

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Kyrie

At times my life suddenly opens its eyes in the dark.
A feeling of masses of people pushing blindly
through the streets, excitedly, toward some miracle,
while I remain here and no one sees me.

It is like the child who falls asleep in terror
listening to the heavy thumps of his heart.
For a long, long time till morning puts his light in the locks
and the doors of darkness open.

Tomas Tranströmer¹

☞ Reflections

It is a new season, *Wellspring* refreshed. As I return to writing these reflections each week, I return also to those habits that make such writing possible for me—the habit of attentive reading, the habit of set-aside time to think and create, the habit of practicing patience as a poem such as this one works on me. Some of these essays come more easily than others just as some poems, of course, are more penetrable than others. And like many lessons that sound straightforward in theory but are much harder to practice (and have, in this case anyway, taken me years to appreciate), the one I have learned from *Wellspring* is simply that sometimes there is more to say and sometimes there is less. Perhaps it is my real work each week to figure out which is so.

I offer this poem in that spirit of discernment, wishing to honor the silent response that good poems inspire and wishing also to articulate what it is that moves me. It is one thing to recognize a well-made poem and quite another to attempt to speak to its craftsmanship—especially considering the inherent irony: the best poems are not paraphrase-able, are emotionally untidy, and carry with them invisible, ineffable truths. Like having to explicate a pun, or explain a good joke, there is always something lost in translation from poem to commentary, something subtracted in the rendering and delivery.

And yet, and yet. Here is “Kyrie,” translated from Swedish, whose real subject is to me a subversion of fear and darkness, a meditation that begins and ends in a liminal space between open and closed, between wakefulness and sleep, between light and dark, between

¹ “Kyrie” by Tomas Tranströmer from *The Half-Finished Heaven*, Graywolf Press. Used by permission.

terror and mercy. Appropriately, the poet's translator, Patty Crane, has written of Tranströmer's particular curiosity about the relationship between interior and exterior landscapes. "For him," she writes, "inspiration is 'the feeling of being in two places at the same time.'... There he is at the nexus."²

I think that it is this very between-ness that is the heart and the heat of the poem's experience. The poet himself, then, becomes the link that connects one state to another much the way the white space between stanzas here connects and unifies one darkness with another. The sense of abandonment, invisibility, and profound loneliness in the first stanza mirrors the agony of the beginning of the second stanza—that is, "the child who falls asleep in terror." The title, "Kyrie"—the Greek words for *Lord, have mercy* are *Kyrie eleison*—is of course essential to our grappling with these parallel images. The poem feels to me as if it is barreling into the void, into fear, "pushing blindly / through the streets" but is then resolved, relieved, by daylight and its mercy.

As many of us have probably experienced, the morning sun has a way of vanquishing the horrible night just passed. The poem offers not a solution, not an escape, not a way *out* of darkness and terror; instead, the poem gives us a way *through*. Maybe it is our universal hope that our eyes might be opened in the dark as well, to an awareness that perhaps we were not barreling into the void at all, but headed towards a miracle unseen.

✧ About the poet

Tomas Tranströmer (1931-2015) authored numerous poetry collections and his work has been translated into over fifty languages. One of Sweden's most important poets, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2011. The critic Katie Peterson has written that Tranströmer has "perfected a particular kind of epiphanic lyric, often in quatrains, in which nature is the active, energizing subject, and the self (if the self is present at all) is the object." Prior to his stroke in 1990, he worked as a psychologist, focusing on the juvenile prison population as well as persons with disabilities, and those with convictions and substance abuse issues. His work has been described as modernist, expressionist, and surrealist, and is often concerned with fragmentation and isolation, striving to understand the unknowable and glimpse the unseeable.



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²"Tomas Tranströmer's Translator Talks Tenses, Silent Energy" by Harriet Staff, poetryfoundation.org