

The Jazz Season

SAMPLER

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The Jazz Season

—*Selected Poems*—

Edip Cansever

translated from Turkish by George Messo

Shearsman Books

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Edip Cansever: An Introduction

Edip Cansever was born in Istanbul in 1928. He grew up in a country transitioning from the Ottoman Empire into a modern Turkish republic. As a student of law and sociology he was widely influenced by Western modernism and Eastern mysticism. To the outside world, Cansever's was an unremarkable life, spending most of it in Istanbul's Covered Bazaar where he worked as an antiques dealer. It's entirely fitting that a poet who came to define Turkish modernity should have made his living among the residues of its past.

His extraordinary poetry speaks of familiar twentieth-century conditions, of rapid change, migrations and transports, of historical realities and ethnic diversities. His language mirrors the unique human landscapes of his city, a geopolitical cross-roads, of people dispersed by conflict and poverty, renewing themselves in a world unmapped.

Cansever's poetics are marked by simplicity and depth. Often colloquial and irreverent, his accessibility belies the turbulent sexual and emotional undercurrents that run through much of his work. He's off-hand and humorous just when he's at his most serious. He can be profound and silly in a single breath. Central to Cansever's poetic idiolect are the demands he makes on its linguistic resources, stretching the expressive capacity of language to breaking point, a kind of jazz, alive to its own fluid semantic possibilities and cognitive riffs.

Throughout the poems Istanbul emerges not merely as a backdrop but as a living entity that reflects the complexities of human interactions. The natural world is never far away, but it is a more urgent urban earthiness that Cansever so memorably places before the Turkish reader, a landscape of pimps, thieves, petty criminals, prostitutes, and vagabonds. It would have been familiar to many but rarely seen in Turkish literature before his time.

The poems gathered here reflect many of Cansever's central concerns. They are taken from each of his published books,

presented chronologically, and though Cansever's life was relatively short, his output was enormous. There are surprises on every page. At times the sheer variety of assaults on the senses threatens to overwhelm the reader, as perspectives on familiar objects and situations shift and contort to re-position them as strangely new and uncanny.

Like many of his contemporaries – İlhan Berk, Cemal Süreya, Ece Ayhan, and Turgut Uyar – Cansever was a controversial figure. His association with the İkinci Yeni (the Second New movement) brought him into conflict with a cultural establishment uncomfortable with abstraction. He was outspoken in defending the poetry of his friends and never shied from public debate.

For much of his adult life, Cansever was a hard drinker and smoker, dying unexpectedly at the age of 57 while on holiday in Bodrum. In 2005 Yapı Kredi published his two-volume collected poems, and a further book of previously unreleased poems appeared in 2009. Taken together they amount to more than 1,000 pages of the most innovative, challenging poetry ever written in Turkish. Until today, they have never been out of print.

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A Note on the Translations

In Turkish, Edip Cansever's *Collected Poems* runs to more than a thousand pages. The present book, now the largest selection in English, is a mere fragment of his complete works. Over the decades there have been many distinguished translations, of individual poems and selections made for anthologies. The first book-length translation, *Dirty August*, appeared in the USA in 2009, translated by Julia Tillinghast and Richard Tillinghast. Over the ten or more years working with Cansever's poems, I've sought out as many of the published translations as I could find. These have formed major points of reference and reflection throughout my time on *The Jazz Season*. I'm grateful to their authors, living and dead, and to the many friends who have offered advice and suggestions. The liberties and imperfections are my own.

George Messo

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The Onward Rush of Life

Never been warmed like this
To cherries on a branch
To light in shop fronts
To the smell of tomato paste in my kitchen
To flowing streams, flying clouds
Never been warmed to life like this.

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Oh Yeah Now That's a Table

A man filled with life's joy
Placed his keys on the table
Put down flowers in a copper bowl
Put down his milk, his eggs
Placed light coming from the window there
Sound of a bicycle, sound of a spinning wheel
He placed there the softness of weather and bread

On the table the man
Put things that occurred in his mind
Whatever he wanted to do in life
He placed it there
Who he loved, who he didn't love

The man put them too on the table
Three times three equals nine
The man placed nine on the table
He was next to the window next to the sky
He reached out placed infinity on the table
For days he'd wanted to drink a beer
He put the pouring of beer onto the table
He put down his sleep his wakefulness
Placed there his fullness his hunger

Oh yeah now that's a table
Never once complained about the load
Once or twice it shook then stopped
That man kept putting things on.

Non-Figurative

This man was raised among the people
Always to be found at feasts and festivals
Going to plays in his best clothes
He wore the demeanour of Jesus
No other drink but whiskey passed his lips

This man was a line going on forever

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Sweet Truth

The house is dark pots pans hang on a nail
It isn't clear if there's a wife and kids
Table stool stove
Don't look for those things
A dinner table a tablecloth
Not even a sofa no
Nothing like that
The man lives a threadbare life
Loneliness has chewed away the walls
Sky above and stars even higher
Let someone put in a roof and walls

The man is stretched out above a void
No one sees him
Soap swings in its hair sack
Until morning
When the man is finally through with nothingness
Let the walls and windows come
The wife and kids
The wet cobblestones and morning tasks
The man goes back to his shop
This thing we call truth is bright
It hides a crunch beneath its sugar coat

Look at the Barber

Open your eyes and look at my face
Let's see who I am
Who am I
You're a barber in your neighbourhood
I'm a barber in ours
I've got a spanking new pair of scissors
My body knows the feel of finer things
The sun shines out of my everywhere
What haven't you got with a barber's shop
It's all completely new to me
Apart from human heads

But newer still
For the cut than the uncut
For the balding than the full-headed
For those who spend than those who don't
For those that know than those who don't
For the beautiful than the ugly
It's newer still

I'm a barber, my hands are for you

Precise

My eyes on the sea of a fish being caught

My eyes are those of a fish.

A fish in my hands,

A fish-eye in my hands;

Without lashes, salty, precise

His gaze is endless.

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