

· My Tongue in Other Cheeks

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"Watch Out for Obscure Publications"

My Fongue in Other Cheeks

A Selection of Translations by James Sallis

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To David, who knows the same parlor tricks

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To a Brazilian professor who had translated Baudelaire, Annibal sent the following telegram: "Kindly retranslate me back into French immediately. Signed: Baudelaire."

Albert Camus, American Journals



At the Heart of the World

Blaise Cendrars

This Paris sky's purer than any winter sky clear with cold. I've never seen nights more filled with stars and growth than this spring With boulevard trees like shadows of the sky, Foliage in the rivers laced with elephant-ears, Sycamore leaves, heavy chestnuts.

A lily on the Seine's the moon cut loose by water, The Milky Way swoons down on Paris to embrace it, Naked and mad and upside down, its mouth sucks at Notre Dame. The Great Bear and Little Bear growl around Saint Merry. My severed hand shines in the sky, in the stars of Orion.

In this hard cold light, shimmering, insubstantial, Paris is like the still image of a plant Reappearing in its ash. Pitiful phantom. Perfectly straight and ageless, houses and streets are just Piles of stone and steel in an unreal desert.

Babylon and Thebes are no more dead, tonight, than this dead city of Paris Blue and green, ink and tar, bones bleached by starlight.

Not a sound. Not even a footstep. The heavy silence of war.

My eye goes from urinals to the streetlamp's violet eyes.

That's the only place I can focus my dread.

Every night like this I cross all Paris on foot
From the Batignolles to the Latin Quarter, same way I'd cross the Andes
Under the fire of news stars, larger and more alarming,
The Southern Cross more prodigious with each step towards it, emerging from
the ancient world
Onto a new continent.

I'm the man with no more past. --But my stump aches.--I've let a hotel room, better to be alone with myself. I've a brand-new wicker basket filling with manuscripts. No books or pictures, not a single artsy trinket.

Morning papers linger on my table. I work in this bare room, behind a smeared window, Bare feet on red linoleum, playing with balloons and a child's toy trumpet: I'm working at the END OF THE WORLD.

The Bowels of My Mother

Blaise Cendrars

That was my first house It was all round And I often think How well-off I was...

My feet on your heart mama Knees against your liver Clutched hands at the spout That ran out to your belly

My back twisted into a spiral Ears full eyes empty Tightly curled Head almost out of your body

My skull at your cervix I had your own health then Easy heat of your blood My father's embraces

Often stray passions Lit up my darkness there A knock at my skull loosened me And I kicked out at your heart The strong muscles of your vagina Clamped down then I let go sadly Your blood annointed me

My face still a washboard From the rub of my father Why do we have to let go Half-strangled that way?

If I could have opened my mouth I would have bitten you
If I could have spoken then
I'd have said:
Shit, I don't want to live!

Hotel Notre-Dame

Blaise Cendrars

I've come back to the Quarter
The days of my youth
I think it's a waste of time
There's nothing left now
Of my dreams of my despairs
What I'd become at eighteen years

They're breaking up the blocks of houses Changing street names Saint-Severin's stripped bare La place Maubert is larger Rue Saint-Jacques widened The neighborhood looks good New and older at the same time

I'm getting torn down and changed myself Beard and hair cut short Wearing today's face And my grandfather's skull

That's why I don't regret anything
And I call to the wrecking crews
Knock my childhood to the ground .
My family and habits
Put up a train station in its place
Leave only an empty lot
To mark my origin

I'm not my father's son
And I love only my great-grandfather
I'm making a new name for myself
Prominent like a billboard
Put up on a scaffold
Behind which they go on building
Novelties tomorrows

Air

Jacques Dupin

The body and dreams of the lady We whirled the hammers for --And now they're lost, returning From the clouds only A few tatters of lightning And the dew to come. Family Graveyard
In memory of Robert Lowell

Andrei Voznesensky

You came through the gate at Peredelkino, Head to one side, cheek pressed to your shoulder As though supporting an unseen violin. A lost violin. And now I want to hear it.

At Peter's house you went in squinting. Stood by a notch hacked on the door there And fit yourself under it, Trying on what remained of great Peter.

How emptiness resounds where a body was! A new shadow stands under the notch now. Boughs above the graveyard are bare. And that lost violin cries out.

Cloaked in woods, a family graveyard. Your mother and father. But where are you? As in books with markers removed We can no longer find our place.

How is it, Robert, in your new wilderness? We all carry our graveyards within us. And how can we name the center of sorrow In this void that rushes so quickly by? The name you wore is worn by stone.

So you've won your way through the maze. And that shadow under the notch, is it you? From Pasternak's rowan tree I bring this branch For whatever good such things may do.

Light of Evening

Yves Bonnefoy

Evening, These chittering, uncertain birds Snapping at one another, light. Hand that passed over this bleak edge.

We have been still for a long time. We speak quietly. And time stays around us, pools of color.

The Art of Poetry

Yves Bonnefoy

Out of the night the eyes were dredged. The hands held still and dried. You reconcile the fever. Tell the heart To be the heart. In the veins a devil Fled screaming. In the mouth a sad voice heavy with blood Has been washed and restored.

Gravestone

Yves Bonnefoy

He wanted, without knowing,
He has died, without having.
Trees, smoke,
Every kind of wind and disillusion
Sheltered him.
Infinitely
He has known death alone.

We Are Many

Pablo Neruda

Of the many men I am, we are, I can't turn up a single one: they lose themselves in my clothes, flee to far cities.

When everything's set to make me look smart the fool I keep hidden takes the words right out of my mouth.

Other times I'm sleeping among distinguished company and when I go looking for my brave self a coward I don't know appears whispering to my skeleton that he must be careful.

When a decent house starts burning instead of the firemen I call an arsonist runs up and turns out to be me. I'm in disorder. What must I do to settle my mind? How can I redeem myself?

All the books I read celebrate bright heroes forever sure of themselves:
I die of envy for them, and at movies filled with wind and bullets watch the horseman jealously,
I'm even jealous of the horse.

But when I call for a hero out comes my old lazy slobbering self, and I never know who I am, never know how many I am or will be. I'd like to ring a bell and summon the real me. When I'm needed I shouldn't disappear.

When I write I'm absent and when I come back I've gone: gone off to see if other folk go through what I go through, if they've got so many others inside them, if they see themselves the same. And when I've found out all this I'll know so much about everything whenever I talk about my problems it's geometry I'll be speaking.

The Disavowed

Pablo Neruda

I left her waiting in the doorway and went away never to return.

She didn't know I wouldn't come back.

A dog went by, a nun went by, a week and a year went by.

Rain scrubbed away my footprints and grass grew in the street and one after another like stones, like heavy, slow stones, the years came down on her head.

Then the war came, came like a bloody volcano. Children and houses died.

And that woman did not die.

The whole of the landscape burned.

Peaceful yellow gods

who'd spent a thousand years meditating
got cast from the temple in pieces.

They couldn't be allowed to go on dreaming.

Cool houses and the veranda where I slept on a hammock, rosy plants, leaves shaped like huge hands, chimneys, marimbas, all were crushed and burned.

Where the city had been only ashen things remained, twisted iron, hellish heads of dead statues and a black stain of blood.

And that woman waiting.

Regulation

Francis Ponge

Enough of this snow beloved for postcards.

Choose frost instead, frost and wind with no cloud in the sky,

serum, acid and the charged cool air for your glassy eyes,

for your fragile fingers, for the discreet snail of sex.

Hamlet

Boris Pasternak

The rumble subsides. I have my cue. Pausing for a moment backstage In echoes I seek a clue
To how the play's going.

A thousand opera glasses Aim their darkness at me. If there's any way, Father, Please let this glass pass by me.

Your will I cherish; I thank You for the role. But now the part's been rewritten: I pray You'll release me.

The play's set, of course, The end waiting. Pharisees All around me, life's plot hard to follow.

White Snow

Apollinaire

Angels angels in the sky One is dressed as a soldier One as a cook And the rest are singing

To you blue soldier Long past Christmas gentle spring Will present you a bright star A shining sun

And now the cook is plucking geese Ah! fall of snow Falling, no Girl for my arms

Back and Forth

Raymond Radiguet

Eros stitched on the embroidered square Quiver hiding other attributes

Worse

Than by bullets
This body shot with sadness
Hemmed in by 4 walls

The sun
Has eaten away part of the head that weeps
on
the rocking chair

Sorrows
Unfold in the desk
That singing
You have locked

I Will Die of This Cancer

Boris Vian

I will die of this cancer climbing my vertebrae It'll be one horrible evening Clear, warm, scented, sensual I will die from the rotting Of cells I hardly knew I had I will die, one leg torn away By a giant rat sprouting from a gigantic orifice I will die the death of a hundred cuts The sky will come down on me Dash me to pieces like a dull windowpane I will die of the roar of voices Bursting my ears I will die of insensible wounds Inflicted two hours before dawn In the general slaughter I will die unaware That I am dying, I will die Swallowed up by dry rot Mummified in meters of decaying cotton I will die drowned in midnight oil Trampled under the feet of indifferent beasts Then by different beasts I will die naked, swaddled in bloody linen Or sewn in a sackcloth belly with the gills of razors I will die perhaps without anyone's making much fuss Over polishing my toenails Hands filled with tears

Hands full of tears
I will die when they slice away
The lids of my eyes under a raving sun
When they hold my ears and pour in slowly
Their boasts of vile accomplishments
I will die of seeing children tortured
And men gone pale with shock
I will die eaten alive
By worms, I will die
Hands bound beneath the cataract
Burned to a crisp in this dismal fire
I will die, some of me, more,
Dispassionate yet fascinated
Then when it's all done
I will die.

The Spiders

Boris Vian

Into houses where children are dying The old people lug their bodies They sit in the waiting room Canes between black knees They listen, shaking heads Whenever the child coughs Then their hands snatch at their hearts And become huge yellow spiders Rising feebly like butterflies And stumbling against one another on the ceiling Faintly they smile And the coughs of the child stop-And those huge yellow spiders Rest trembling On handles of polished boxwood On the canes between their hard knees Then when the child is dead They get up and go somewhere else

I Don't Want to Die

Boris Vian

I don't want to die Before I've seen The black dogs of Mexico Sleeping without dreams Bare-assed apes Who devour the tropics Silver spiders acrouch On their nests of bubbles I don't want to die Without knowing If the moon's round face Beneath its fake nickel look Has a point If the sun is cold If there are really Just four seasons Without having gone out On the town Wearing a dress Without having peeked Into sewers Without having poked My dick where it doesn't belong I don't want to hit the end Ignorant of leprosy Not knowing The seven diseases

One catches down there Good or bad What do I care If if if I knew Got it firsthand Not to mention All I've learned All I like Everything that's pleased me The sea's green bottom Where stalks of seaweed waltz On wavering sand Burnt grass of June Earth crackling Smell of evergreens. And her kisses Kisses here and kisses there My belle's coming My bear cub, my Ursula I don't want to die Without having consumed Her mouth with mine Used up her body with my hands The rest with my eyes Respectfully I won't say any more I don't want to die Till someone's invented Immortal roses Two-hour days Seas on mountains Mountains in seas An end to pain

Newspapers in full color All the children happy And so many other tricks Up the sleeves Of ingenious engineers Gay gardeners Care-full socialists Urbane urbanists And thoughtful thinkers So much to see T'see and t'hear So much t'look forward to There in the night

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Myself, I see the end coming Grumbling as it hauls itself along Rotten jaws Taking me in Its froglike embrace

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I don't want to die
No sir no ma'am
Before I've tried
The taste that torments me
The strongest taste of all
I don't want to die
Till I have on my tongue
The tang of death....

James Sallis has published ten novels, three volumes of musicology, multiple collections of stories, poems and essays, a landmark biography of Chester Himes, and a translation of Raymond Queneau's novel Saint Glinglin. Stories and poems regularly appear in venues such as the Georgia Review, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Pequod and American Poetry Review. Jim is also a well-regarded critic, contributing to Book World, the New York Times, The Review of Contemporary Fiction and the Boston Review. Currently he writes columns for The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, literary website Web Del Sol and the Boston Globe.

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