

Stephen Spender Prize Anniversary Readings

7pm, Thursday 12 March 2015

**The Royal Institution
Albemarle Street, London W1**

**To read the poems in their original languages and the
translators' commentaries, please just click on the links in
the poem titles**

**‘From the Republic of Conscience’ by Seamus Heaney
read by Michael Pennington
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I

When I landed in the republic of conscience
it was so noiseless when the engines stopped
I could hear a curlew high above the runway.

At immigration, the clerk was an old man
who produced a wallet from his homespun coat
and showed me a photograph of my grandfather.

The woman in customs asked me to declare
the words of our traditional cures and charms
to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye.

No porters. No interpreter. No taxi.
You carried your own burden and very soon
your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.

II

Fog is a dreaded omen there but lightning
spells universal good and parents hangs
waddled infants in trees during thunderstorms.

Salt is their precious mineral. And seashells
are held to the ear during births and funerals.
The base of all inks and pigments is seawater.

Their sacred symbol is a stylized boat.
The sail is an ear, the mast a sloping pen,
the hull a mouth-shape, the keel an open eye.

At their inauguration, public leaders
must swear to uphold unwritten law and weep
to atone for their presumption to hold office –

and to affirm their faith that all life sprang
from salt in tears which the sky-god wept

after he dreamt his solitude was endless.

III

I came back from that frugal republic
with my two arms the one length, the customs woman
having insisted my allowance was myself.

The old man rose and gazed into my face
and said that was official recognition
that I was now a dual citizen.

He therefore desired me when I got home
to consider myself a representative
and to speak on their behalf in my own tongue.

Their embassies, he said, were everywhere
but operated independently
and no ambassador would ever be relieved.

Quince Jelly by Jan Wagner
translated from the German by Iain Galbraith
read by Noma Dumezweni

In the German, 'Quince Jelly' follows the complex Sapphic form. Iain Galbraith set himself the daunting task of adhering to the strict metre of the original, following its drive syllable for syllable while converting the poem into flowing and natural-sounding English poetry.

when october hung them among the leaves, those
bulging lanterns, then it was time: we picked ripe
quinces, lugged the baskets of yellow bounty
 into the kitchen,

soused the fruits in water. the pears and apples
grew towards their names, to a simple sweetness –
unlike quinces, clinging to branches in some
 shadowy border's

alphabet, obscure in our garden's latin,
tough and foreign in their aroma. we cut,
quartered, cored the flesh (we were four adult hands,
 two somewhat smaller),

veiled by clouds of steam from the blender, poured in
sugar, heat and effort to something that – raw –
made our palates balk. but then who could, who would
 hope to explain them:

quinces, jellied, lined up in bellied jars on
shelves and set aside for the darkness, stored for
harsher days, a cellar of days, in which they
 shone, are still shining.

The Frog by Francis Ponge
translated from the French by Esther Sorooshian
read by Patricia Hodge

'The Frog' is a prose poem. Here it has been daringly – and successfully – re-cast in verse form by seventeen-year-old Esther Sorooshian.

As sharp needles of rain
Bounce from bloated meadows,
A dwarf amphibian,
A one-handed Ophelia,
Barely a fistful, unclenching,
Flings herself from the foot of the poet

Into the next pond.
Unpin her –
She's highly strung,
Her long limbs – such pretty legs –
In the rubber glove of her skin –
No meat on them; lithe
With a grace I've seldom seen
In fish or fowl. Like mercury,

She slips through my fingers.
Engorged,
Alive,
Panting,
Her fat, beating heart.
Her shrivelled eyelids,
And drooping mouth
Move me to let her go.

The Collar (anon)

translated from the Anglo-Saxon by Meghan Purvis

read by Patricia Hodge

Meghan Purvis was drawn to Beowulf because although its world is violent, feudal, and supernatural, it is also concerned with very modern questions: do we evaluate a person's actions by words or by deeds? How do we value the ties that connect us? Is it possible to admire a hero while questioning his heroics?

Eagles hunt high. Their feathers glint gold against the sun,
mica among the loam-specks of crows a sky-current below.
They hunt by sight – a rabbit tensing to the ground, grass tenting
over a field-mouse's flight – or light against a gold collar,

a signal-fire gone wild to an empty sky. Coast closer.
The collar sits on Hygelac still, prideful where he clasped it
that dark morning, waves pushing him towards Frisia.
He fell under his shield, and his people's flag covers them both.

A hand covers the collar and the eagle loses interest,
Franks come for golden carrion once the bravery of battle is gone.
Hygelac's men sleep with him still, downed scarecrows
guarding a field of corpses. The wind has changed.

Omolkaanthi by Nirendranath Chakraborty
translated from the Bengali by Damayanti Chatterjee
read by Noma Dumezweni

Damayanti Chatterjee chose this poem because of the story it tells about an ordinary person who wanted to do something extraordinary. Although the poem appears simple, it has many layers; a Bangla expert described Damayanti's translation as a remarkable effort for a 12 year old.

Omolkaanthi, my friend,
We went to school together,
He always arrived late,
And he never tested well,
When asked about Sanskrit declensions,
He stared so dumbfounded out of the window,
It was painful to watch,

Some of us wanted to be teachers,
Some doctors,
Some lawyers,
Omolkaanthi didn't want any of that,
He wanted to be the sunshine!
The type of sunshine, that
On rainbowed afternoons filled with birdsong,
Lingers like a shy smile,
On the leaves of tropical trees.

Some of us became teachers,
Some doctors,
Some lawyers,
But Omolkaanthi didn't become the sunshine,
He now works in a dark printing shop,
From time to time he visits,
Drinks tea,
Makes small talk,
Then says 'I'll be rising then',
I show him to the door,

The one amidst us who became a teacher,
Could have easily been a doctor,
The one that became a doctor,
Wouldn't have lost out by becoming a lawyer,
However, their dreams all came true,
But not Omolkaanthi's,
He couldn't become the sunshine,
That same Omolkaanthi,
Who, every day, was enchanted by the sun,
wanting nothing but to be it
Couldn't.

Amores I.I by Ovid

translated from the Latin by Imogen Halstead

read by Michael Pennington

The joke in Ovid's poem hinges on the necessity of using particular metres for different styles of Latin poetry. Josephine Balmer wrote that eighteen-year-old Imogen Halstead tackled Ovid's notoriously difficult metrical, mythological and literary in-jokes and references with an ease and maturity beyond her years.

As I was writing solemn metre
Of violent wars and slaughter,
Cupid, snickering, stole a foot
And made the next line shorter.
So thus my war-like drumbeat changed
To Love's inferior measure
And I, a bard, was so demeaned
For Cupid's idle leisure.
'What's this?' I cried, 'Who gave the right
Of meddling to you, boy?
The Muses rule my lofty verse,
It's not your nursery toy!
Should Venus seize the arms of war
While Hera fans Love's flames?
Or Ceres rule the wooded hills,
Diana till the plains?
Apollo with his shining locks
Could not take up the spear,
While Mars attempts to tune the lyre
With war-cry deafened ear.
But, Cupid, you already rule
A great and powerful sphere,
Why then should you aspire to change
My verse? Why interfere?
Perhaps your realm now covers all
To Helicon's leafy dell.
Is Phoebus' lyre no longer safe?
Will that be yours as well?

Each time that I begin my page
And write in warlike length,
The second line cuts short too soon
And undermines my strength.
Besides, I lack a fitting theme
For Love's less weighty beat,
I have no long-haired boy or girl
To make my verse complete.'
No sooner had I thus complained
When Cupid snatched a dart,
An arrow made to seal my fate
And destined for my heart.
He curved the bow across his knee,
And speaking thus, he drew:
'O Bard, take this to be your theme!'
And out the arrow flew.
Alas! That boy has piercing shots,
Unerring did he fire,
And now in my once empty heart
Roar flames of my desire.
So let my work in six feet rise,
And fall in five once more,
I bid farewell to epic themes,
I'll write of Love not War.
Come, wreath your golden brow, my Muse,
With myrtle of the sea,
My verse will scan eleven feet
I'll bow to elegy!

**The Damned from *Inferno* Canto V by Dante Alighieri
translated from the Italian by Paul Batchelor
read by Patricia Hodge**

Paolo and Francesca are being punished in hell for the sin of adultery. To convey the tone and musicality of the original poem, he opted for consonantal rhyme and a form borrowed from George Herbert's 'Easter Wings' in which the number of metrical feet per line expands and then contracts over a six-line stanza.

The bitterest
sorrow is not regret,
though that is part of what we suffer –
the bitterest sorrow lies in happiness rehearsed,
as when I speak of how
our fate took root.

It was a poem:
the ballad of Sir Lancelot
whom love enslaved – old fashioned stuff,
pure nonsense really, so where was the danger if
from time to time our eyes met –
where was the harm?

We read on
until we reached the line
about a kiss both looked-for and unbidden –
a kiss so long desired and yet so lightly taken –
that line was our undoing:
a sidelong

glance – another –
into each other's eyes, and we,
who since that day have never been apart,
we latecomers to everything within our hearts,
we put the book away
and read no further.

Memory's Sideways Glance by Elena Shvarts
translated from the Russian by Sasha Dugdale
read by Michael Pennington

'Memory's Sideways Glance' is about becoming a poet. The poem invokes Pushkin's poem 'about becoming a poet' – 'The Prophet' – in which God forces a coal into the poet's mouth and commands him to light the hearts of men. In Shvarts's poem the narrator is a woman and a mere boy throws the coal. This is the country, according to another of her poems, where women are beaten by their menfolk on Sundays and so even in her poetic calling it is petty victimisation and not grand mutilation which brings forth creativity.

Once upon a time
We were playing at war
On the bank of the river Neva.
It was blowing a fresh Easterly,
Dragging the river by her white coat to sea,
And I was lost in contemplation of this,
When suddenly a boy, grinding his teeth,
Hurled
A jagged lump of coal
At my temple
(Temple has two meanings in English).
And the game was over.

But perhaps it was the Neva herself
The indolent Neva lifted herself
Came to my side, opened my third eye
And took up lapping in our heads.
Oh evil! Evil you are, Neva
With your might from Ladoga –
You seized that coal from the bank
And knocked the words into my temple.
Blood poured in streams and tributaries
Through the anthracite grime,
Pallor mixed with crimson
And the plumed shadow of coal.
And my head was the sun setting
On that short day before spring.

It burnt for a time above the Neva
Then circled, suddenly darted,
Enshrouded in cigarette smoke
Past my hands like ashen coal,
Like a seraph's white corpuscle.
I saw a branch – a rib of Adam,
Charcoaled, flying like a sister.
The Neva whets on granite banks
Its marble-silken sabres.

Stillborn 1943: Calling Limbo by Derry O'Sullivan
translated from the Irish by Kaarina Hollo
read by Patricia Hodge

Derry O'Sullivan's elegy to his stillborn brother refers to the now defunct practice of burying unbaptised infants in little churchyards located at liminal sites – crossroads, cliff-edges and abandoned churches.

You were born dead
and your blue limbs were folded
on the living bier of your mother
the umbilical cord unbroken between you
like an out-of-service phone line.
The priest said it was too late
for the blessed baptismal water
that arose from Lough Bofinne
and cleansed the elect of Bantry.
So you were cut from her
and wrapped, unwashed,
in a copy of *The Southern Star*,
a headline about the War across your mouth.
An orange box would serve as coffin
and, as requiem, your mother listened
to hammering out in the hallway,
and the nurse saying to her
that you'd make Limbo without any trouble.
Out of the Mercy Hospital
the gardener carried you under his arm
with barking of dogs for a funeral oration
to a nettle-covered field
that they still call the little churchyard.

You were buried there
without cross or prayer
your grave a shallow hole;
one of a thousand without names
with only the hungry dogs for visitors.
Today, forty years on
I read in *The Southern Star* –
theologians have stopped believing
in Limbo.

But I'm telling you, little brother
whose eyes never opened
that I've stopped believing in them.
For Limbo is as real as Lough Bofinne:
Limbo is the place your mother never left,
where her thoughts lash her like nettles
and *The Southern Star* in her lap is an unread breviary;
where she strains to hear the names of nameless children
in the barking of dogs, each and every afternoon.

Venice by Mihai Eminescu
translated from the Romanian by Alistair Elliot
read by Noma Dumezweni

Patrick McGuinness particularly admired this translation, which he felt captured the stillness and desuetude of the city and its still, reflective waters.

Life is extinct in Venice. So pride falls.
Not a breath of song or wink of light, indoors
or out. Through ancient portals, over marble stairs
the moon pours ghastly whiteness down façades.

Oceanos weeps and sniffs in her canals,
the eternal bridegroom, always young, who longs
to breathe his kiss of life into her lungs –
and parts her dead knees with his watery hands.

Across the city rings of silence spread.
Only one priest remains from the old days –
Saint Mark's – who grimly strikes the midnight bell.

With its dull voice, the language of the Sibyl,
It signifies in these repeated blows:
'The dead, my child, are dead forever. Dead...'

To a Nose by Francisco de Quevedo
translated from the Spanish by Thomas Franchi
read by Michael Pennington

Thirteen-year-old Thomas Franchi took the joke in what George Szirtes described as Quevedo's 'gorgeous tease of a poem' one step further by shaping his translation to look like an old man's bulbous nose.

There was once a man who had a nose.
It was a most impressive nose,
the nose of a killer,
a writer's nose,
a hairy pointed sword of a nose.

It was a like a badly-shaped sundial,
pensive and still,
it was an elephant turned upside down,
it was Ovid's nose, but...nosier.

It was like the breakwater from a galley,
it was an Egyptian pyramid,
it was the twelve tribes of noses.

It was a peach of a nose,
An infinite mass of nose,
A nose
so
fierce.

Childhood in the Diorama by Durs Grünbein
translated from the German by Karen Leeder
read by Noma Dumezweni

Karen Leeder wrote that one of the difficulties of translating Durs Grünbein was to catch the way different tones – the caustic and the lyrical – rub shoulders, without giving in to the temptation to smooth things out.

Strange, as a child he was always drawn to the inert.
In museums he'd stand for ages at the diorama,
its animals ranged in natural groups, stock-still
against the painted backdrops, forests, Himalayas.
Like in a fairy-tale, enchanted, the deer pricked up
its ears as he edged closer in the neon, eyes shining.
In the skull of the caveman right next door he saw
only the gaping hole, couldn't imagine the blow
of his rival's club, the struggle for the fire.
The Egyptian mummy had lasted thousands of years
with its brain spooled out. Only with the melting
of the perma-ice had this mammoth come to light.
The most beautiful butterflies, big as your hand,
he found skewered with pins. Once, he thought
he saw their wings still quivering – as if in memory
of the trees that had been felled, the tropical winds.
A draught, perhaps, had blown through the displays.

The Wind by Dafydd ap Gwilym
translated from the Welsh by Gwyneth Lewis
read by Noma Dumezweni

The medieval poet Dafydd ap Gwilym presents a number of challenges for translators. Gwyneth Lewis's aim was to preserve the brilliance of ap Gwilym's metaphorical thinking while retaining his metrical lightness of touch.

Skywind, skilful disorder,
Strong tumult walking by there,
Wondrous man, rowdy-sounding,
Hero, with nor foot nor wing.
Yeast in cloud loaves, who's been thrown out
Of sky's pantry with not one foot
How swiftly you run, and so well
This moment above the high hill.

Tell me, north wind of the cwm,
Your route, reliable hymn.
Over the whole world you fly,
Tonight, hill weather, please stay high,
Man, go to Upper Aeron
Be cool, and stay right in tune.
Be quick, don't let that maniac,
Litigious Little Bow, hold you back
He's toxic. Society
And its goods are closed to me.

Nest thief, though you winnow leaves
No one condemns you, nor impedes
You, no posse, nor law's hand,
Neither blade, nor flood, nor rain.
No son of man can kill you,
Fire won't burn nor treason harm you.
You won't drown, as you're aware,
You're never stuck—angle-less air.
Horseless, you gallop about,
Need no bridge, nor any boat. [...]
Sight can't see you, wide-open den,

We hear you, nest of great rain.

Across the world, you are God's grace,
The roar when tearing oaks break;
You play clouds' notes in sky's score,
Dance, athletic, over moors,
Dry-humoured, clever creature;
On clouds' stepping-stones you range far. [...]
Sea storms show your jeu d'esprit,
Randy surfer where land meets sea.
Bold poet, rhyming snowdrifts you are,
Scatterer of leaves you are,
Clown of peaks, you go scot-free
Driving masts mad in foaming sea.

Poor me when I first felt desire
For Morfudd of the golden hair.
A woman's the cause of my disgrace.
Run up to her father's house
Knock hard and make him open
To my messenger pre-dawn,
Find her, if there's any way,
Give voice to the song of my sigh.
You come from unsullied stars,
She's noble, loyal, tell her:
For as long as I'm alive
I will be her loyal slave.
Without her, frankly, I'm a mess
If it's true she's not been faithless.

Climb, hold her in your spotlight,
Then plunge down, heaven's favourite.
Go to Morfudd Gray the blonde
Come back safe, holy vagabond.

Theorem by Eeva-Liisa Manner
translated from the Finnish by Emily Jeremiah
read by Patricia Hodge

Finnish has no articles, so the translator has to choose between 'a' or 'the', which for Emily Jeremiah raised philosophical questions about the nature of the particular and the general – appropriately, she thought, since Eeva-Liisa Manner was often interested in such issues.

Let prose be hard, let it provoke unease.
But the poem is an echo that is heard when life is mute:

shadows gliding on mountains; the image of wind and cloud,
the passage of smoke or life: bright, dusky, bright,

a river flowing silent, deep cloudy forests,
houses mouldering slowly, lanes radiating heat,

a worn-down threshold, the stillness of shadow,
a child's timorous step into the darkness of the room,

a letter that comes from afar and is pushed under the door,
so big and white that it fills the house,

or a day so stiff and bright that you can hear
how the sun nails shut the abandoned blue door.

Age Hangs on You by Pierre de Ronsard
translated from the French by Rosemary Brook-Hart
read by Michael Pennington

Stephen Romer singled out eighteen-year-old Rosemary Brook-Hart's take on Ronsard's sonnet as an example of 'versioning' – that is to say, when radical liberties are taken with the form and content of the source text – that worked because it remained above all tonally true to the original.

Age hangs on you like sawdust hangs on velcro –
light, but irremovable – and I am
old
as you (older, maybe? memory baulks
at counting quicksand years). If we can join
our sawdust-weight of age,
let's make a spring
let's make it grow
hear the pale shoots as they push lightwards through the
ice-hard soil of winter, watch
the first
snow-
drops –
purer than those showy roses that lined
the lanes where we once walked – cast eyes in all
the ditches, thickets, under hedges, seeking
the light-print of those first white buds
as they kiss open, slowly hatching,
lifting like wings to fly at summer's threatening –
and I still don't feel old. So am I, then?
Must age give in to agedness, or can
a man tie new cords, slough his wrinkled skin
and with the carousel of wheeling years be young again?
A time-scarred face, two breasts sagging and limp,
no scalpel-blade, no collagen can cure.
The gentle bend of swan-wings maps your back's curve –
stripped of its mask, your face is snowdrop-pure.

The Lament of the Gorgeous Helmet-Fettler (stanzas 55–59)

translated from the medieval French by Jane Tozer

read by Patricia Hodge

The Gorgeous Helmet-Fettler was once a famous prostitute. In old age, she's wretched, sick and down-and-out. In earlier stanzas, she has told us that in her youth she was famous for her beauty and skill. When young, she loved (was seduced by?) a no-good pimp who beat her up. Now she's old, penniless, with nothing left to live for.

'... If he broke all my bones I wouldn't care
I loved him still. One kiss would set me free
Of all my pain. He'd wheedle me to bed
With some new trick, and soon I'd cry for more.
The lusty hog was rotten to the core
Lord love him, dead some thirty years or more.

'I brood on glory days I can't forget.
God, he was something. Stole me, heart and all.
What did he leave me? Bugger all, that's what!
Except a life of shame, a sin-stained soul
– Even the priest has had me, like as not –
And not an ounce of faith to make me whole.
Stripped to this body, withered, grey and old
A bag of bones. Completely lost the plot.

'You should have seen my bright unwrinkled brow
The tumbling golden locks. I'd toss my head
And give one sidelong glance - like this - just so
I'd flash my baby-blues and knock 'em dead.
Had hardened cynics begging me to bed.
That straight and perfect nose - where is it now?
Such dainty ears, my face a cameo
A dimple fit to kiss. Lips coral-red.

‘My shoulders, soft and fragile, pleased the eye.
Long shapely arms, fine smooth unblemished hands,
Sweet budding breasts, my haunches firm and high
The loins well-muscled, nifty to withstand
And parry in the joust and thrust of love.
Well-rounded hips, thighs parting to disclose
My pretty little rosy quelque-chose
Hidden inside its fragrant bushy grove.

‘Just see me now. Quite broken down, world-weary
A forehead crazed with lines. Hair – hanks of grey.
Once-shapely eyebrows sparse, and eyes grown bleary
That with a look drew moneyed men my way.
This broken nose is not a pretty feature
Nor heavy earlobes tufted with thick moss
A pallid, moribund, pathetic creature
With toothless wizened mouth. Fancy a kiss?

‘This way goes human beauty, and all flesh.
Cramped limbs; distorted fingers clenched with pain
Shoulders and back hunched forward in distress
The tits and arse just pitiful remains.
Blotched salami thighs; brittle bones like sticks.
My little wotsit? Huh! You cheeky sod,
Don’t even go there, mate. I know your tricks.
Remember – this is how I’ll meet my God.

‘All huddled up, a bunch of sad old bags
We hunker down to mourn those happier days
Squat on our bum-bones, foul-mouthed mad old hags
Our weedy hemp-stalk fire, no roaring blaze.
We’re wisps of wool, a spinner’s teased-out rolags.
The fire burns out. The wind blows us away.
We were so lovely, once, us poxed-out slags.
This mortal city. No abiding stay...’

Sobriety, book III, poem 12 by Paul Verlaine
translated from the French and Italian by John Turner
read by Michael Pennington

To set the scene: the poet Paul Verlaine has been released after an eighteen-month stretch in Belgium on a conviction of assault. His wife has obtained a judicial separation, his public has abandoned him, and he has rediscovered his Catholic faith. On his way to a teaching post in Stickney, a village in the Lincolnshire fens, a suitably long way from the usual temptations, and moreover more than a walking distance from the local pub, Verlaine meets some livestock in a field beside the road. The quotation half way through is from Dante's Purgatorio.

Well there you are, my simple better thoughts:
Hope – that's a must; penance for good abjured;
Kindness of heart with steel rods in the soul;
The watchfulness; a recommended calm;
And all the others. Steady on your feet,
Quite wide awake, but hesitant – the hot
Night and the heavy dream entangles you:
Let's see who's first to stumble! – a slow train
Bewildered by the broad light of the moon.
*As ewes that exit from the fold, by one,
By two, by three; and then the rest are there
Keeping their heads down and their eyes wide shut;
So what the first sheep does the others do,
Shunting up close behind her if she stops,
Glaikit, silent, not understanding why.*
My flock. The canny shepherd is not I,
But greater, how much greater: it was he
Who kept you penned for such an ache of time
To move the hurdle when the hour came right.
Follow him – for his crook is kindness, and
His voice a balm for bleating.

As for me:

I am the faithful dog that runs behind.

**From Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes by Rainer Maria Rilke
translated from the German by Michael Swan
read by Noma Dumezweni**

Michael Swan wrote that he liked this best of all Rilke's poems. "The mythology works beautifully: Eurydice's engagement with her own death gives the legend a striking and consistent new interpretation."

The slender man in blue walked first of all,
looking ahead with dumb impatient eyes.
His stride ate up the road in greedy bites
and swallowed each one whole; his hands hung down
heavy and tightly-clenched outside his cloak,
no longer conscious of the graceful lyre
that seemed to have grown into his left hand
like briars twining round an olive trunk.

His senses were at odds with one another:
for while his eyes, like hounds, ran out in front,
turned round, came back, and ran ahead again,
then stood and waited for him at the corner —
his hearing followed after like a scent.
Sometimes he thought it lagged so far behind him
that he could hear the footsteps of the others:
those two who should be climbing after him.
But then his ears caught nothing but the echo
of his own progress, and his rustling cloak.
He told himself, though, that they were still coming;
said so aloud, and heard the echoes die.
They were still there, he knew. The trouble was
they were so quiet. If only he could turn,
just once, and look (except that turning round
would bring about disaster, now when the task
was almost over), he was sure he'd see them
walking behind him quietly, without speaking:

the god of messages, the traveller,
holding his staff: wings beating at his ankles;
his clear eyes gazing out beneath his hood;
and on his left, led by his hand, the woman.

She who was so much loved that one small lyre
poured out more grief than countless grieving widows.
It made a mirror-world of grief, in which
everything had its double: rivers, valleys,
roads, hamlets, woods, and fields with grazing cattle;
and round this grief-world, just as round the other
ordinary world, another sun revolved,
another sky with silent constellations,
a sky of grief whose stars were out of shape.
She who was so much loved.

And guided by the god she walked the road,
her steps confined by heavy winding-cloths,
uncertain, gentle and without impatience.
She was within herself ... And her new death
Filled her whole being.

... And when, suddenly,
the god threw up his hand and cried in pain:
'He has turned round to look. We must go back,'
she did not understand, and whispered 'Who?'

But far away, dark in the opening,
a figure stood outlined against the daylight,
unrecognisable. He stood and watched
as, on the ribbon of a meadow lane,
the courier of the gods, without a word,
turned and went sadly after his companion,
who was already walking back again,
her steps confined by heavy winding-cloths,
uncertain, gentle and without impatience.

Poppies by Attilio Bertolucci
translated from the Italian by Allen Prowle
read by Michael Pennington

For Allen Prowle, Attilio Bertolucci's poetry has many of the qualities that he admires in the poetry of Edward Thomas, several of whose poems Bertolucci translated into Italian. Working on his translation of 'Poppies', the translator kept listening for Thomas's voice, for Thomas's version.

This is a year of poppies. When, between May and June,
I came back home again, our fields
brimmed with their wine, so sweet, so dark,
it made me drunk.

From cloud-banks of mulberry
to the grass and the grain, ripeness was all,
spreading in gentle heat and dawdling sleepiness
through this world of green.

Halfway through my life I saw my sons,
grown men, escaping out of sight,
freed from whatever binds
the swallow to its flight

across a stormy evening's fading glow.
And, as is human, my sorrow eased
when the house lit up again,
for another supper, the air cooled

by a far-off flurry of hail.

A Jackeen Keens for the Blasket by Brendan Behan
translated from the Irish by Seán Hewitt
read by Patricia Hodge

Seán Hewitt visited the Blasket islands and was very struck by the slow backbone of land rising out of the sea-mist, the cormorants skimming the water and the sheer, devastating silence which Brendan Behan's poem conveys so well and which he tried to preserve in his English translation.

Sunset, and the wide sea will be laid out like glass,
no sailing boats or signs of life, just a last
eagle that glints on the world's edge, separate,
circling over the lonely, spent Blasket...

The sun sunk down, and nightshadows scattered
over the high moon, herself scaling
the ground with bare, outstretched fingers, cold
on the broken houses, the life's scaffold...

All silent but the birds' bellies sliding
over the waves, glad to be home, head tucked
snug in breast, the wind's breath rocking the door,
and the damp hearth, fireless, heatless, unwatched.

Epigrams, Book 3, Number 44 by Martial
translated from the Latin by Robert Hull
read by Patricia Hodge

Robert Hull was attracted to this poem by Martial because of its warmth, its sense of fun, and its absence of ego and malice. He resurrected his A level Latin to try to capture Martial's droll exasperation.

Would you like to know why it is, Ligurnus,
that no one greets you with enthusiasm?
why it is that whenever you turn up somewhere,
hurried exits tend to take place,
and large breathing-spaces develop?
It's because you're too totally The Poet.
For those round you, it represents
extreme hazard. Nothing, no creature
makes one as nervous, or is as feared. No tiger,
enraged at the theft of her cubs,
is as alarming, no snake burning with thirst
in blistering sun, no, not even
the malevolent scorpion: nothing
possesses your capacity to terrify.
I ask you, who could possibly survive
the tortures you inflict on me?
You read poems at me when I'm standing
casually around, or when I'm relaxing
on a couch. You read at me when I'm in a dash
for the public lavatory, then while I'm on the thing.
I escape to the steam-baths, there you are,
at my ear. I go for a swim, so do you –
and your Poem. I'm on my way to dinner,
you waylay me – a Poem.
I arrive, you're there waiting
to wrestle me from my food –
a Poem.
I'm in bed, exhausted, you'll come by
with – what else? – a Poem.
Don't you notice the acute misery you cause?
Don't you really, you innocent, harmless,

utterly terrifying man?

The Retreat from Moscow by Victor Hugo
translated from the French by John Richmond
read by Michael Pennington

Victor Hugo wrote this poem while in exile in the Channel Islands from Louis Napoleon's Second Empire and in it takes his revenge on Bonaparte. For translator John Richmond, Hugo is a master of atmospheric narrative.

It snowed. Their very victory had brought on their defeat.
For once, the eagle bowed its head. Dark days! In slow retreat
from smoking Moscow, emperor and men recrossed terrain
whose only feature now was snow: white plain, then more white plain.

A brief thaw, and an avalanche of water. In the spate
none knew his leader nor his flag; no-one could separate
the army's centre from its flanks. How had it come to pass
that yesterday's proud columns were today's disordered mass?

The opened bellies of dead horses sheltered wounded men:
the only refuge on the road. The snow set in again.
Beside deserted bivouacs, the silent, frozen ghosts
of buglers, upright in the saddle, occupied their posts,
their copper instruments glued fast to mouths of stone. The sky
dropped cannon-ball and shell, mixed with its own artillery
of snowflakes, deathly white, which settled on the grenadiers,
who trembled as they marched, absorbed in private thoughts and fears,
their grey moustaches trimmed with ice.

Across the unknown lands
the north wind and the driving snow chased barefoot, starving bands
of former warriors, and broke their hearts. They were a dream
they'd wandered into, in the mist; a mystery, a stream
of shadows under leaden sky. The utter loneliness!
The sky's revenge: a mighty army in a wilderness,
enwrapped in snow – a silent shroud the elements have sewn.
Each man imagined he was dying; knew he was alone.
Here, in a fateful realm, two enemies pronounced their curse.
The Czar was one; the North another, which was worse.

Gun-carriages chopped up for firewood; cannon thrown away;
men lying down to die; this was a mob, confused, astray,
in headlong flight, their bleak processions swallowed in the waste.
The folds and bulges where the snow had seemed to drift embraced
whole regiments. The fall of Hannibal was on this scale.
Attila left behind such dreadful scenes: the wholesale
rout of wounded, dying men, on stretchers, barrows, carts; the rush
to cross the bridges; death by suffocation in the crush.
Ten thousand closed their eyes to sleep; a hundred saw the day.
Great Marshal Ney, whom once an army followed, ran away.
He haggled with three Cossacks for his watch.

And every night
the French imagined Russian soldiers harrying their flight.
They grabbed their weapons. 'Who goes there?' In nightmare fantasies
came squadrons, whirlwinds of wild men, whose terrifying cries
were like the calls of bald-head vultures, harbingers of doom.
In panic one whole army fled, and vanished in the gloom.

The emperor surveyed the scene, as if he were a tree,
a giant oak, about to taste the axe. Catastrophe,
the fatal axe man, who had spared his greatness until now,
had climbed up on him. Now he shuddered as each severed bough,
his officers and men, crashed round him one by one. He watched them die.

He paced inside his tent. A remnant of his company,
who'd loved him, trusting in his destiny, stood by outside.
Fate had betrayed him, surely. To and fro they saw his shadow stride.

Within, Napoleon was dazed and pale. Perhaps this was not fate?
Perhaps – he knew not what to think – he had some sin to expiate?
The man of glory trembled as a sudden unaccustomed dread
assailed his soul. He turned to God in anguish. 'Lord of Hosts,' he said,
'is this my punishment, to see my legions scattered on the snow?'

He heard his name called in the dark. A voice said, 'No.'

The School House by T H Parry-Williams
translated from the Welsh by Neil Croll
read by Noma Dumezweni

Neil Croll chose what he described as this Welsh Shakespearean sonnet because it was 'lean and direct, without the sentimentality common in popular Welsh poetry'. Judge Alan Jenkins found it 'lovely and unassuming, saving its mighty charge of grief for the final couplet'.

The chimneys smoke whatever breezes blow
and someone sweeps the floor occasional days
and opens windows wide, though no one now
has lived here since the family went its ways —
save for a month or so in summer heat,
when needing to escape the urban pace
we stay and walk the lanes. Then those we meet,
surprised that people occupy this place,
will ask why we, with father, mother gone,
still feel some obligation to maintain
an old house no one needs now we've moved on.
But there it is — and how can I explain?
Perhaps we fear that those two in the ground
Might sense the door was locked the whole year round.

**Andromache from the *Iliad*, Book 22, lines 437–467 by Homer
translated from the Ancient Greek by Sam Norman
read by Noma Dumezweni**

Bill Herbert was impressed by eighteen-year-old Sam Norman's selection 'of a passage that worked perfectly as a contained episode, which was then subjected to a virtuoso recasting into quintains rhyming ABAAB' – the rhyme scheme Sam chose in his attempt to retain the musicality of the original Greek.

She broke off, weeping – but still, Hektor's wife
had heard nothing, no messenger had come
to warn that her husband had gone to fight
far from the city gates... So for the while
she simply wove, sat in their lofty home.

And working on her two-fold, purple lace,
weaving dappled flowers, she bade her maids go
and heat a massive cauldron straight away
so that when Hektor returned from the fray,
he'd find a steaming bath. She didn't know

that Achilles and the one with flashing eyes
had laid him low, far-off from any bath.
But when, from the wall, she heard shouts and cries
the legs beneath her rocked dangerously
and from her hand, her shuttle fell to earth.

Then she spoke among her maids with lovely hair:
'I must see what has happened – you two, come!
That was his honoured mother's voice I heard...
Oh, in my breast I feel my very heart
leap to my mouth, and my legs are numb...

'Some evil for the house of Priam is near...
I hope such news will never be revealed,
but godlike Achilles – I'm racked with fear –
has cut off reckless Hektor far from here,
and is driving him onto the open field

‘where he will end the fatal bravery
that summed my husband up – he’d never wait,
safe in the throng of men, but rather he
would charge ahead, outstripping them greatly,
and yielding to no one in his might...’

And with these words she rushed out from the hall,
heart pounding, nearly mad – her maids came too –
but when she reached the teeming city wall
and stood there, looking out, among them all,
only then, she saw him and she knew.

There was Hektor, being dragged outside
the city to the hollow, Grecian ships
by quick horses – unburied, brutalised.
Then black night descended over her eyes,
enshrouding her, and the life passed from her lips...

A Small Garden by Rin Ishigaki
translated from the Japanese by Mary Weatherburn
read by Patricia Hodge

This is a rare Japanese winner from a rare female voice in post-war Japanese poetry. Although in Japan Rin Ishigaki is one of the best-known 20th century poets, little of her poetry has been translated, and the judges were very moved by this deceptively simple poem.

The old woman came
to her long path's end.

Had she lived
striving straight for the light? Or
had she fled,
driven here by the dark?

The children:
buds of graft
on vines of toil.
(Yet she speaks of this
to no one.)

She turns her back
to their meagre home
and tends her morning glories.
Green, slim shoots:
these alone will bloom for her
unfaltering.

Her old eyes shine
like a little girl's.
'I want a sky-blue watering can,'
she says.

On the Ceiling by Michelangelo Buonarotti
translated from the Italian by Duncan Forbes
read by Michael Pennington

Michelangelo is world-famous as a painter and sculptor, but less well known as a poet. This characteristically witty rendering by Duncan Forbes of what he describes as an irritable, irreverent and comical expression of self-pity attempts to capture the vernacular verve of the original Italian.

I've grown a goitre from this twisted pose I'm in
like a Lombardy peasant in a hovel that's boggy
or any other district similarly soggy
because my belly is underneath my chin.
My beard points skyward and my skull is crippling
my neck as I twist my chest in this enslavement
and the paintbrush dripping and constant stippling
have messed up my face like a decorated pavement.
My haunches are digging up into my gut
so I shift my arse like a horse's pack
and vainly I paddle my feet down below.
In front my skin is leather-like and taut
but it wrinkles behind as I arch my back
bending my spine like a Syrian bow.
So stranger and fainter
my judgements grow in this mental spiral.
You can't shoot straight through a crooked barrel.
My painting's a goner.
Fight for it now, Giovanni, and my honour.
I'm in a bad way and I'm no painter.

Pearl (Section IV: lines 181–240)

translated from the Middle English by Jane Draycott

read by Noma Dumezweni

This is another good example of a perfectly judged extract from a much longer poem. Jane Draycott wrote that as a parent of daughters about to leave home, and as someone who has written more than her fair share of poems about loss, working at close quarters with the Pearl poet had felt more like an extraordinary arrival than a departure.

Then fiercer than longing came the fear.
I didn't stir or dare to call
to her: wide-eyed and silent as a hawk
in a great hall I waited there.
I knew that what I saw was spirit
and I feared for what might follow –
that within my sight she'd disappear
before I could come close to her.
So smooth, so small, so delicate,
this graceful, innocent girl now rose
before me in her royal robes,
a precious creature set with pearls.

Now, like a vision granted, showered
in a setting of jewels fit for a queen
this child as fresh as a lily-flower
stepped downward towards the stream.
The fine white linen she wore seemed woven
with light and where its sides hung open
was laced with borders of pearls far paler
and prettier than any I'd seen before.
The sleeves of her robe fell long and low,
stitched in with double rows of pearls;
her skirts of the same fine linen were trimmed
and seeded all over with precious gems.

But the girl wore one thing more: a crown
composed entirely of ice-bright pearls
and no other stone, tipped and figured
with flowers, each petal set with a perfect gem.
She wore no other decoration
in her hair which in its falling framed
a face as white as ivory
and noble in its gravity.
Her hair like hand-worked gold shone
and flowed unbound around her shoulders,
the chalk-white pallor of her skin as pure
as all the fine-set pearls she wore.

Where her skin met the white of the linen
at her wrists, her throat and on every hem,
were set pearls with the pallor of no other stone.
The whole dress shone like an icy stream
and there at the heart of it all on her breast
lay a single immaculate pearl far greater
than all the rest. To tell its true measure
or worth would test a man's mind to the limit –
I swear no singer however inspired
could summon the words to capture the sight
of that pearl, so perfect, so faultless, so pale
and placed in the most precious setting of all.

I watched as this dearest creature set
with jewels walked at the water's edge
towards me: no man was happier from here
to Greece at the moment she came so near.
For that girl was closer to my heart
than aunt or niece, and the joy that I felt
far deeper. Inclining her lovely head
with all the grace of a lady, she bowed
and took off her jewel-encrusted crown:
with joy in her voice she bade me welcome.
That I had lived to speak to her
was heaven itself. My girl, this pearl.

'Dolphins' by Stephen Spender
read by Patricia Hodge

'Dolphins' was written by 85-year-old Stephen Spender in 1994, a year before his death, while on a sailing holiday off the Lycean coast of Southern Turkey with his wife Natasha.

Happy, they leap
Out of the surface
Of waves reflecting
The sun fragmented
To broken glass
By the stiff breeze
Across our bows.

Curving, they draw
Curlicues
And serifs with
Lashed tail and fin
Across the screen
Of blue horizon –
Images
Of their delight
Outside, displaying
My heart within.

Across this dazzling
Mediterranean
August morning
The dolphins write such
Ideograms:
With power to wake
Me prisoned in
My human speech
They sign: 'I AM!'