

Advanced Poetry Poem Starter Kit

Death Fugue [Tödesfugue]

Paul Celan, 1948

Trans. from the German by John Felstiner (modified)

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink
we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Marguerite
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all sparkling
he whistles his hounds to come close
he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in the ground
he orders us strike up and play for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at morning and midday we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair Margeurite
your ashen hair Shulamith we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped
He shouts jab this earth deeper you there you others sing up and play
he grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it his eyes are blue
jab your spades deeper you there you others play on for the dancing

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday and morning we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margeurite
your aschenes Haar Shulamith he plays with his vipers
He shouts play death more sweetly Death is a master from Deutschland
he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then in smoke to the sky
you'll have a grave then in the clouds there you won't lie too cramped

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland
we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue
he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true

a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
he looses his hounds on us he grants us a grave in the air
he plays with his vipers and daydreams
der Tod is ein Meister aus Deutschland
dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Shulamith

The Drunken Boat [Le bateau ivre]

Arthur Rimbaud, 1871

Trans. from the French by Holly Tannen (modified)

As I came floating down impassive rivers
I felt myself no longer guided by the bargemen's hands
Howling natives hauled them up for targets
Nailed them naked onto painted poles.

What did I care I for any crew?
Traders of Flemish wheat or English cotton
When they were through with all their noisy grief
The rivers let me wander where I would.

Out on the angry splash of winter tides
Emptier than children's minds I ran!
And no unmoored peninsula ever knew
More triumphant uproar than I made . . .

Sweeter than sour apples to a child
Green water seeping through my battered hull
Cleansing the stain of vomit and wine
Tearing apart my anchor and my keel.

Cork-light I danced upon the waves, ten nights
And never missed the lantern's idiot eyes . . .
. . . And since then, I've bathed in the Poem of the Sea,
Milk-white, infused with stars . . .

I know the sky split wide by lightning, tides,
And surf, and waterspouts; I know the night,
And dawn exalted like a flock of doves
And sometimes I've seen what man thought he's seen!

I've seen the setting sun light up the shivering purple waves
Like actors in some ancient tragedy . . .
I've dreamed the evening green with dazzled snow and singing phosphor
And kisses rising slowly on the eyelids of the sea . . .

I've touched the shores of Floridas where flowers mingle
With the eyes of panthers in the skins of men
And monstrous serpents eaten up with lice
Drop down from trees entwined with black perfume . . .

I've seen sidereal archipelagoes and islands
Ecstatic skies thrown open to the traveller on the wave
Is it in these endless nights you sleep in exile
O million golden birds, o future strength?

I'd like to show to children these dolphins on the wave
These fish of gold, these singing fish
These flowers of foam that lulled my scudding course
Until I rested like a woman on her knees.

There were times I'd list, almost an island,
Beneath the quarrels and droppings of the barking blond-eyed birds
And there were times when past my fragile bow
A pensive corpse came floating backwards by.

Lost beneath the estuary's long and trailing hair
Jettisoned by hurricane into the birdless ether
Neither shipbuilder nor sailor
Would salvage my water-drunken carcass now . . .

I who rose from violet fog and ran . . .
Steaming and free, stained with electric crescents . . .
Herds of black seahorses by my side

I who trembled, fifty leagues away
From groans of gathering storms and rutting whales . . .
I long for Europe with its ancient parapets . . .

True, I've wept too much. Dawns are heartbreaking
Every sun is agonizing, every moon is cruel
Acrid love has swollen me with drunken torpors
Split apart my keel! Let me go to the sea!

If I desire any European water
It's the cold black pond at twilight
Where a lone boy crouches, eyes full of sorrow,
And sets sail a boat frail as a butterfly in May.

Sodden with weary waves
I can no longer sail against the cotton-trader's wake
Nor cross the pride of flags and blazing banners
Nor swim beneath the prison-ship's dreadful eyes.

The Panther

Rainer Maria Rilke, 1902

Trans. from the German by Stephen Mitchell

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold anything else.
It seems to him there are a thousand bars;
and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils lifts, quietly—.
An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone.