says
to the blackened mirror that it sees you
other, a tale of imperturbable
errors, etched there
where the sponge cannot reach.
Your legend, Dora!
But it is already written in the eyes
of men with weak side-burns
in large gold portraits, and returns
in every chord of the broken
harmonica at the hour
that darkens, ever later.
It is written there! The evergreen
laurel for the kitchen
lives on, the voice does not change.
Ravenna is distant now. A ferocious
faith distils its poison.
What does it want from you? Not that you yield
voice, legend, or destiny...
But it is late, forever later.

*Note: Porto Corsini is the old port of Ravenna. Dora Markus
though based loosely on a real person is rather a type of the age.
Carinthia is the southernmost part of Austria, in the Eastern Alps.*

The Shadow Of The Magnolia

(L'ombra della magnolia giapponese)

The shadow of the Japanese magnolia
has thinned now the purple flowers
are fallen. At its top, a cicada
vibrates intermittently. It is no longer
the time of voices in unison,
Clizia, the time of the infinite deity,
who devours his faithful, revives them with blood.
To expend oneself was easier, to die
at the first wing-beat, the first encounter
with the enemy, a plaything. No a harder
path begins; but not for you,
consumed by sunlight, rooted, and yet a soft
thrush that flies high over your cold
river-banks – not for you fragile
fugitive for whom zenith nadir Cancer
Capricorn remained indistinct
because the war could have been in you and who adores
in you the stigmata of your Spouse, the shudder
of ice bends...the others retreat
and bow. The file that pares
thinly will fall silent. The empty husk
of those who sang will soon be glass
dust under your feet, the shadow is livid –
it's autumn, it's winter, it's the other side of the sky
that accompanies you, into which I hurl myself, a mullet
leaping high and dry in the new moon.
Farewell.

Note: Clizia, based on Montale's American friend Irma Brandeis, is a symbolic female religiously-oriented presence.

Hitlerian Spring

Né quella ch'a veder lo sol si gira...

Not the one the sun turns to see....

(Dante, in a poem to Giovanni Quirini: attributed)

(Folta la nuvola bianca delle falene impazzite)

The white cloud of maddened moths swirls
thickly round the pale lamps and over the parapets,
spreading a sheet on the ground that crackles
like sugar underfoot; now imminent summer liberates
the ice of night trapped
in the secret caves of the dead season,
in the gardens that stretch from Maiano here to Arno's shores.

Lately, on the Corso, an infernal messenger passed in flight
through cheering admirers; a mystic gulf, open
and decked with crosses, took and swallowed the bait;
the shops are shuttered, poor
and harmless though even those are armed
with cannon and toys of war,
the butcher has locked his grille, who wreathed
the heads of dead goats with berries,
the ritual of mild executioners who still do not realise blood
has been transmuted into the foul tangle of crushed wings
of insects on the embankments, and water continues
to gnaw the banks, and no one is innocent.

All for nothing then? – And the Roman candles,
on Saint John's Day, that slowly bleached
the horizon, and the pledges and long goodbyes
intense as a baptism in gloomy expectation
of the horde (yet a comet scored the dripping air
on the ice and shores of your coasts,
the angels Tobias saw, the seven, the future
arriving) and the sunflower born
from your hands – all burned and desiccated
in this pollen that shrills like fire
with the sharpness of icy sleet...

Oh, the wounded
spring is still festive though frozen
in death, this death! Your fate, Clizia,
is still cherished above, you
who preserve a love unaltered though altered
pure in what the blind sun might bring you,
dazed by the Highest, and destroyed
in Him, for all. Perhaps the sirens, the tolling bells,
that greeted the monsters in their stormy
evening are already confounded
with a sound loosed from heaven, descending, in victory –
with the breath of a dawn that rises tomorrow
for all, white but without those dreadful
wings, over the scorched shores of the south...

Note: The 'liberation' of the first verse is the imminent liberation of Italy from Fascism. Maiano is near Florence, the caves are those of partisans. The Corso is the street in Florence. Hitler was the infernal messenger, Mussolini the other monster. Clizia is leaving for America; the American troop landings in Southern Italy are imminent.

News From Mount Amiata

(Il fuoco d'artificio del maltempo)

The bad weather's firecrackers
will become a murmur of hives in late evening.
There's woodworm in the beams
and an odour of melon oozes
from the floor. The soft
smoke that ascends the valley
of elves and mushrooms to the transparent cone
of the summit fogs the windows,
and I write to you from here, from this table,
from this honeyed cell
of a sphere hurled through space,
and the covered cage, the grate
where chestnuts explode, the veins
of saltpetre and mould, are the frame
from which I will burst. Life
that renders you legendary falls short
if it contains you! The bright background
reveals your icon. Outside it rains

And you can follow the fragile architecture
blackened by carbon and time,
the square courtyards with the deepest of wells
at their centre; you can follow
the veiled flight of nocturnal
birds, and in the depths of the ravine the glow
of the galaxy, that belt of every torment.

But the step that resonates in the darkness
is of one who goes solitary and sees nothing
except this descent of arches, shadows and angles.
The stars are embroidered too thinly,
the eye of the campanile shuts at two o'clock.
the vines too are an ascent
of darkness and their scent bitter regret.

Return tomorrow, colder still, north wind,
shatter the ancient fingers of sandstone,
scatter the missals in the attics,
and let all be slow tranquility, a domain, a prison
of feeling without despair. Return more fiercely
north wind that makes our chains dear to us,
and seals up the seeds of the possible!
The streets are too narrow, the black donkeys
that jog along in files strike sparks,
from the hidden peak magnesium flares reply...
...has this Christian quarrel nothing
but words of shadow and lament
to bring me? Less than whatever
the mill-race stole from you that inters
sweetness in its closure of cement.
A grindstone, an old trunk,
the world's ultimate limits. A heap
of straw is scattered: and woodworms emerge
to link my wakefulness to your deep
sleep that greets them, The porcupine
sips at a thread of mercy.

Note: Mount Amiata is a lava dome in southern Tuscany.

Little Testament

(Questo che a notte balugina)

This, that glimmers at night
in the shell of my mind
mother-of-pearl snail-track,
or ground glass powder,
is not a lamp in some church or office,
tended by clerical
red, or black.
I have only this rainbow glow
to leave as testimony
of a faith contested
of a hope that burned more slowly
than an iron-hard log on the fire.
Keep its face-powder in your compact,
when with every light extinguished
the wild dance becomes infernal,
and shadowy Lucifer lands on some prow
on the Thames, the Hudson, the Seine,
beating his bitumen wings half-
lopped by fatigue, to tell you; this is the hour.
It's not an heirloom, a lucky charm
to withstand the force of the monsoon
beating on the spider-web of memory,
but a story can only survive as ashes,
and persistence is only extinction.
It will be a sign, for certain; whoever sees it,
cannot fail to find you there.
Everyone knows their own: the pride was
not escape, the humility not
meanness, the tenuous spark struck
there no spurt of a spent match.

Index of First Lines

I recall your smile, and for me it is limpid water.....	4
To rest in the shade, pale and thoughtful,	5
Evil I've often encountered in life;	6
The hope even of seeing you again.....	7
Happiness is achieved for you, walking	8
I free your brow of all the ice.....	9
Perhaps one morning walking in dry glassy air,.....	10
Even a flying feather can sketch	11
The journey ends here:	12
The form of the carob tree that looms.....	14
At last, with a gesture, the last shreds of your tobacco	15
The baroque convent.....	17
The pulley of the well-shaft creaks,.....	18
Between the thud of chestnuts	19
The repertoire of memory is worn: a leather suitcase.....	20
It was where a wooden pier	21
The shadow of the Japanese magnolia.....	25
The white cloud of maddened moths swirls	26
The bad weather's firecrackers	28
This, that glimmers at night	30