

Life and Death in the Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer

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Abstract Life and death are two sides of the same coin; it is on the boundary between them that art is created. My article discusses the relationship between life and death in Tomas Tranströmer's poetry. It demonstrates that his concrete images provide access to the imminence and reality of death while at the same time preserving its mysterious nature. Tranströmer's poems can act as agents of change, enabling readers to breach the wall of conventional thinking and regard death from a variety of perspectives.

Key words death; life; water; boundary

Life and death are not opposites but two sides of the same coin. Living and dying depend on each other; they are, in fact, the other's condition (Smith 1). Whichever face of the coin is up, life and death belong together. This article discusses the representation of the symbiotic relationship between life and death in the poetry of Nobel Prize winner Tomas Tranströmer.¹ Praised for their “*condensed, translucent images that give us “fresh access to reality”*” (www.nobelprize.org/), Tranströmer's poems are created at the boundary between life and death: life hovers just above the surface; death lurks below, threatening to flood its banks at any moment. Tranströmer's poems can act as agents of change, waking us up and opening “a breach in the wall of conventional thinking and seeing”.² By emphasising the close proximity of death, they have the potential to change our view of life. While the first part of the article examines the representation of different views of life and death in Tranströmer's poems, the final part focuses on the poet's awareness of the ever-closer proximity of death.

For Tranströmer, life and death make up a language as they converge; separately, they are mere words without context or meaning. This idea is expressed in “From March 1979”:

Weary of all who come with words, words but no language
I make my way to the snow-covered island.
The untamed has no words.
The unwritten pages spread out on every side!
I come upon tracks of deer in the snow.

Language but no words (134).³

Death is an unwritten page, but when viewed from the other side, from life, it has a language that can be deciphered if one only has the imagination.

Tranströmer's poems give voice to a subject that was taboo in the twentieth century. This is changing; the first years of the twenty-first century have seen a proliferation of research on human mortality and the introduction of a number of academic programmes on death and dying, not to mention a spate of cinematic interpretations of dying and the afterlife.⁴ Poetry is a narrative of death that enables us to recognise our mortality and assess the existential value of life projects (Wilmott 661); through it, death can be recognised as an ally.

1. Death as a Rite of Passage

Tomas Tranströmer's poems are produced in a world that is secularised, and from which the western God is seen to have departed (Baudrillard 4) or is dead (Bruce 12) rendering the concept of death even more critical because it is no longer the preserve of divinity. What happens after death takes on a new importance: it is no longer the final frontier but a transition to other destinations, even a natural doorway to other lives. Death as it is portrayed in Tranströmer's poems is a rite of passage that brings about a change of place and state⁵; it is ritualised by society in recognition of entrance into a new status that marks the passage from the kingdom of life to the kingdom of death (Turner 1967 95).

This passage incorporates liminality: that is, the state of being ambiguous, of being "betwixt and between all fixed points of classification" (Turner 1974 232). The passenger or "liminar" must pass through a symbolic domain that bears no relation to his or her past or future state. While the poet does not have special knowledge about death, his or her words and images have a unique power to stimulate the imagination and heighten awareness of the nature and implications of death for the living; in so doing, they give rise to a new view of the value of life.

Talking about death encourages meaningful speculation on what follows. It is not the purpose of the present article to debate Tranströmer's philosophy or the presence of God in his poetry; this has been done elsewhere.⁶ Rather, I wish to discuss a variety of perspectives on death in Tranströmer's poems, from his earliest collection, *17 Poems* (1954), to his latest, *The Great Enigma* (2004). In terms of subject, Tranströmer follows in a grand tradition. In the Bible, we are reminded that there is "a time to be born and a time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3.1). Famous poets such as Thomas Gray ("Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard", 1751), Percy Bysshe Shelley ("Ozymandias", 1817) and Edgar Allen Poe ("The Conqueror Worm", 1843) have addressed the inevitability and nature of death.⁷ Among philosophers, death has long been recognised as "the true inspiring genius or the muse of philosophy" (Schopenhauer 249). Among sociologists, it is regarded as a phenomenon lying within our fantasies and dreams, our language and metaphor (Kearl 6). Death is one of life's greatest mysteries (Bergsten 19 and 361). Tranströmer's poems provide unique insights into death, combining the knowledge of the psychologist (Tranströmer

has a degree in psychology and has worked with juvenile offenders) with an extraordinary ability to make the abstract concrete. Death is part of life as it blows like the wind under the wings of a bird (Tranströmer “Haiku 11” 199), propelling us forwards until the final journey.⁸ Tranströmer’s collections of poems represent a journey in which the presence of death is felt ever more acutely.⁹

2. Death and Its Representation

Finitude, as one critic has noted, is ungraspable because “the event of our death is always too late for us” (Critchley 26). A phenomenology of death is impossible because no adequate intention or intuitive fulfilment can be identified. Simon Critchley thus concludes that “Death is radically resistant to the order of representation. Representations of death are misrepresentations or rather representations of an absence” (27). While poets have no greater knowledge of death than other human beings, they have a special ability to stimulate the imagination. Experiential patterns — patterns of experience that relate to the poet’s or the reader’s and which correspond exactly with what the poem is saying — present a picture of reality as seen by the poet.¹⁰ This requires a positioning, adjusted to the quarter of an inch, of shadows and light, creating a new dimension that clarifies the layer of experience on which it is based (Julén 2–3). Tranströmer is a master of the art. His images are like explosions that change reality; we can hold on to them because they are situated in a time or place with which we can identify (Torhamn 799). The unbelievable takes on qualities of its own that makes it real.

Tranströmer specialises in expressing what appears to be inexpressible, a technique that he develops both in “range and interest” throughout his career, “as the circumstances acquire a wider social and historical significance and as the personality of the narrator becomes more explicitly revealed” (Fulton 109). The factual precision of Tranströmer’s poetry (which always starts at a particular geographical point),¹¹ combined with what one critic has described as a special “visionary insight” (Warne 395), enables Tranströmer to transform the abstract into something resembling the concrete and particular. Death *appears* to become real because it is treated as such.¹² The challenge for the reader is to identify the patterns of experience and relate these to his own.

Tranströmer has defined his mission as a poet “to be where I am. / Even in that ridiculous, deadly serious/ role — I am the place/where creation is working itself out” (“The Outpost” 100¹³). Here, the “I” of the poem portrays itself as a corpse that has crawled out of a “heap of stones”. He flies like a spirit at the command of an unidentified authority, is neither man nor spirit but a place and is in the past and the future: “Coming events, they’re there already!” They are not “here”, they are “there”. The “I” of the poem is a turnstile through which all must pass. It is not clear if the path leads to the kingdom of life or death; perhaps it is somewhere in between. The crowd is eager to enter but the “I” of the poem is “anxious” and “confused”. He has been given the task of selecting those who are eligible to enter the new kingdom. The travellers are presented with two options: to remain outside or pass through the turnstile. In order to make a choice, we must accept the experience en-

capsulated in the poem as authentic; it is experienced not only by the poet himself but as something of relevance to all.¹⁴ The poems discussed here are like the turnstile of “The Outpost”: we can enter — or we can remain outsiders. The choice is ours. To enter is to discover a new world that we can re-form to our own and understand as we see fit; it is a place where we meet the universal, as the “I” of the poem goes down through his own psyche “before moving outside of himself to others in the world” (Whiting 67).

The “others” include the unseen, the dead who frequently populate Tranströmer’s poems. They try to communicate and even desire to move in the human world:

Overheard horizon. They want to say something, the dead.
 They smoke but don’t eat, they don’t breathe but still have their voices.
 I’ll be hurrying through the streets like one of them.
 The blackened cathedral, heavy as moon, causes ebb and flow (“Deep in Europe”, 154).

The dead are the other side of the horizon, equipped with voices that carry no sound even though the horizon itself is “overheard”. The “I” of the poem identifies with the dead, he is like them, but alas, he cannot give them a voice.

The dead who have crossed the frontier also feature in the short prose text “How the Late Autumn Night Novel Begins”:

Stethoscope noises from a slow heart, it beats, goes silent for a time, comes back. As if the creature were moving in a zigzag across the Frontier. Or someone knocking in a wall, someone who belongs to the other world but was left behind here, knocking, wanting back. Too late. Couldn’t get down there, couldn’t get up there, couldn’t get aboard . . . The other world is this world too (119).

Here, not only the voice but even the heart is “silent”. The “Frontier” is capitalised to denote that the dead belong to another kingdom. It seems that the Frontier is impenetrable; neither can it be circumnavigated. And yet in the end, the two worlds become one. That this is an impenetrable mystery is emphasised by the addition of the three dots.

In “From the Winter of 1947”, the dead are living and demand their likeness to be reproduced. What do they hope to achieve? Whom do they ask? Is it the poet himself, perhaps?

I read in books of glass but saw only the other:

the stains pushing through the wallpaper.
 It was the living dead
 who wanted their portraits painted . . . (121)

There is a transparency in language if we are prepared to open our eyes. We are, however, easily distracted as the stains of the dead push relentlessly through the wall-paper. Are the creatures more alive than dead? one wonders. They seek preservation in art. Again, the three dots denote that the process of reproduction is a mystery. The “I” of the poem can offer no solution but raises an important existential question about the importance for the living of commemorating the dead.

As a writer, Tranströmer asserts, it is necessary to be both eagle and mole: “But the writer is halfway into his image, there/ he travels, at the same time eagle and mole” (“The Journey’s Formulae” 50); he must have a wide panorama from which to select details (the eagle) and be sensitive to a blind underground life that is always at work beneath our human creations (the mole).¹⁵ This is a never-ending project: “He who has arrived has a long way to go” (“From an African Diary”); for each new poem that he writes, the “I” must first shrink before it can be “hatched”:

Fantastic to feel how my poem grows
while I myself shrink.
It grows, it takes my place.
It pushes me aside.
It throws me out of the nest.
The poem is ready (75).

The process resembles life; when an individual has reached maturity, he or she is extinguished in order to make room for another. The effort is not wasted because it results in new life, new perspectives, and new hope.

3. Selected Poems (1954 – 2004): Life and Death, a Chronological Analysis

Death is mentioned in Tranströmer’s first published poem, “Prelude”. It is likened to the first hours of consciousness as one wakes in the morning:

In day’s first hours consciousness can grasp the world
as the hand grips a sun-warmed tree.
The traveller is standing under the tree. After
the crash through death’s turbulence, shall
a great light unfold above his head?

The concrete image of the tree, and the crashing through its branches, are both graspable and accessible. Death is not quiet and cannot go unnoticed. But what of the afterlife, one wonders? It is unclear if we can expect guidance on the other side of the final sleep that is death. Light, perhaps in the form of the sun or moon, may or may not be there when we arrive in the new kingdom. The effect of the poem is visionary rather than realistic. The awakening of the traveller has religious undertones of a resurrection.¹⁶ It is a rite of passage whose consequences are left to the reader’s imagination.

“Postludium”, published twenty-nine years after “Prelude” (in *The Wild Mar-*

ket-Square), presents a different picture of death. As Niklas Schiöler has noted, the vertical drop of “Prelude” is replaced in “Postludium” with a horizontal dragging. The morning of “Prelude” becomes night in “Postludium” (Schiöler 45 – 46). The light that is in question in the earlier poem is present in the later one, in the form of moonlight:

I drag like a grapnel over the world's floor —
 everything catches that I don't need.
 Tired indignation. Glowing resignation.
 The executioners fetch stone. God writes in the sand.

Silent rooms.
 The furniture stands in the moonlight, ready to fly.
 I walk slowly into myself
 through a forest of empty suits of armour. (141)

Death is a much stronger presence in “Postludium”, and it is more threatening than in the earlier poem. It comes at the end of a lifetime of accumulating the “wrong” things, which only brings one closer to the inevitable. The executioners are God's servants, carrying out His will. The vision is made concrete by the description of “silent rooms”. We die alone. Before we do so, we slowly re-live our previous existence as we travel back in time through a series of earlier identities (“suits of armour”) that are hollow. The “turbulence” of “Prelude” is nothing like as frightening as the slow retreat into oneself of “Preludium”. The poem is a reminder of the importance of living one's life well and to the full.

Published in the same collection of poems as “Postludium”, “Brief Pause in the Organ Recital” offers a ray of hope. Comparing life with an encyclopedia that is written throughout life, the “I” of the poem reminds the reader that there is air between the pages.

But each one of us has his own encyclopedia written, it grows out of each
 soul,
 it's written from birth onwards, the hundreds of thousands of pages stand
 pressed
 against each other
 and yet with air between them! (134)

In the space, it is possible to write new pages as we follow the promptings of our soul. Nothing happens by chance, as “the pictures retouch themselves” and “the words flicker”. God may have written in the sand, as “Postludium” suggests, but we are not helpless; we have a chance to write our story. While the outcome is inevitable, the journey to our final destination is to some extent ours to control. This is why “our book” is full of “contradictions” (“Brief Pause in the Organ Recital”). We do

not have the overall “eagle” view of our lives, we can, and indeed must, work at the ground level of the mole.

The encyclopedia of “Brief Pause in the Organ Recital” is replaced by a diary in “Black Picture-Postcards” (*The Wild Market-Square*): “The diary written full, future unknown”. The sea is “lead-still”, like a coffin lid and “Shadows wrestle on the pier” resembling dead men with no future. As Niklas Schiöler has noted (53), the picture is reminiscent of the River Styx that separates the world of the living from the dead and wraps around the underworld nine times. The process towards death is gradual, beginning in middle age. Death’s visit as described by the “I” of the poet is a preparation for the crossing of the boundary marked by the river. It seems that our destiny is already shaped in the first half of our life because, once we are measured, the suit will fit irrespective of how many years elapse before we die. We do not need to make any changes; we can — and indeed will — forget the occurrence:

In the middle of life it happens that death comes
and takes man’s measurements. The visit
is forgotten and life goes on. But the suit
is sewn on the quiet (140).

The fact that death’s visit is “forgotten” suggests at least some Level of awareness on the part of the one who is visited — and yet the process of making the suit is carried out “on the quiet”, indicating that secrecy is required. How do we know when we have been visited? Will we know when our death garment is complete? There are no answers, of course, making the knowledge of death bearable.

Death, however, is never far away. In “Carillon”, also published in *The Wild Market-Square*, it lurks below the surface of life. The “I” of the poem declares, “I have low beaches, if death rises six inches I shall be flooded” (144). This is part of the “inconceivable that will nevertheless happen” (144) because the “I” is on the border between land and water, life and death (Schiöler 22). The exact measurement of six inches lends authenticity to the poem. It is not clear if the measurement applies only to the “I” of the poem or to people in general: are some closer to the limit? Do some require a greater level of flooding? What causes the water level to rise? How fast does it rise? Does it rise without warning? The water is part of “the great unknown”, which is infinitely more important than the “I” of the poem. For this reason, the “I” acknowledges that he cannot expect any answers to his questions. He can only wait.

In the meantime, he reflects on the fact that there have been other options in the past. The “irrevocable choices” he has made and describes in “The Blue House” (*The Wild Market-Square* 138) are a cause for regret: “I miss the alternatives. The sketches, all of them, want to become real”. The “sister ship” that is our alternative life follows another route, away from the chosen life. Would this life have led to a different kind of death, which might perhaps have occurred at another time? The sun that blazes behind the islands in the final line represents the setting of the life that has been conditioned by the “irrevocable choices” made earlier — but now forgotten.

4. The Later Poems: Approaching the Boundary between Life and Death

“Streets in Shanghai”, published six years later in the collection *For Living and Dead*, provides a specific location that illustrates the fearless honesty of the “I” of the poem. While the Chinese around him have eight faces “for every situation, for the avoidance of mistakes” (152), the “I” of the poem is not ashamed to admit that he is “an old tree with withered leaves that hang on and can’t fall to the earth” (153). Published just one year before Tranströmer suffered a stroke, the poem anticipates death. The leaves will fall off. They are like receipts for everything the “I” has done, thought or bought. It takes only “a puff of air from the sea” to make them “rustle” (153). The distance between the branches and the leaves is not great; and when the wind of death blows, it will be closed for ever.

As a result, it becomes even more important to heighten one’s awareness of the value of life. This is made particularly clear in “Romanesque Arches” (*For Living and Dead* 158). The Romanesque church is packed with tourists who have come to admire the great vaults. Their view is obstructed, however. The “I” of the poem focuses not on the church but the vision of an angel, who embraces him and fills his body with the message of the poem: “Don’t be ashamed of being human, be proud! / Inside you vault opens behind vault endlessly. / You will never be complete, that’s how it’s meant to be” (158). Why should the “I” of the poem be ashamed of being human? In life, only some of the vaults inside us will open up; only part of our potential will be realised. This can be read as a promise that on the last day, all vaults will be opened as one crosses the frontier from life to death. The sun that greets the “I” of the poet as he leaves the church and enters the piazza reminds him that he is still alive and that there is hope. He also has the reassurance that there is more to be revealed, more to be discovered both within himself and in the environment about the kingdom that awaits him.

This reassurance continues as he describes old age in the prose poem “The Cuckoo” (171) in the collection “The Sad Gondola” that follows “For Living and Dead”. The “I” no longer wishes to make journeys; indeed, he does not need to do so, because, as he explains, “the journey visits me”. Age, symbolised by the multiplying “annual growth-rings”, backs him into a corner, from which there can be only one exit: death. His sight is failing; he needs reading glasses not only to read by but to interpret the signs that are all around him but are fading. This does not worry him, however, because he accepts his situation. Nothing surprises him anymore. His thoughts are a source of comfort and strength because they never fail him, bearing him “as faithfully as Susi and Chutma bore Livingstone’s embalmed body right through Africa”. They will follow him from life into death, bridging the boundary between the two kingdoms.¹⁷

The image of the boundary is repeated in “Midwinter”, “where dead people/ are smuggled over the border” (177). It is in the mind, and consists of a small crack. It is not clear why the dead must be smuggled: Perhaps the “I” of the poem visualises an alternative border that exists only for those who have the necessary imagination. Perhaps this is for the dead who are not eligible to cross the regular border

because they have not been summoned or because they have taken their own life. Crossing the border is associated with shame and dishonesty; death has not followed its natural path.

Death takes time. Its kingdom must be approached slowly and with reverence. In “A Sketch from 1844”, the advance is described as a slow wading down into the kingdom. One is reminded of the previously discussed “Carillon” and the slow rising of the water of death by six inches. In the earlier poem, death rises up to meet the living; in “A Sketch from 1844”, the living must wade out into death. For the artist, the wading process is a productive one as it generates new life in the form of art (Schiöler 79). The “I” of the poet visualises William Turner setting up his easel among the breakers. The silver-green cable that goes down into the depths can be followed by all, represented by the “we” of the poem; not everyone, however, can create art; only “he” who wades out into the sea can do that.

And so it is with the last poem to be discussed, “Eagle Rock”, in Tranströmer’s final collection, *The Great Enigma*. As Schiöler notes, life and death change places as the soul of the “I” of the poem retreats underground (94). The concreteness of Tranströmer’s images and the compactness of his language are illustrated clearly in this poem, which is quoted in full below:

Behind the vivarium glass
the reptiles
unmoving.

A woman hangs up washing
in the silence.
Death is becalmed.

In the depths of the ground
my soul glides
silent as a comet. (181)

The living death, represented by the “unmoving” reptiles locked in their vivarium and the woman surrounded by silence, is more alive than dead; the creative soul of the “I” of the poem has retreated underground but retains its power as it continues to glide smoothly and unimpeded. The comparison of the soul with a comet is significant. In the first paragraph of his memoir *Memories Look at Me*, the narrator compares his life with a comet: the brightest end is childhood; the nucleus is infancy, which determines the most important features of our life; the longest part is adulthood (3). At the age of sixty, the narrator observes that he is “now far out in the comet’s tail” (3). It is not this part, however, but the first two that are especially dangerous because they constitute the origins of death. In trying to recall them, the “I” of the poem observes, “it feels as if I am coming close to death itself” (3). The comet, the soul and death join in the work of art, which alone can transcend death. “Eagle Rock” returns to the image of the eagle and mole of “The Journey’s Formulae”

(50): the first two stanzas are viewed from above, the final one, from below. The “I” of the poem is “halfway into his image” (50), positioned somewhere between above and below — between life and death.

5. Final Words

Not only are life and death two sides of the same coin, it is in their meeting that art is born. The boundary between life and death is thin and fragile, and sometimes the two conditions change places. Tranströmer’s poems can act as agents of change as they challenge the reader to examine his lifestyle and accept the inevitable. They enable us to breach the wall of conventional thinking and seeing. The concreteness of Tranströmer’s images makes the concept of death graspable while at the same time maintaining its mysterious nature.

Death plays an increasingly important role in Tranströmer’s poetry. The crash and turbulence of death in the “Prelude” give way in the later poems to the image of death as a slow and inevitable process that either lurks below the surface or invites us to wade gradually into his depths. Death is no longer frightening but as inevitable as the wind under the bird’s wings or the coming of the autumn and the withering of leaves. As the bird flies by or as the leaves drop, and as the “I” of the poem is chucked out of the nest, wades out into the depths of death or allows his soul to glide in the underworld, life and death meet — and new life is born. Forty years of writing have resulted in one of the shortest but most important collections of poetry of the twentieth century. Through Tranströmer’s poems, we are given the opportunity to access the reality of life and death and visualise the crossing from the one state to the other.

Notes

1. Tomas Tranströmer’s poems have been translated into more than 60 languages. He is regarded as Scandinavia’s most important poet since World War Two. In addition to winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2011, Tranströmer has won a variety of awards, including the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in the US, the Bonner Award for Poetry, Germany’s Petrarch Prize, the Bellman Prize, the Swedish Academy’s Nordic Prize, and the August Prize. See Bloodaxe Books: Author Page > Tomas Transtromer at <http://www.bloodaxebooks.com/personpage.asp?author=Tomas+Transtromer>. Accessed on February 11th, 2012.
2. See also Tomas Tranströmer, *Selected Poems*, edited and translated by Robin Fulton (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis Press, 1981), 158.
3. All quotations from Tranströmer’s poems are, unless otherwise stated, taken from *Tomas Tranströmer. New Collected Poems* edited by Robin Fulton (Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2011).
4. Raymond, L. M. Lee, “Modernity, Mortality and Re-Enchantment: The Death Taboo Revisited”. *Sociology* 42, 2008, 745 – 759.
5. This is Arnold van Gennep’s definition and refers to a transition from one state or realm to another during which the passage is consummated. See Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1909.
6. Jenifer Whiting, “The Recognition of Faith in the Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer”. *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 4, 2004, 65 – 79. Whiting concludes that “Tomas Tranströmer is a unique kind of secular poet, who clearly sees himself within the active framework of God’s creation. . . . Faith is something that the poet comes to through encounters in the physical world,

through the senses, in a series of recognitions that bring the poet and his readers face-to-face with their uniqueness, and that confront poet and readers with the miracle of our skins, bones, possibilities. In each of these recognitions of preciousness and faith, whether prompted by the holy unseen, the self, nature, or other human beings, Tranströmer creates a series of small, enclosed moments of realization, moments that unfailingly reveal this message: our search is not in vain, we live, breathe, and help embody the simple beauty of God everyday — even if the train is late and the lines are long” (78).

7. See Robert F. Weir (ed.), *Death in Literature*. New York; Columbia University Press, 1980), 1–42, for a review of poetry and prose addressing the inevitability of death.

8. This idea is presented in the last haiku in Tranströmer’s final collection of poems, *The Great Enigma*.

9. Niklas Schiöler notes the increasing importance of death in Tranströmer’s poetry, *Ledstången I Mörkret (The Banister in the Darkness)* (Stockholm; Carlsson Bokförlag, 2011), 25.

10. In his introduction to Tranströmer’s *The Half-Finished Heaven* (Minneapolis MN; Graywolf Press, 2001), Robert Bly notes that Tranströmer’s poems faithfully preserve “the link to the worldly occasion” that has prompted it (p. ix).

11. Tomas Tranströmer, *Selected Poems*, 155.

12. Urban Torhamn argues that Tranströmer’s precise style and detailed descriptions make the unreal real, enabling the poet to treat his subject as something already in existence even if it is, in fact, unreal. See Urban Torhamn, “Tomas Tranströmers Poetiska Metod” (Tomas Tranströmer’s Poetic Method), in Swedish. *Bonniers Litterära Magasin* 10, 1961, 799–803.

13. This poem was written while Tranströmer was a young soldier. He was sent to a remote location on a military exercise. The poem is the result of daydreaming. While playing with words for fun he suddenly became serious, expressing the situation as follows: “That’s a kind of religious experience which recurs here and there in my poems of late, that I see a kind of meaning in being present, in using reality, in experiencing it, in making something of it. And I have an inkling that I’m doing this on some sort of task or commission” (Tomas Tranströmer, *Selected Poems*, 162).

14. Staffan Bergsten, *Den Trösterika Gåtan. Tio Essäer om Tomas Tranströmers Lyrik (The Consoling Mystery)*. Stockholm; FIB:s Lyrikklubb, 1989, 11.

15. See Robin Fulton, “The Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer”, 115.

16. See Birgitta Steene, “Vision and Reality in the Poetry of Tomas Tranströmer”, *Scandinavian Studies* 37, 1965, 236–244.

17. A similar idea is expressed in Bei Dao’s poem “Old Places” in which the kingdom of death lies behind our own picture. The only ones who are able to cross the border between life and death are angels, who collect taxes from the living. The latter can cross the boundary only once, and only after they have paid their taxes. Bei Dao, *The Rose of Time* ed. by Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions, 2010), 161. Bei Dao and Tomas Tranströmer are friends. See “Chinese Writers Cheer Swedish Poet’s Nobel Win” at <http://tomastranstromer.net/2011/11/28/chinese-writers-cheer-swedish-poets-nobel-win/> Accessed on 20 February 2011.

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