Goya as Dog

SAMPLER

Also by Stefan Hertmans in English

Intercities

War and Turpentine
The Convert
The Ascent

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Stefan Hertmans

Goya as Dog

Selected Poems

SAMPLE

translated from Flemish by

Donald Gardner

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Translator's Preface

In recent years Stefan Hertmans has acquired an international reputation for his fiction. *War and Turpentine,* a memoir of his grandfather's experiences in the First World War, was one of the *New York Times*'s ten best books of 2016, while *The Ascent* (*De Opgang*) sheds an abrasive, troublesome light on the historical tradition in Flanders of collaboration with Fascism. Before he began to write fiction and autofiction, however, he already had a very high profile as a poet. Hertmans' output has been prolific, and it was as a poet that I first made his acquaintance in 2013, when I was asked to translate two of his poems for an annual cultural miscellany, the *Lowlands Yearbook*. I was struck by the airy lightness of his work: "A child summons you to these hours, / imagine trickling water, / centuries without people. / Be still as ancient stones." This was a poetry that was both layered and transparent. I saw it as a challenge for a translator and deserving of an international readership.

This book is the result of a number of translation commissions I received over a period of more than ten years. It includes a sequence recalling scenes in Flanders in the First World War for the *Poetry Review* and a set of poems, *Take and Read*, commissioned for the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam. This was work that I felt was important and original, and that always had something to say. Fairly recently, I realized I had enough for a book.

At Hertmans' suggestion, *Goya As Dog* is thematically, rather than chronologically organized. I have chosen poems from all his collections: *Music for the Crossing* (*Muziek voor de overtocht*), his *Collected Poems (1975–2005)*, *The Lure of Idle Days* (*De val van vrije dagen*) (2011) and *Under a Bronze Sky* (*Onder een koperen hemel*) (2018).

With its insistent musicality, Hertmans' poetry lodges itself in the reader's memory. It also engages in a political and social discussion, which means that, while remaining highly concentrated work, it is anything but hermetic. Its relevance to current world issues, in combination with an almost traditional lyricism, makes him a unique figure in the Flemish scene. Perhaps the notion of 'metamorphosis' is a key to his work: each of his poems seems like a living creature, undergoing a transformation from start to finish. It is this quality that makes his poetry hard to grasp and consequently a particular yet inspiring challenge for me as his translator. It has been a pleasure to work with Stefan Hertmans. His fluency in English,

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as well as his knowledge of English literature has meant that I could avoid any pitfalls and, so I hope, arrive at versions that accurately reflect their Flemish originals.

Donald Gardner

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Goya as Dog

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TAKE AND READ

You can study history,
riddles, rumours and gossip,
pages of crazy electronics,
but suddenly you're facing
a beggar in the rain and no longer
know what you are doing in the world.

A ghost grows warm beside you
and taps you on the shoulder.
Golden shower, Danaë in foam,
the glitter of life.

You're being hugged; the sun breaks through.
Someone deciphered a brand new
cuneiform, kids on their Vespas go
in hot pursuit of Vestal girls.

Everything costs, and everything's null.
Tolle, lege, St. Augustine,
take this poem and read.

Don't mention us
in your unbearable prayers:
it wasn't for us
your God once suffered.

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GOYA AS DOG

It felt like a morning for proclaiming the Last Days;
Saturn, eating children in the ecstasy of his own
flesh, who had grasped his times, even if that made no difference.

But then – the painter has just got out of bed and in the streets
the fatty smell of fried calamari is wafting upwards –
he shudders at what he knows and sees a dog's head emerge
out of Bordeaux's oceanic blueness,
floating in oyster juices.

He is alone; a murmur humming on the faint signals
of memory. A tubby old man
is strumming his guitar
in a darkened shop in a back street,
a cast-off lover with a young man's soul.
Fingers like sausages, gleaming and gnawed at
and the heave of his chest is wheezy
while the angel kneels by the foot-rest
and bites his slender fingers –
a hand that caresses virgins
but does not know what she is playing.
Los Madrileños, the shining wheat and the whispering chaff.

The painter barks at the emergence of his own Self –
something his hand has achieved,
hidden from the previous naïve panorama.

It's only paint – dried earth,
grit and the pulverizing rhythm
of the pestle, the patina
of what I see when I'm seeing him –
but, like spittle-moistened white of egg
in the miasma of the canvas,
it releases the things that I remember:

SEIDLER

the old angel in the shop, and I who for my
love – I didn't know it then – clasp my hands
in a long-forgotten pose while among the nameless people
in the winding queues on the Prado steps,
somebody is singing.

We drown in the present and breath falls short.

(Anyone who gets as far as the darkness of the Final Gallery,
and sees what is blatantly there
in the unreal twisted mugs –
can maybe find himself in this mirror:
speculations, last days, the belling of hellhounds in
the hoarse barking of a stray decoy dog, swimming
against the current, coloured by pus, delirious syndrome.
The boy in the queue has reached the great door singing,
feverishly rummaging in the deep pockets of
his raincoat for his crumpled artist's pass).

I used to live in a low house in the plains, clouds sunk
far under the golden section, and with my fingertips
I could touch the smoke-blackened ceiling –
a young lad exhausted with self-pity,
the kind who, sinking in a glaze, still succeeds
in irritating the viewer with his painfully precious princely soul
in the sublime emptiness of portraits.
I had a dog that liked to swim in polder ditches
swollen with flood water; a beast
that slept in wintertime on the horizon.
And I walked out with him,
lost him in the wide landscape
devastated by sky.

But now that the boy has descended singing
into the black room, hideous Cerberus thrusts
his muzzle upwards and everything yelps against him.
His little head, with the drooping ears,

SPINNLER

sticks up just above the rising water line –
or is it quicksand that chafes him so.
His paws flounder invisibly, cutting
deep tracks in the thick coat of paint;
the eyes turned upwards focused on something,
in the ochre hues of a last judgement.

This is Goya, drowning like a dog – time is against him
and this portrait howls, whines and barks and swims
as dogs swim with their far too short paws.

(The swimming teacher, long ago,
snapping at him that he'll fail the exam
because 'You swim like a dog, my boy,
you won't be able to cope with life,' while the chlorine
stings his eyes) –

Goya peers at a scene in which the shapes
lie deeply sunk. He licks the sombre gold
of his paint brush.

The entrance to these black Elysian Fields, it's announced,
is free on Sundays, the *Hoi Polloi* can pour in.
But only someone acquainted with this old gift for drowning,
can penetrate the whirlpools of the canvas
in which the dog drowns over and again.

No harm is done; behind the broad boulevards, the café terraces are
decked out
with the ironic theatre of *décolletés*, the clinking of ice
in cocktails and the worldly-wise commentary of a studied smile.

The creature has been scraped from its wall;
nimble are the paws of these little masters.

How good it is to linger in the lukewarm squares
where someone with plump fingers is still playing *duende*

SCHILLER

while another is frying squid and laughing at his opposite.
Ah, tender is the flesh of Spanish angels.

Come, you who are drowning, at any moment the stream
can begin again right from the source, and every bit
as overwhelming. The boy lingers in the Last Gallery
till closing time, forgets his sweetheart,
his little ailment, and when he leaves
in the evening light there is Madrid, the clouds
of filthy ozone over the boulevards, untidy as
life always is, the *Glockenspiel*, the
silk dresses at the entrance to the Ritz.

He sees a young woman with her dog,
tongue hanging from his mouth.
He greets the return
of the fearsome Beast.

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Francisco Goya, died Bordeaux 1828,
'A Dog Struggling against the Current', 1821/23, Prado, Madrid.

MONT NOIR

Just like the landscape in my eyes –
I led you up the garden path
and said the things are there to grasp.

But as for us –
casting around in dewy meadows,
fruit that's too hard to bite –

this is the form we willed.
Look at the landscape
where trees turn into icons
and everyone gives someone
else a name.

Hold onto this.
Hold that we know each other,
even in twilight,
just as stories look like a horse
and children may be clouds.

Hold onto this.
Some day you will be taken by the wrist,
someone will draw with your hand,
and we will really be

a landscape for each other.

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THREE APPLES AND A MOUNTAIN

Le principal dans un tableau
c'est la distance.
Paul Cézanne

1

Three apples and a mountain –
reason enough to sit for years
searching for the one right view.
Full moon over Mont Sainte-Victoire,
even at night it glows,
a mass of rocks, scorched and
burning on its southern slope.

After the last of some fifty attempts
he wrote to a friend: I am too old
and sick to take this on.
To Ambroise Vollard:
I've made a little progress.
Why so late and so difficult?

The painter is a wanderer.
A burning path lies coiled in his eyes
and sleeps there like a snake.

Afternoon heat, evening of a life.
Blinded by too much light.

In Aix the *Cours Mirabeau* was steeped in shade;
long ago under the great plane trees
the little enlightened despot reached out
for fresh fruit – still perfectly round
and undisturbed by any trouble.

A coolness in the lawcourts and old premises.
The painter's footprint was preserved.

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The studio lies further on, hidden
in a garden dense with views.

But against that high wall
of distant opacity
things took on form and grey
became the colour of colours.

A cross stands unapproachable
in a sky of molten lead.
You have to climb a mountain
with nothing but your eyes
and the road is full of unsightliness.

Bellevue, Beauregard, Vauvenargues.
A mill and a sleeping village.
A washing place from
Roman times.

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2

Brushes lie quiet in a blazing stillness,
even when the colours scream in sunlight.
He knew what distance was.
Entered bodies, penetrated apples the better
to hear what that mountain told him.
It lies there glowing in its facets,
does not reveal itself to the visitor
and at night it whispers in your ears
with the black owls.
You can pass your life just sitting,
children everywhere grow up just like that,
water always flows to a source.

But all those shapes in his mind
splintered by thinking: how did he combine them
so neatly I recognize them in a dream
as something that was once mine
and yours, and anyone's who knows what
heat is, silence of a timeless
southern afternoon?

On the terrace he squashes insects,
drinks absinthe in moderation and
talks with the water silently.
He lets the evening sink into itself.

SCHIKLER

3

A village can have many voices;
only now does the sheet of paper start
to fall silent in his hand.
Mountain, how can I conquer you
like the apples and onions on the window sill?
How eat of you, who
drive me from your walls,
back into my own eyes,
that I trust more and more?

Rilke explored this countryside
in summertime, but it was only
at the Autumn salon he first saw
where the paths led.

Never has a painter shown so well
that colours need to do the work
by themselves, that you
must leave them free. Because
they'll understand each other some day.

That was in nineteen seven.
The mountain smouldered in its stony wall,
screwed itself into the world,
into his eyes, into a strange awareness.

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4

Anyone today who still wants to see
the philosopher's stone
just as paintbrushes did then,
does not always end up in
villages of former days.

Les Lauves is the name of a concrete housing estate
where he once stood staring at the grass:
how the backlight singes the cornea.

Somewhere suddenly there is an ideal view
at the far end of a street, between two blocks,
but only from the second storey.

Among those who enjoy this view are
a plumber, a lawyer and
an old lady – silently
she shows me in. A blue cuckoo clock
ticks against concrete and plyboard.

The hour is right: a little sad
about what just passed by and blew
like sand against the panorama.
She has a table with still life
and dried fennel.

The inscrutable painting
clings to her window, *support suprême*,
constantly changing shape
in the light of what slips by.

Muttering, she shows me out.
You walk through busy traffic
back to the silent studio.

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A brief reconstruction
of his bookshelves
offers the following:

Journal des demoiselles,
volumes nineteen forty-one to
forty-four; Plutarch and Virgil;
the *Magasin Pittoresque*,
Beauté du spectacle de la nature,
Hyppolite Taine's *Voyage en Italie*,
and then a binder, gold-embossed:
Avant d'entrer dans le monde.

An entry that was mostly outside –
Les Grandes Baigneuses for instance,
in order to go naked into the world
a metre-high hole in the wall was needed
to make their exit on the north face.

He too returned to Paris,
leaving house and garden for what they were.

But here in Loubassane, Bibémus,
Beaureceuil and Jas de Bouffan
children throw pebbles through
the high windows of the day.

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5

Later a *torero* with a palette
took over the foot of the mountain.
He made the castle of Vauvenargues
his home, cursed that he was able
to purchase this dream with his paint.
He became bitter there and older,
excessively creative, fought with
the devil of the old masters
and conquered no one in the end
except his own flaming ego.

He wasn't a drifter like the other fellow,
he didn't talk to adders and spruces,
simple tables or a dusty canvas;
he gave up looking and stayed silent,
only hurling his rage at
the smallest areas of
this sleeping cosmic village
that touches on the blue,
this glowing mass of rock,
these twelve Carpaccio trees
around the house.

I drink here deep into the night.
Crickets land on the table,
they're something of a cross between
dragonflies and centaurs.
The bull sleeps in its grave.

And the master of Aix walks beneath Orion,
he who can gaze things to pieces
only to bring them together again:

time on a palette full of crusted paint,
conqueror of a mountain

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