

POEMS

By J. AQUILINA

OBITUARY

No more shoe-banging scenes. Kruschew is dead;
 Left the U.S.S.R. and his hospital bed
 To join a new world, after having shed
 The insignia that made him a prominent Red.
 It did him good to look up God instead,
 Beyond where astronauts and missiles sped.

12.ix.71 – Balzan

A WIDOW'S SORROW

A sorrowing widow kissed for the last time
 Kruschew's pale forehead, folded arms at rest.
 How many sorrowing widows kissed the foreheads
 Of their dead husbands killed in Budapest?

25.ix.71 – Balzan

WESTWARD HO!

As the time for packing up gets near,
 The time for going back home,
 I pray the Captain of the boat
 To steer us clear of doubt and fear,
 The fear of the hazards of the trip
 That has sunk many a ship.

Oh, Captain, Steerman of the Boat,
 As you call us all aboard
 And count us one by one,
 We pray you steer the Shadow Ship
 Westward ho!
 Towards the rising sun.

1.xi.72

LEPTIS MAGNA

Ruins of Sabratha
 The thud of the centuries by the Blue Glass Sea
 Fill me with admiration
 Awed by the dread of the Vulture,
 Man-chasing cormorant,
 For the architects that designed the city,
 The Forum and the Temple,
 The *hamamat* by the blue
 Warm sea – ever the same
 Warm blue sea.
 (Hello, ghostland! Who goes there?)
 The dead city, the shadow city,
 Fills me with tearful pity
 For what the unearthed city
 Was once and is now
 No more – the Dead City, the Shadow City.
 Hawks overhead –
 Solitude and pity
 Time, the grave-Digger, dangling his feet
 On the broken colonnades.

15.xii.72 – Tripoli

TIME'S CLOWN

I have long been gliding,
 Gliding down, gliding down,
 Turning somersaults like a clown
 In Time's circus (Time's Clown)
 Sliding down, always down
 The slippery back of a Bear,
 Bear Black, Bear Brown, Bear White,
 Bear of the North Pole.
 Gliding down every moment of my life
 I have now reached the bottom of its spine
 Right at the beginning of its tail

From the beginning to the end of the story –
 Tip end of the spine
 (How it hurts!)

A laugh, a whimper, a whine.
 Pray you be ready to collect me
 On your arms, on your lap,
 When I slide off the last vertebra
 Of the Spine of Time.

Collect me kindly on my way back
 Lest I break my neck on the Rock of Time;
 Collect me as the midwife
 Collected me on her arms
 Before I was put astride
 The slippery back of the Big, Big Bear –
 Wandering Bear
 That is Time –
 This World its Den.

16.xii.72 – Tripoli

ATHENS

This is Athena's City, proud, unique,
 Belovèd of the gods that made her great,
 From where Olympus ruled her warriors' fate,
 Launching the Ulyssean Odyssey of the Greek.
 'Tis here that Mind and Vision touched the peak,
 And Phidias' luminous statues re-create
 The epic of the Body, bards narrate
 Battles at sea and shipwrecks in the creek.

From where the Parthenon guards its ancient glory,
 Poseidon's temple dominates on high
 Like an eagle's eerie, I espy the City
 With its *stora* and *agora* near by,
 Haunted by myths that people Homer's story:
 These broken columns wrench my heart with pity.

Athens – 27.iii.73

FAME

What would not a man do to attain immortality!
 I think he would not mind a little vulgarity.
 Lord Byron, for instance, did not scruple to scratch his name
 On a column of Poseidon's temple to win a double fame.
 Now with Poseidon he shares the limelight and the glory,
 Not less the banter of American tourists amused by the story.

Athens – 28.iii.73

THE STORM

God, help me weather the storm
 Before my boat reaches
 The far-off harbour
 With tattered sails and broken masts.
 The oars are not broken yet;
 But the arms are tired.

20.iv.73

SHIPWRECK

Will it not be very cruel
 If the ship, with all its cargo,
 Sinks in the harbour
 Swallowed up by the deep shark sea,
 As if nothing ever really mattered
 Good and bad all pushed
 Down the throat of the shark
 Blue sea?

20.iv.73

DEDICATION

Mary, Dawn of Joy,
 I instal you Queen
 Of my Heart and Mind.
 Govern me by the regality of your love,
 Mother most kind.

20.iv.73

QUESTIONS

How long must I stretch my arm
 To catch and remove the dark cloud
 That conceals you from my immediate sight,
 God invisible, yet unmistakable?
 How long and how often must I push back
 The attacks of the Bear
 That claws me from behind?
 How long, O God, will you remain invisible
 To my inward searching
 Behind the dark cloud?
 How long and how tortuous is the road back
 Through the Dark Tunnel?

6.v.73

ACADEMIC BOREDOM

The lecture was scholarly, the lecturer precise
 and deep,
 The Chairman, after having sung his praises, fell
 asleep
 Enjoying the snooze till the end of the learned
 communication
 When he joined the clapping of hands to express
 his approbation.

29th International Congress of Orientalists,
 Paris – July 1973

J. AQUILINA

THE PEOPLE'S FESTIVAL OF FUN AND MIRTH*

Make room for King Carnival! Blow the trumpets loud!
 Cry his subjects today that swell the motley crowd.
 We greet His Majesty with cheers for three Days' Fun,
 Salute him our Monarch and crown him with our Sun!
 Come, stand up and salute! King Carnival passes by –
 Take your place on his chariot for tomorrow you die!

*Originally published in the Carnival programme of 1958.

J. AQUILINA

POEMS

by JOE FRIGGIERI

(translations by Fr. Peter Serracino-Ingloff)

STEDINA

Il-mithna li żżaqżaq fuq rasna
 taf kliemna bħal kredu
 taf ruħna minn ġewwa
 u taf il-litanija
 ta' l-immijiet qabel ma troxx id-dalma
 meta jiqfilna l-kliem
 u ruħna tinxef qoxqox
 ibqa' ejja miegħi taħt il-mithna l-kbira
 u ssemma' sewwa.

FAIRE-PART

En grinçant sur nos têtes
 le grand moulin n'aurait-il appris
 nos redites comme le récit
 d'un credo, ne pourrait-il
 les dédales de nos dedans
 parcourir, s'il voulait, à l'aveuglette,
 et aussi les litanies de oui-mais
 dont nous faisons litière dans la brume
 qui tombe tout autour de nous
 en attendant la totale obscurité.

Lorsque les mots ne couleront plus
 et nos âmes écorchées se dessèchent
 fréquentions encore cet endroit sous le grand moulin
 et alors écoute bien.

GHALIEX?

Ghaliex il-qiegh tal-baħar
 illum mhux ibeżżagħni
 u l-krib tal-gawwi fuq il-blat
 inħossu bħal stedina?
 ghaliex ir-riħ tax-xitwa
 qisu tmellisa helwa f'xagħri mħabbla
 u l-qtar tax-xita f'wiċċi
 jaħraq bħal omm qed tibki?

Tgħid qed tistrieħ il-mewt
 fuq l-alga sewda
 u nista' llum sa fl-aħħar
 nistejqer bl-arja tfuħ
 u bl-ilma mielah?
 Tgħid nista' nimxi 'l bogħod
 illum u għada
 mingħajr ma nħossu jċedi
 ir-ramel taħt riġlejja?

Imqar li jkun dan biss
 illum u għada
 umbagħad ha tigi l-mewt bil-minġel f'idha,
 ha tagħmel festa bija, ha tifnini,
 laqwa li nkun mxejt
 illum u għada
 qabel immur nistrieħ
 fuq l-alga sewda.

IT-TIENI DARBA

Il-bebbuxu trekken f'xaqq fil-blat
 ma' l-eku ta' lehinna
 mal-passi ta' riġlejna

illum ersaqna kisnijiet
 la int la jien ma wrejna
 la kelma la ċaqliqa
 u l-bebbuxu ma raniex

u baqa' jilgħab fuq ir-ramla bajda.

LA DEUXIÈME FOIS

L'escargot s'enfonça dans une crevasse du rocher
 à l'écho de nos voix
 au piétinement de nos pattes.

Mais aujourd'hui nous sommes arrivés à la sourdine
 toi et moi nous voici
 sans un mot sans un geste
 et l'escargot ne s'est aperçu de rien
 et il continua le jeu sur la plage blanche.

EPIGRAMM A

Igbor ċagħqa
 aqta' kewkba
 tiġrix hafna
 inti u ġejja

hekk għallinqas
 qabel rasal
 nilhaq noħlom
 l'inti hdejja.

EPIGRAMM B

Jien naqra' driegħi
 għas-sbieħ għajnejk
 u naqsam baħar
 biex niġi hdejk

imma kemm taħseb
 li int sabiħa
 biex wara kollox
 nibqa' bir-riħa?

LOGHBA

Is-surmast dawwama tond ma' hofra kbira
 u l-ohrajn kollha qabzu minn tarf sa tarf
 imma meta mess lili
 kejjilt l-ixbar b'ghajnejja
 u bqajt imwahhal
 f'xifer il-hofra l-kbira.

GHID

Dan ghalmin hargu t-tfal
 bil-palm u l-liedna?
 u ghalmin l-orgni
 fawwar hnejjet il-katidral
 b'noti qabbieza?

Mhux ghalina
 is-sliem tal-flawt u l-arpa
 u l-ghanja raqqadija tal-flejguta.

In-nisa taghna xuxthom mahlula
 irahmu f'nofs l-indiema;
 qarset ix-xema' wiċċ il-bniet imgezwra
 fl-imnatar vjola;
 u fuq ras il-bhejjem taghna
 ghadna rroxxu l-irmied.

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by JOE FRIGGIERI

(translations by Theresa Micallef)

VJAGĠ

Tfajjel aghini idek
 u hudni 'l boghod sakemm jaghjew riglejna
 sakemm ma jidhrux iżjed il-kampnari
 u l-qniepen ma jdoqqux is-seba' moti
 ta' l-erwieh midinba

hudni fejn ma tasalx
 il-bikja tan-newwieha
 u qabel tarani rieqed
 thallinix.

Umbaghad meta tismagħhom
 ir-russinjoli fl-arja kaħlanija
 meta tarah il-lewz ifur bil-bjuda
 u x-xefaq qed ibexbex
 umbaghad ejja qajjimni.

A VOYAGE

Boy, give me your hand
 and take me far until we're tired out
 until the steeples fade
 and the bells stop tolling
 for the souls of the lost.

Take me where the song of mourning cannot be heard
 stay until I've fallen asleep.

Only then, when you can hear the nightingales in the blue air,
 when the almond tree overflows with white
 and the horizon is streaked with light,
 only then, you must come and call me.

QUDDIESA

Int taf

armaj ruhi xrafet bid-dnubiet il-mejta
 kull platt li ġie laqqattu
 u meta stajt billejt subgħajja sew
 fiż-żejt u l-balzmu tal-passjoni l-kbira
 u talli la qerrejt u la sogħbieni
 il-ħanin Alla nsieni.

Da' x'kien illejla m'intx tobroxli moħħi
 bis-seba' sjuf tas-sagramenti l-ġodda?
 lanqas tikwi f'ġenbejja
 karattri ħomor b'tarf dufrejġ misnuna?
 x'inhil dir-riħa ta' ġismek sħun
 bħal qamħ Awissu mxarrab?
 u x'inhil jsib il-baħar f'għajnejk rotob?

Mhux sewwa troxx il-melħ fuq il-ferita,
 imma jekk trid, għal-lejla biss,
 ninsew li ħell l-inbid u l-ħmira qraset,
 u m qar għal-lejla biss,
 la hawn dal-plejju jfuh, la haw' l-urieħaq,
 inqaddsu taħt il-qamar.

GHEDEN

Thallihx jixref rasu d-dudu
 tad-dubju seksiek
 tħallihx is-serp isefsef f'widintek
 kliem għasli bħal ta' Eva
 iżd' isħqu bla ma tħares

ma tmurx illejla
 meta ma tkunx tistenna
 toħroġ minn ġot-tuffieħa
 il-qrusa tal-misteru
 u llejla wkoll
 bir-riħ li jmelleš wičċna
 jaqsam id-dlam raġġ Adonajs
 u ssir taf kollox.

BIDLA

Hekk meta jiħmar is-sħab
 u l-palm jitbandal waħdu
 fuq ġbini tinżel fwieħa rqiqa
 u minn ġor-ramel titla' s-sinfonija
 ta' l-ilmijiet hadrana.

Imma meta jiswied is-sħab
 u l-palm jissara ma' l-irwiefen
 u r-ramel isir ċaġħaq iniggež

l-arja timentela bit-twerżiq ta' l-isqra
 u jekk ma jkunx xi hadd li jżommli jdejja
 f'tarf l-irdum inħossni qed nistordi
 u l-baħar ma jridx wisq
 biex jitla' għalija.

Tiftakar il-baħar
tiftakar il-blat
tiftakar ix-xemx u l-qamar
tiftakar ir-riħ
tiftakar is-sajf inkaljat u x-xitwa
tiftakar il-lejl u n-nħar
tiftakar il-kwiekeb

tliet mitt sajf tiftakar
tliet mitt xitwa qalila
tliet mitt rebbiegħa bi tliet mitt tqala ġdida
tliet mitt ħarifa bla ma toħrof darba

u l-blat inkaljat taħt riġlejha
u s-silġ ma' kuxtejha
u l-beraq li jfellel ġenbejha
u r-riħ bħal azzar ġol-qurriegħa

bil-karba tal-ħlas dejjiema
bil-ħorħara li ddakkar u terġa'
fi tliet mitt sajf li ġej
tliet mitt xitwa qalila
tliet mitt rebbiegħa ġhajjiema

ma jkunx id-dudu li jnawriha qalbha
ma tkunx is-ħana li tnixxfilha għeruqha
ma jkunx is-silġ li jingazzalha demmha.

Tiftakar il-baħar
tiftakar il-blat
tiftakar ix-xemx u l-qamar
tiftakar ir-riħ
tiftakar is-sajf inkaljat u x-xitwa
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la int la jien ma wrejna
la kelma la ċaqliqa
u l-bebbuxu ma raniex

u baqa' jilgħab fuq ir-ramla bajda.

THE SECOND TIME

The snail squeezed itself into a crevice
to the echo of our voices, to the sound of our footsteps.

Today we came stealthily
both you and I came
without a word without a move
and the snail never saw us
and went on playing on the white beach.

IX-XIĦ U JIEN

Meta staqsejt lix-xwejjah
li jaf jaqra l-ġrajja
"Xwejjah aqrati jdejja",
ix-xemx għamietu 'x-xwejjah
u minn xufftejh imfella
waqa' bħal haġar jaqta'
kliem li ma jifhm u hadd

u telaq wahdu biex imiss il-kwiekeb.

THE OLD MAN AND I

When I asked the old man who reads fortunes
'Old man, read my hand',
the sun blinded the old man
and from his furrowed lips
cryptic words fell like pointed stones.
And he set off to touch the stars.