

Under Pressure

Tomas Tranströmer
Translated by Robin Fulton

**Published in *New Collected Poems*,
1997**

The blue sky's engine-drone is deafening.
We're living here on a shuddering work-site
where the ocean depths can suddenly open up —
shells and telephones hiss.

You can see beauty only from the side, hastily,
The dense grain on the field, many colours in a yellow stream.
The restless shadows in my head are drawn there.
They want to creep into the grain and turn to gold.

Darkness falls. At midnight I go to bed.
The smaller boat puts out from the larger boat.
You are alone on the water.
Society's dark hull drifts further and further away.

"Five Poems by Tomas Tranströmer." *NobelPrize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2019.
<<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2011/transtromer/25710-five-poems-by-tomas-transtromer-2011-3/>>.
Accessed 9 May 2019.

Tomas Tranströmer: Biography

The Nobel Foundation

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for Literature web page**

Tomas Tranströmer was born on April 15, 1931, the son of Gösta and Helmy, née Westerberg. His parents divorced when Thomas was three years old, so he grew up in Stockholm with his mother, who was a schoolteacher. They spent their summers at his maternal grandfather's pilot station on the island of Runmarö in the Stockholm archipelago, an environment that has always been an important starting point for his poetry, particularly *Östersjöar*, 1974 (*Baltics*, 1975). Here, among islets and skerries, he developed an early interest in geography and science, especially entomology. Because of his work in collecting insects, a newly discovered beetle now bears Tranströmer's name: *Mordellistena transtroemeriana*.

As a teenager, Tranströmer cultivated artistic interests. Music became essential to him; he began to play the piano, and he soon approached poetry. His first poems were published in student magazines during the late 1940s.

After completing secondary school, Tranströmer studied literary history (writing his graduation essay on Swedish Baroque poetry), history of religion and psychology at Stockholm University College (now Stockholm University). During the late 50s he worked at the Institute for Psychometrics at Stockholm University College, then as a psychologist at Roxtuna outside Linköping, a youth correctional facility, and then from 1965 to 1990 as a psychologist at the Labor Market Institute in Västerås....

In 1958 Tranströmer married Monica, née Bladh. Their two daughters, Emma and Paula, were born in 1961 and 1964.

Right from his debut book *17 dikter (17 poems)* in 1954, Tranströmer came to be regarded as the leading Swedish poet of

his generation. To a substantial degree, he had already developed his distinctive language here: his original and sharply contoured metaphors, nature mysticism, musicality, strictness of form and natural diction — qualities that reappeared in his later books of poetry....

Yet Tranströmer's exploration of the complex nature of human identity and his instantly constructed bridges between nature, the cosmos and the dead never result in structured patterns or loud-voiced confessions. His poetry is a tranquil affirmation of few words, but is nevertheless a form of resistance to power, the market and media clichés.

Experiences that were based the poet's simultaneous career as a psychologist also influenced many of his poems. He combines factual observation and a psychologist's fascination with the metaphorical reality of dreams.

In later collections... death — though never an unfamiliar guest in his poetry — has demanded more and more space, but not as an unambiguous threat. With trusting stillness, Tranströmer notes that life includes death, and vice versa. ...

Since the Swedish language cannot be read by more than about one thousandth of the world's population, the skillfulness of his translators has been especially vital. Since efforts to translate his works began in earnest during the 60s, Tranströmer's international reputation has constantly gained strength. Today his works are available to readers of some sixty languages.

In 1990 Tranströmer suffered a stroke that paralyzed his right side. He almost entirely lost his ability to speak. Since then, writing has taken him longer, although he has published

some poetry collections and a memoir, *Minnena ser mig*, 1993 (*Memories Look at Me*, 2011). Tranströmer has increasingly embraced short forms of poetry such as haiku, which only reinforce his focus on concentration of expression. But even before he became ill, he took plenty of time to write his vivid, precise poetry. Some poems took him years to complete.

Tranströmer's lifelong interest in music, which has left significant traces in his writings, has actually deepened since his stroke. Several composers have been inspired by his poetry and have set it to music, as well as dedicating to him a number of newly composed piano works for the left hand.

Between 1965 and 2000, Tranströmer lived in Västerås, Sweden. In 1997 the Municipality of Västerås established the Tranströmer Prize, which rewards outstanding poetic writing. Since 2000 he has lived in his childhood city of Stockholm.

Tomas Tranströmer died on 26 March 2015.

"Tomas Tranströmer — Biographical." 2011. *NobelPrize.org*. Nobel Media, 1993, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2011/transtromer/biographical/>. Accessed 9 May 2019.

Miracle Speech: The Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer

Teju Cole

**Published *The New Yorker*
October 6, 2011**

Tomas Tranströmer, who was awarded this year's Nobel Prize in Literature, has for years now been one of my ports of refuge. The books of his poetry on my shelves never remain unopened for long. I turn to him when I wish to come as close as possible to what cannot be said. This past decade was full of dark years, and I returned again and again to poets. They kept watch over me and, to adopt a phrase of Tranströmer's, I survived on milk stolen from their cosmos.

I read Walcott, Bishop, Ondaatje, Szyborska, Bonta, and a dozen other marvelous writers, but above all I read Heaney and Tranströmer who, in different ways, fused the biggest questions with personal experience.

To read Tranströmer—the best times are at night, in silence, and alone—is to surrender to the far-fetched. It is to climb out of bed and listen to what the house is saying, and to how the wind

outside responds. Each of his readers reads him as a personal secret. For this reason it is strange to see this master of solitude being celebrated in the streets or showing up as a trending topic on Twitter and a best-seller on Amazon. He usually dwells in quieter precincts.

Tranströmer's poems owe something to Japanese tradition, and early in his career he wrote haiku. Reading him, one is also reminded of American poets ... But Tranströmer casts a spell all his own, and in fact the strongest associations he brings to my mind are the music of Arvo Pärt and the photography of Saul Leiter.

I swim out in a trance
on the glittering dark water.
A steady note of a tuba comes in.
It's a friend's voice: "Take up your grave and walk."

(From "Two Cities")

His poems contain a luminous simplicity that expands until it pushes your ego out of the nest, and there you are, alone with Truth. In a Tranströmer poem, you inhabit space differently; a body becomes a thing, a mind floats, things have lives, and even non-things, even concepts, are alive. His memoir, "Memories Look At Me," inspired me to title my weekly column for the Nigerian newspaper *NEXT* (for the year the column ran) "Words Follow Me." There is much following in Tranströmer, much watching, from a distance and from close by, and the trees, pasts, houses, spaces, silences, and fields all take on invigilative [watching over] personae. There are many dreams.

I dreamt that I had sketched piano keys out
on the kitchen table. I played on them, without a sound.
Neighbors came by to listen. (From "Grief Gondola #2")

Tranströmer is well translated into English (even if he wasn't, until this week, a best-seller)...

I open the first door. It is a large sunlit room. A heavy car
passes outside and makes the china quiver.

I open door number two. Friends! You drank some
darkness and became visible.

Door number three. A narrow hotel room. View on an
alley. One lamppost shines on the asphalt. Experience,
its beautiful slag. (From "Elegy")

And, from "The Scattered Congregation," which is in five short parts, these lines:

We got ready and showed our home. The visitor thought:
you live well. The slum must be inside you.

Nicodemus the sleepwalker is on his way to the Address.

Who's got the Address? Don't know. But that's where we're
going.

[He presents] helplessness in many of the poems, the sense

...[that] something irresistible and invisible [pulls us along and] moments of tart social commentary, a sense of justice wounded ("the slum must be inside you"—for many years, Tranströmer worked as a psychologist at an institution for juvenile offenders)... When I'm asked in interviews what my favorite thing about New York, I usually answer with a line lifted from "Schubertiana": "Outside New York, a high place where with one glance you take in the houses where eight million human beings live."

The images with which Tranströmer charges his poems bring to mind the concept of "acheiropoietia," "making without hands"; in Byzantine art, acheiropoietic images were those believed to have come miraculously into being without a painter's intervention. The Shroud of Turin and the Veil of Veronica are the most famous examples. These were images registered by direct contact, and they were usually images of the Holy Face of Christ. ... I feel Tranströmer's use of imagery is like this, and like contact printing, in which a photograph is made directly from a film negative or film positive. There is little elaborate construction evident; rather, the sense is of the sudden arrival of what was already there, as when a whale comes up for air: massive, exhilarating, and evanescent.

The satisfaction, the pleasure, the comfort one takes in these poems comes from the way they seem to have preëxisted us. Or perhaps, to put it another way, the magic lies in their ability to present aspects of our selves long buried under manners, culture, and language. The poems remember us and, if we are perfectly still, give us a chance to catch sight of ourselves.

"Miracle Speech: The Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer." *The New Yorker*, 6 October 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/miracle-speech-the-poetry-of-tomas-transtromer>. Accessed 9 May 2019