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Three Poems by Giacomo Leopardi

Translated by Patrick Creagh*

The Calm after the Storm
(*La quiete dopo la tempesta*)

The storm is over and past.
I hear birds making merry, and the hen
Back on the road again
Repeating her refrain. And lo! the blue
Bursts through towards the mountain, there in the west; 5
The country rinses the murk away
And clear in the valley reappears the river.
Gladdened is every heart, on every side
The hum of life arises,
The round of work resumes. 10
Holding his handiwork the craftsman comes
Singing to his doorstep, to survey
The watery sky; eager to be the first,
Some hussy bustles out to fetch in rain
From the recent cloudburst; 15
And now from lane to lane
The costermonger raises
His daily cry again.
Here comes the sun returning: see, it smiles
Upon the hills and farms. The servants throw 20
The windows wide on terrace and balcony,
And you hear from the highway down afar
Creak of wagon, tinkle of harness-bells
As the wayfarer sets forth on the road once more.

Every heart is glad. 25
When is life so sweet, so fine
As it is at this time?
When does a man with greater zest
Busy himself with some pursuit,
Return to a task or take up something fresh? 30
When does he dwell upon his troubles less?
Ah pleasure, child of anguish,
Insubstantia¹ joy, the fruit
Of terror lately passed,
Which dismayed and struck the fear of death 35
Even into one who held this life in hate:

* About Patrick Creagh, see in this issue of CIS “Translator Patrick Creagh and the Sound of Italy” by Lucia Re.

Wherefore in interminable torment
Folk sweated cold, aghast,
Shuddering dumbstruck, seeing
Unleashed to their affliction 40
Lightning, cloud-rack, stormy blast.

These, O courteous nature,
Are the gifts which you bestow;
This is the sort of pleasure
You offer to us mortals. Release from woe 45
Is pleasure here below.

Troubles you dispense with bounteous hand,
Grief comes unbidden; and, of delight, that little
By miracle or marvel sometimes born
Of anguish, is great boon. O sons of men, 50
You darlings of the gods! Happy enough
If it be given you to draw one breath
Without some grief; and blest
If you are cured of every grief by death.

To Silvia
(*A Silvia*)

Silvia, do you still
Recall that season in your life on earth
When beauty itself shone forth
Out at those eyes, blithesome and fugitive,
And you, content and pensive, climbed 5
The threshold of youth?

The tranquil rooms
Rang, and the streets around,
With your perpetual song
As you, intent 10
On women's tasks would sit, happy enough
With the vague fair future that you had in mind.
It was the fragrant maytime then, and this
Was how your days were spent.

And I, from time to time 15
Leaving my pleasant studies, the hard-won
Pages on which the best
Of my youth and very being were passed,
From the high balconies of my father's house
Used to hearken to your voice, 20
And hear your swift hand shifting
This way and that across the exacting loom.
I gazed on shining skies,
The gilded streets, the gardens,
Thither the distant sea, hither the hills. 25
What I felt then at heart
No human tongue tells.

What pleasurable thoughts,
O my Silvia, what brave hopes, what hearts!
How wondrous then appeared to us 30
This human life, and fate!
When I remember such abounding hope
A sentiment oppresses me,
Sour and disconsolate,
And I grieve for my misfortune once again. 35
Nature, O nature, why do you not fulfil
The promises you made us then?
Why, and so utterly,
Do you defraud your children?

You, before winter shrivelled up the grasses, 40
Besieged and vanquished by some hidden sickness
Perished, O tenderling, and never saw

The summer of your days;
Your heart was never pleased with sweet praise
Now of your raven tresses, 45
Now of your love-lit and elusive eyes;
Nor did you trade love's phrases with your friends
On holidays.

Nor was it long before
My sweet hope perished also; for the fates 50
Also denied my years
Their season of youth. How soon,
Alas how soon you sped away
My long-lamented hope,
The darling of my heart in early days. 55
Is this the world we knew? Are these
The joys, the love, the exploits, the events
That oftentimes we spoke about together?
Is this the end and all of humankind?
For at the first advance 60
Of truth, you fell, poor thing; and with your hand
Cold death and a plain grave
You showed me in the distance.

The Feast-Day Evening
(*La sera del dí di festa*)

Soft and clear is the night and without wind,
And peaceful upon the roofs and in the gardens
Rests the moon, and far away reveals
Every mountain shining. Dearest one,
Now every path is hushed, and through the windows 5
Rarely there glimmers some late-burning lamp.
You are asleep, for easy sleep embraced you
There in your quiet rooms; no care at all
Gnaws at you, you neither know nor think
How keen a wound you opened in my breast. 10
You sleep; I stand at the window to behold
The heavens, so benignant in appearance,
And omnipotent ancient nature who
Fashioned me for anguish. To me she said:
I mean to deny you hope, yes, even hope; 15
Those eyes will never glisten except with tears.
This was a fest day: now from the merriments
You take your rest; and maybe you remember
In dream how many you charmed today, how many
Charmed you: not I, not that I even hope 20
To come into your mind. But I ask how long
I have to live, and at this I cast myself
Down, cry out, and quake. O horrendous days
In the very bloom of youth. Ah woe, along
A lane close by I hear the lonely song 25
Of an artisan returning late at night,
After the revels, to his humble dwelling;
And very cruelly my heart is wrung,
To think how all things in this world must pass,
And barely leave a trace. For lo! The festive 30
Day has fled, and after the festive day
The workday follows, and time carries off
All the haphazards of man. Where now is the name
Of those ancient peoples? Where the renown
Of our famed ancestors and the great empire 35
Of that mighty Rome, the arms, the clamour
Which from her walls went forth by sea and land?
All is now peace, and silence, and the whole
World is at rest: of them we speak no longer.
When first I was a child, when feverishly 40
We hanker for the feast-day, now no sooner
Was it over, than sorrowful, unsleeping,
I would lie abed; and far into the night
A song that came from down along the lanes,
Diminishing little by little into the distance, 45
Would wring my heart even then; as it does now.