descent, promising final form but dissolving at the last. The latter poem, which also recalls the bird-poet inscribing his verses, is a tour de force that builds Wallace Stevens’ own repertory of images into it. Similarly, “On the Difficulty of Reading Paul Celan” depicts the poet “crack[ing] // open German with a grackle- / beak” to write his poems in a language rendered all but unusable by terror. No song-birds here, decidedly. And even in the act of love, the inadequacy of human communication is recalled: “tongues taste tongues, tasting the fractured crumbs // of words not spoken” (“On Seeing Brokeback Mountain for the Sixth Time”).

As the sun orchestrates the images of the book’s first two sections, the last is dominated by night. “Tower of the Moment” begins with a line from Kenneth Rexroth—“A dark blur in the blur of brightness”—and proceeds to “The crushed model / of a lighthouse, its light extinct.” In the night sky, the moon will prove a “a radiant liar,” while underneath the dark truth of Hades’ rivers—all five of them—flow with their burden of lost souls, “neither dead / nor breathing, neither meat nor / shade, guzzling tears. Scuttling off.” The book thus concludes where it began, with water, the cycle of the elements complete. Yet even in its very last lines, even in terminal dissolution, the struggle for speech goes on: “Siena gurgling each name from the mouth / of its underground river” (“Siena”).

The richness of language that Dean Kostos achieves in Rivering, it is safe to say, will last.

—Robert Zaller


Dana Goodyear’s slender second book has a slightly pre-apocalyptic feel to it. She lives in Los Angeles, and most of her poems are situated there. It is a place that, more than any other American city, perhaps, combines a kind of preliminary look at the end of time with the loveliness of a coastal semi-tropical landscape, by turns pastoral and burnt out. When the jacarandas lose their beautiful purple flowers in the late spring, the whole city seems to glow with an aura like the Northern lights. But downtown L.A., where there are few trees, combines postmodern architecture (Disney Hall, the Museum of Contemporary Art) with the horrors of a Skid Row where hospitals dump mental patients who cannot pay for services and where drugs are a way of life. In a way, all large western cities embody this paradox, even the Paris of the original flâneur, Charles Baudelaire, whose poems brought the horrors of the urban landscape into po-

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etry for the first time, but who also clearly loved being a knowing denizen of the Benjaminian “Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” The opening poem in Goodyear’s book, “Springtime in Hollywood,” embodies this confusion (or richness, depending on how you look at it). The jacarandas are “getting naked in the street” (a nice view of the process), but the birds are “coked” and the leaves’ “capillaries [are] bursting,” an image that combines the efflorescence of spring with a more ominous allusion to blood vessels re giving way. This short poem then ends with the disquieting image of “An engine idling behind/a closed white door,” with its suggestion of suicide by asphyxiation.

At the other end of the book, a poem alarmingly called “Home” is full of the imagery of breakdown. “Those last days in Hollywood” it begins, with a metaphorical nod towards doomsday, before proceeding to a catalogue of disturbing incidents: a house that is home but subject to the insults of urban life ranging from finding used condoms on the sidewalk to an accident in which a globe belonging to the poet’s husband smashes on the floor—the breaking of the cosmic egg in short. Goodyear’s enviable ear gives us these lines from the center of this gloomy poem:

[...] one night, years ago, while
we watched Play Misty For Me,
wind played the fence wires’
anguished vocal cords, a lowing
loud as a mourning cow.

Whether cows mourn and just how one gets into a megalopolitan landscape anyway are good questions, but the music of this passage is wonderfully convincing, with the repeated “w”s and the attentiveness to both vowels and consonants in the final trope, as well as the double use of “play.” (A film reference, and to a film that’s frightening and violent—it was Clint Eastwood’s first film as a director—is more expected and makes perfect sense.)

In the poems that appear between these parenthetical pieces, much of the imagery and affect are both rather somber, even comfortless at times. In Second Amendment-obsessed America, Goodyear’s closing lines in the first of a three-part pseudo-sonnet series entitled “Wild Fire” ring horrifyingly true:

All it takes is one dumb fuck, trigger-happy,
with a six-pack and bad aim,
to fill the world with flames.

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But this is just one example of many lines that carry a heavy weight of soberness and the seemingly oft-attempted kiss of death. Laughter becomes slaughter when the voice notices the extra letter (“Sympathetic Magic”); love is self-destructive, “a jumper, going over like the water of a dam” (“Dog Whistle”); and the ambiguous command in “Conception” is “Inject clear liquid where I mark the X.” A man and a woman lying in bed in “Separate People” are just that. Goodyear hammers the point home with a series of comparisons, from “I have been beside you/all night like soaped windows,” through three further images of solitude, to the final, perhaps overdone “country-club policy on Jews.” A poem called “Objet Petit A” (which she defines in a note as Lacan’s “unattainable object of desire,” apparently quoting Wikipedia) is about a starfish found by her husband on a beach during the winter, a creature described as “body and gash,” whose life is a mystery (“who knew what it meant//by living.”). The eerie, almost repulsive closing tercet mashes up nature and culture, nature and symbol, and life and pervasive guilt:

[. . . ] It should have turned
hard, into ornament,
but stayed wet, like guilt.

Goodyear’s subjects are not happy in the world, and the world is seemingly not happy to have them around either, if its prophetic weather and corrupt ecology are any measure. The conception and birth of a baby which is covert in some of these poems does not bring with it any sort of transformation or imagery of rebirth in the usual sense. This is instead a world of pregnancy testing kits and spermatic injections, of a gravid woman who dreams of having sex with “the interrogator,/his one fat finger pressed against my lips,” a world where “Let’s make/a baby is only a joke/if the man says it.” All the same, Goodyear’s ear as a poet is startlingly conventional at times. She uses rhyme, if sparingly, often ending a poem with a rhyming couplet and once, in “Natural Disaster,” closing with three lines that rhyme:

Chandelier, swimming pool, EKG
all sashay together on the count of three.
Abracadabra, you are free.

The sing-song metrics of this excerpt are also not unique in Oracle. “Dog Whistle” finishes with a couplet—”The newspaper keeps chaos just at bay./Old people, full of feeling, inch away.”—that comprises two ten-syl-
lable lines that sort out as conventionally iambic, as does the rhyming pair of lines that comes at the end of “Daylight Savings”: “and I stayed with you inside the room,/as the warm white walls became a womb.” These poetic proprieties can sound at odds with Goodyear’s cutting-edge sensibility and her limning of a dissolute and desolate postmodern environment. She is at her best, I think, when she lets her ear work its magic without trying to making the poem’s words follow a well-worn formal path.

—Bruce Whiteman


In the introduction to this new edition of his translation of a selection of Georg Trakl’s poetry, originally published in 1988 as Song of the West, Robert Firmage describes the German poet as “an enigma wrapped in silence.” He suggests that by comparison with Rilke, Trakl is little known and poorly understood. Yet Trakl has attracted several good English translators over the past sixty years, beginning with the great Michael Hamburger, and including not only Robert Bly and James Wright (1961, a small book of limited circulation admittedly), but several others as well: the poet Christopher Middleton (1968, with other poets), Daniel Simko (1989), Alexander Stillmark (2001), Margitt Lehbert (2007), and most recently Stephen Tapscott (2011), whose new translation was reviewed in the Summer 2012 issue of Pleiades. This is by no means a complete list. It is true, as Firmage also notes, that Trakl has not yet been the subject of a complete biography in either German or English. The outline of his life and even many of the details are well established, however, and it seems unlikely that even a full-dress biographical study of a poet who died at twenty-seven is likely radically to change our perceptions of him or our understanding of his poetry.

Firmage has expanded his earlier selection from forty-seven poems to sixty, including four newly translated prose poems. A brief comparison suggests that he has not revised the versions of the poems already published, and the introduction is substantially similar as well. An essay on Trakl has been added as an afterword, and the title of the book has changed and now borrows from a poem called “Gesang des Abgesehenen,” a poem of great significance to Heidegger in his famous essay on Trakl, translated into English as “Language in the Poem.” Firmage writes
at length in his afterword ("Truth in Trakl") about the importance of departure as a metaphor in the poet's work. His exploration of the concept involves him in some Heideggerian language that can be hard to take, as in sentences such as “The movement of Trakl’s poems is therefore properly to be seen as a departure from departedness,” or, more egregiously, “The song of one who has departed from departedness is itself the very act of his departure,” which is baroque enough to be almost absurd. But despite these stylistic lapses, Firmage clearly knows Trakl's work intimately, and he is an excellent guide for readers both new to Trakl and for those already familiar with the poems through other translations.

_Song of the Departed_ begins with a handful of rhymed poems that to my ear are the least successful in the book. There are few translators who can bring rhyme from one language into another without sounding stiff and awkward; and although Firmage admits that he has allowed himself some latitude in terms of the poetry's content in order to accommodate English rhyme, the poems remain unconvincing qua poems. For example, the first poem, “Dream of Evil,” contains such odd lines as “In golden gleam the chestnuts shrink and simmer,” which just seems opaque, and “Lepers, who rot away perhaps at night,” which is inappropriately humorous. The rhymes are often approximate only (hound/pond, painted/haunted, follow/mellow/willow), and the vocabulary occasionally adventitious or poorly chosen. “Ruft der Hirt die bange Herde” in “Plaint” becomes “The shepherd calls his cowed flock forth,” and while “cowed” is by no means incorrect (“bange” means fearful or afraid), its aural alliance with “cow” makes the reader wince a bit. Rhythm can also be a problem or a challenge in these rhymed poems, and while Firmage usually manages to find the appropriate English metrical pattern, his ear fails him occasionally, as in the last line of the first stanza of “Night Surrender,” where the three strong stresses with which it ends seem awkward (“In starlight the cross looms stark”) in an otherwise trochaic context. By contrast, these lines, from a poem called “Afra,” are wonderfully executed:

> Out of the branches fall the rotten fruit.  
> Unspeakable the flight of birds, a meeting  
> With the dying; dark year follows year.

With the majority of the poems that do not rhyme, Firmage is on easier (though never all that easy) ground. The movement from Section I (rhymed poems) to Section II (unrhymed pieces) is extraordinary, almost overwhelming, as though Trakl simply stopped writing conventional
poems one day and began the next to compose something completely new, lines full of startling imagery often with little connection between them but with huge emotional power in the aggregate. As a whole the poems cohere to some extent through the repetition of a number of words and thematic fragments: words like blue (surely the blue flower of Novalis representing nostalgie de l’infini), sister (many critics believe that Trakl had an incestuous relationship with his younger sister Grete), autumn, music, elder bushes, chestnut trees, and others. But with equal force it is the deliberate unconnectedness of the lines within an individual poem that is a key characteristic, and something quite new in German poetry in the years just before World War I. The scholar Herbert Lindenberger demonstrated long ago that Trakl’s technical prowess and formal strategies owe a good deal to Rimbaud’s work, which he knew in a rather second-rate German translation.

Firmage’s versions of the formally freer poems are mostly very good. The occasional word strikes me as cumbersome (“silverly,” for example) or even wrong (“novitiate” when clearly “novice” is meant), but in general Trakl’s powerful poetry works well in his English. A comparison of his translation of a few lines from “Unterwegs” (“Underway” in his version, “Wayfaring,” “On the Way,” or “On the Journey” in others) with four other versions shows his strengths:

A song on the guitar, which rings out in a strange tavern,
The wild elderberries there, a November day long ago,
Familiar footsteps on the dusky stairs, the sight of browned rafters,
An open window, where sweet hope remained behind—
All this is unspeakable, O God, that the knees buckle in astonishment.

This is deft work. One might prefer “twilit” to “dusky” (one of the other translators also chose dusky, two used twilit or twilight, and one used dark), and the final line might be slightly improved by inserting “so” before “unspeakable,” so that the “that” (“that the knees buckle”) becomes grammatically clearer. All the same, Firmage has brought Trakl’s poetry into an English that itself has an undeniably poetic character. It is good to have his translation back in print, and better still to have a larger number of his versions available. The poet of the “unspeakable,” the poet described by Firmage as “an enigma wrapped in silence,” is a little less silent for his efforts.

—Bruce Whiteman