Bitter Grass

SAMPLER
Also by Gëzim Hajdari, from Shearsman Books

Stigmata (translated by Cristina Viti, 2016)

Books in Albanian

Antologia e shiut, Naim Frashëri, Tirana 1990
Trup i pranishëm / Corpo presente, Botimet Dritëro, Tirana 1999
(bilingual Italian/Albanian).
*Gjëmë: Genocidi i poezisë shqipe, Mësonjëtorja, Tirana 2010

Books in Italian

Ombra di cane / Hije qeni, Dismisuratesti 1993, Supplement to issue nº 110 of Dismisura
Sassi controvento / Gurë kundërërës, Laboratorio delle Arti 1995
Antologia della pioggia / Antologjia e shiut, Fara Editore 2000; 2nd edition, Edizioni Ensemble 2018
Spine Nere / Gjëmba të zinj, Besa 2003; 2nd edition, 2005
Peligòrga / Peligorga, Besa 2007
Corpo presente / Trup i pranishëm, Besa 2011; 2nd ed., Edizioni Controluce 2018
I canti dei nizam / Këngët e nizamit (i canti lirici orali dell’800). Besa 2012
Evviva il canto del gallo nel villaggio comunista / Rroftë kënga e gjelit në fsahan komunist. Besa 2013
Delta del tuo fiume / Grykë e lumit tënd. Edizioni Ensemble 2015
AUTHOR’S NOTE

_Bitter Grass_ was written in 1976 while I was in my last year of high school in the city of Lushnjë in Albania. It was refused by N. Frashëri, the government publication house in Tirana. According to the censor, “the texts in this collection do not deal with the theme of our socialist village; the hero of the poems is a solitary person who flees from his contemporaries, from the Youth Association, from reality; moreover, the transformations that socialism has brought to the countryside under the guidance of the Party are entirely absent…” At that time, the collection had the title _The Forest Diary_. I translated the texts from Albanian into Italian in 1999. Two years later, in 2001, the work was published for the first time by Fara. This new publication has been expanded and includes new texts in respect to the first edition.

Offering these poems to readers, it’s as if I were going back many years to the icy and inhospitable winter of the Albanian dictatorship where I began my journey as a poet.

—Gëzim Hajdari, Bitter Grass
(Erbamara, Cosmo Iannone, 2013)
SAMPLER
TRANSLATOR’S INTRODUCTION

Gëzim Hajdari was born in 1957 in the mountain village of Hajdaraj, in the province of Lushnje in the west of Albania. He came from a family of landowners whose property was confiscated during the communist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha.

After graduating in Albanian Language and Literature at the A. Xhuvani University in Elbasan in 1990, he worked in a variety of jobs while being intensely involved in journalism and political activism. In 1992 he fled to Italy after repeated threats because of his outspoken criticism not only of the abuses perpetrated by the former communist powers but also those of the post-communist government.

Upon arriving in Italy, Gëzim Hajdari worked in a number of manual jobs and initially occupied the ruins of an abandoned building in Frosinone near Rome. In 1993 a bilingual Italian / Albanian edition of poetry, Ombra di cane / Hije Queni (Dog’s shadow), was published by Dismisuratesti. Hajdari values equally his mother-tongue and the language of his adopted country, and writes in both. Under the Albanian communist government, the study of the Italian language was banned because of Italy’s 1939 occupation of Albania.

However, as Hajdari informs us:

Alongside the official culture, another clandestine literature was also circulating. We read Italian authors that were seen as ‘decadent’ by the official communist culture. The texts by these authors were secretly copied by hand to escape censorship, because it was easy enough to end up in prison for subversive propaganda against the culture of ‘socialist realism’. It was in this way that I read Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Tasso, Catullus, and other foreign classics secretly translated into Albanian. Reading these great poets made me fall in love with the Italian language. In the remote, icy winter of the Albanian dictatorship, my dream was to be able one day to read the Divine Comedy in the original language.¹

Growing up in a family who loved languages and literature, Hajdari was encouraged to be curious about other languages and cultures. He started learning Italian from a neighbour in his village who had spent some time with an Italian road-building crew in the 1940s. When Hajdari arrived in Italy in April, 1992, he already had a good grasp of the Italian language, and began translating his poetry from Albanian into Italian during his initial years in Italy.

After the publication of *Ombra di cane*, Hajdari went on to publish a number of bilingual collections. In 1997 he was awarded the prestigious Eugenio Montale Prize, and following this was granted honorary citizenship of Frosinone and given an apartment. The bilingual editions are of vital importance:

If we look back at history, we find that the forefathers of Albanian literature wrote in Latin and that their works were printed in Rome. By writing in Italian I am stimulating and enriching the Italian language, but also my original language. I write in Italian and torment myself in Albanian—and vice versa! This is not a question of bilingualism, but of one ‘double language’. So my writing is a linguistic migration: to go in and out from one language to the other, teaching people to become migrants and foreigners so as to share common destinies and common futures. The language of the exiles returns a spark of truth to metaphor and vitality to language.2

As well as several volumes of poetry, Hajdari has published collections of essays and travel writing, including a book of reportage on his journey through war-torn areas of Africa, and a number of translations from Albanian into Italian. He gained a degree in Modern Letters from La Sapienza University in Rome in 2004. His work has been translated into several languages. *Stigmata*, translated by Cristina Viti, was his first collection to appear in English, published by Shearsman Books in 2016.

Hajdari also promotes the enrichment of poetry from different languages and cultures through his work as an editor. Since 2012 he has been the director of the Erranze series for the Italian publishing house Ensemble, which has brought out a number of collections in translation, with an emphasis on marginalised and exiled writers.

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2 See Cristina Viti’s 2016 interview with Gëzim Hajdari.
Most of the poems in the current collection actually date from 1976, when Hajdari was still in his final year at high school. He translated them into Italian in 1999, and they were first published as a book, with some additional poems, by Fara in 2001. Besides being remarkable in their own right, these poems are important because, as Hajdari wrote to me in an email, they ‘signal the beginning of my literary and spiritual path during the communist dictatorship's years of terror’. The main characteristics of these early poems – for example, a political commitment to human freedom, a compressed lyricism, a blurring of the boundaries between a geographical landscape and a visionary dreamscape, the merging of the physical with the spiritual – are to be found throughout his work to the present day. The poems in *Bitter Grass* were initially written with the title *The Forest Diary*, and indeed the poems are at times reminiscent of the first canto of Dante's *Inferno* where the narrator finds himself lost in the woods on a hill.

The atmosphere of oppression is palpable in these pages. Nevertheless, there is a sense throughout that ultimately it is the human spirit which will prevail. As Andrea Gazzoni puts it, ‘The grass of the fields of Darsìa is bitter, but it is more real and will outlast the collective hallucination of power.’ The poems, while highly personal, also draw their nourishment from myth, folklore and from different religions, which in Hajdari's view must come together to sustain us, rather than be in conflict with one another:

The Albanian oral tradition is rich in original elements, blending and harmonizing the spirit of three religions: Islam, Christianity, and the mystical tradition of the bektashi Sufi. And it was folk song that kept the nation’s collective memory alive during the dark, tragic moments of Albania’s history.

Hajdari was brought up in the epic tradition of poetry (his father knew more than ten thousand epic verses by heart), and we should note that Hajdari does not see his books as separate from one another, but rather as part of an epic poem which he is continually in the

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3 See Andrea Gazzoni’s essay ‘Monumento dell’erba amara’, in *Erbamara*.
4 See Cristina Viti’s 2016 interview with Gëzim Hajdari.
process of writing, *Bitter Grass* marks the beginning of that long epic in progress.

It is hoped that this translation, alongside Cristina Viti’s translation of *Stigmata*, will help bring the work of Gëzim Hajdari to a wider English-speaking audience.

Ian Seed, 
December 2018
SAMPLER
Nessuno sa se ancora resisto
in quest'angolo di terra arsa
e scrivo a notte fonda ubriaco
versi gioiosi e tristi.

Sogno la morte ogni volta
che torna la primavera.
I gemiti si perdono piano piano
nella nudità della pioggia.

Come brucia in fretta
la mia giovinezza senza richiami.
Ovunque dintorno mi sorridono
rose e coltelli.

Di fumo e alcool
odora così presto il mio corpo.
Chissà quale strana sorte un giorno
stroncherà la mia voce.
No one knows if I still hold out
in this corner of the burnt earth
and drunk in the deep night
I write joyous and sad lines.

I dream of death each time
spring returns.
Moans fade softly softly
in the nakedness of rain.

How fast my youth
burns without recall!
Roses and knives
smile all around me.

So soon my body
smells of smoke and alcohol.
Who knows what odd fate
will one day tear out my voice.
Mi troveranno nei campi trebbiati
senza respiro tra le labbra,
sdraiato sulla paglia che adoravo
con i colombi che beccano accanto.

Sul volto il fazzoletto bianco di mia madre,
mi porteranno nella stanza natale:
'Povero ragazzo, quanto ha sofferto!'
dirà la gente intorno al mio corpo.

Dopo avermi lavato
con l’acqua fresca del pozzo,
mi metteranno sul carro del grano
tirato dai buoi di campagna.

Percorrerò per l’ultima volta
la strada dove correvo nell’infanzia.
Se sarà al crepuscolo, le lucciole ilumineranno
l’abisso della nuova dimora.
They will find me in the threshed fields
without a breath between my lips,
laid out on the straw I adored
with the doves pecking near me.

With my mother’s white handkerchief over my face
they will carry me into the room where I was born:
‘Poor boy, how he suffered!’
the people around my body will say.

After washing me
with fresh water from the well,
they will put me on the grain cart
pulled by country bulls.

For the last time I will go
along the road where I ran as a child.
If it’s dusk, the fireflies will light
the emptiness of a new dwelling.
Anche nell’aldilà mi suonerà
la maledizione all’alba:
‘Non avrai mai fortuna, che tu possa morire
per strada, come un cane!’

Ricorderò con timore
il mio dio crudele,
la melagrana spaccata
sotto la luna piena.

L’anatra che si tuffava nel lago,
i tori insanguinati.
Come un segno lugubre
il richiamo della volpe nel buio.

Gli stornelli che scavavano nella roccia
come se fossero impazziti,
le spine nere che cacciavo con l’ago
dai piedi di mia madre.
Even in the beyond I will hear
the curse at dawn:
'You will never be lucky. May you die
on the road like a dog.'

I will remember with dread
my cruel god,
the pomegranate split open
under a full moon.

The duck which plunged into the lake,
the bloodied bulls.
Like a funereal sign
the call of the fox in the dark.

The starlings that dug into the rock
as if they’d gone mad,
the black thorns I took out
of my mother’s feet with a needle.
Ora vago tormentato nel paese
come uno spirito accoltellato.
Non mi fa più paura la morte,
né il freddo della sera.

So chi mi ha amato
nella collina delirante.
Un amore eterno:
il fango e il buio invernale.

Dietro le spalle m’insegue
come ombra il destino.
Tra i calmanti notturni scelgo
il veleno della vipera.

Due cose porterò con me
nel paradiso promesso:
i pianti in primavera delle prede
e i canti dei gitani.
Now I wander tormented through the country like a spirit which has been knifed. Death no longer makes me afraid, nor the cold of evening.

I know who has loved me in the delirious hills. An endless love: the mud and dark of winter.

Like a shadow my destiny follows behind. For a sleeping pill I choose the poison of the viper.

Two things I will take with me into the promised paradise: the cries of the hunted in spring and the songs of gypsies.