

Andrew Zawacki

NEW COLLECTED POEMS BY TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER

The view from outside is a privileged view, and for those poets who choose exterior vantage points, being once-removed is an alluring stance. A unique intimacy is afforded poets appearing to eschew immersion in favor of radical separation. Detachment, as an aesthetic strategy, may reveal the intricate strangeness and complexity of that ever-shifting construct known as reality, and apparently distanced poets often draw their poetry from human currents, albeit obliquely, subverting the kind of criticism that Swann, say, made of Odette:

You are formless water that will trickle down any slope that it may come upon, a fish devoid of memory, incapable of thought, which all its life long in its aquarium will continue to dash itself, a hundred times a day, against a wall of glass, always mistaking it for water.

Tomas Tranströmer is one of the foremost practitioners of a poetics of glass. Though he lives in his native Sweden, his view is pitched from an earnestly earned peripheralism, from which he characterizes the ephemeral, multivalent interiors of the real. While his poetry of the late 1960s and early 70s was criticized for ignoring politics, and while Tranströmer is preoccupied with dreamscapes, musical compositions and paintings, he is not an escapist. A trained psychologist, he has been called the “buzzard poet,” since his poems often occur through an elevated telescopic eye. This positioning relies, however, on a different impetus from *l’art pour l’art*: his is a metaphysical evacuation. Tranströmer, sometimes ironically, shifts to a gaze from beyond in order to comprehend or newly energize the self and its environment. In “Icelandic Hurricane,” someone struggles across a field to enter a house and sit “behind the big glass pane”:

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What a strange and wonderful invention glass is—to be close yet untouched
 . . . Outside, a
horde of transparent sprinters in giant format charges across the lava plain.
 But I'm no
longer fluttering. I'm sitting behind the glass, at rest, my own portrait.

Tranströmer establishes the paradox of traveling behind glass: his posture is at once removed from the “sky-quake” of living, and, by having negotiated the storm (“I am going to make my way against the wind . . . how heavy for the butterfly to tow a barge!”) in order to observe it, the most profound way of understanding its tremors. Behind glass, the speaker is both “close” and “yet untouched,” so that outside the windchill and within the house (“A final wrestle with the door. And now inside”) he gets a better look at the weather. The speaker has not avoided the hurricane—rather, he “beat[s] upwind,” full of “panic” as he “founder[s],” to finally remove himself from it. In this ultimate stage of “rest” he becomes “my own portrait,” but his self-realization, while an exit from the storm, is thereby a sophisticated encounter with its relation to him. In a conversational note regarding “The Gallery,” which translator Robin Fulton includes in his slightly abbreviated introduction to this *New Collected Poems*, Tranströmer again evokes self-portraiture: after envisioning a crowd, he says, “I thought that I too belonged in the gallery,” so that what begins in objectivity ends by including and affirming the artist.

Tranströmer's poetics is implicitly based on the premise that glass is transparent, reflective, or both. One who looks into glass may see through to the other side; the scene will either be clearer or somehow distorted. The viewer may also see the reverse image of himself looking back, aware that a sheen separates him from some other side, and that he himself is transparent or reflective to whomever may be watching him. Glass is the site of a unifying division, and this border of indefiniteness—what Tranströmer calls a “truth-barrier”—largely defines the liminality of his poetry. Not only is a poem a glass between experience and its articulation, but also experience itself is a perception, a verbal interpretation continuous with living, which is how, for instance, “the moment I caught sight of ME / I lost ME.” Many of Tranströmer's poems, beginning with the famous “Prelude,” which opens his earliest volume *17 Poems* (1954) as well as this latest collection, explore provocative states between sleeping and waking. “Waking up is a parachute jump from dreams,” he writes, linking his aerial view to interstices of consciousness. He

wants “to step over the border without anyone noticing,” anonymity being the outsider’s passport.

Poetic distance precariously preserves anonymity, insuring what is at the same time self-knowledge. As someone in “Allegro” (*The Half-Finished Heaven*, 1962) plays the piano,

The music is a glass-house on the slope
where the stones fly, the stones roll.

And the stones roll right through
but each pane stays whole.

These lines establish Tranströmer’s predominant methodologies: the construction of a vertical world with kaleidoscopic poles of “above” and “below”; the existential predicament between moving and staying still, with its accompanying exit-entrance conundrums; the existential paradox of how the self will not be broken by otherwise destructive events; and the need to discover music among these integrated dynamics. Sometimes Tranströmer positions himself at the top of some slope, watching cities and forests located “under the repose of the constellations,” while at other moments, particularly in *Seeing in the Dark* (1970), he writes from “down among the ballast,” urging readers to “look into the inverted periscope / downwards.” Occasionally he configures objectivity from both ends, as in “The Journey’s Formulae”: “But the writer is halfway into his image, there / he travels, at the same time eagle and mole.”

Most poignant are the poems in which Tranströmer establishes himself as the glassy division between two elements, as if he is simultaneously absent from the world in which he lives. In “Further In” he writes, “I am transparent / and writing becomes visible / inside me,” as language penetrates the receptive self, elsewhere figured as a hotel room. He becomes a vacancy or, as in “The Outpost,” the “place / where creation is working itself out . . . I am the turnstile.” Language constructs a prismatic self that receives all shades of experience, refracting them into more or less precise or beautiful forms, while also mirroring transmuted representations of the self, as in “A Man From Benin” (*Secrets on the Way*, 1958):

I saw the image of an image
of a man coming forward
in the emptiness, a page
lying open. . . .

*"I am come to meet him
who raises his lantern
to see himself in me."*

This veneer does not protect from potential harm but instead serves as an evaluative perspective, increasing possibility. This is why Tranströmer's "dread / that the storm will blow us empty" is mediated by his more recent "Vermeer" (*For Living and Dead*, 1989):

The clear sky has leant against the wall.
It's like a prayer to the emptiness.
And the emptiness turns its face to us
and whispers
"I am not empty, I am open."

New Collected Poems closes with a series of autobiographical chapters called *Memories Look at Me* (1993), their title reinforcing the play of flip-flopped vantages. In "Primary School," Tranströmer admits, "I was acutely aware of the danger of being regarded as an outsider because at heart I suspected I was one." He does affect an outsider's orbit, to better understand what he's circulating around and more effectively embrace its diversity, from afar. Tranströmer satisfies Alastair Reid's definition of a foreigner, as someone "properly lost, and so in a position to discover the world, from the outside in." Readers depend on the vision of self-styled foreigners—including those who depart from themselves—for when they cannot see reality from a transformative distance. Tranströmer's poetry, even through these nearly seamless translations, promotes his hope that "what looks at first like a confrontation turns out to be a connection."