

Black Nettles Blaze in the Wind

par Claude Vigée

Since it erupted in our windpipes
As quickly as it had vanished
Gulped down at the bottom of our wells –
the forever silenced language of childhood –
Why do we stand there like helpless beggars,
all dazed and crooked
bare hands extending?

All this life we dismissed it
on the grounds of sickness:
though slowly stifling ourselves
as we stood away from it.
Always, this foolish air of panic,
of being struck half-dumb.
Our hoarse voices, broken long ago
suddenly stopped:
already, on our school bench,
in the thrall of the forceps of language
we felt like tongue-cripples
tangled up in our songs!
What would be the point
of anger or scorn?
What do we have left
after all this hurt?
A bottomless tear
in the empty pockets
of our ragged and tattered
carnival costumes.
The only trick that seemed to work for us:
be good now, and do as they say -



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that's the lot of true poor wretches.
 "Patience, patience",
 advised the professors
 to us hotheads,
 "Do not bend the rope too quickly around your necks:
 for many a bird before has shat on its own nest.
 Be clever, like Mrs Méller's cat,
 keep your claws hidden
 in a velvet glove,
 or may you endure the guilt
 of having cursed yourselves
 with the plagues and havocs of the entire world:
 God knows what will happen then!"
 – thus did we single-handedly
 clinch the nail
 that clung to our shackles.

Traduit de l'alsacien en anglais par Delphine Grass

This translation is an extract from Claude Vigée's long Alsatian requiem *Schwärzi Sengessle Fläckere ém Wënd* (*Black Nettles Blaze in the Wind*), written in 1982 in Israël. During the Second World War, Claude Vigée was forced into exile from his hometown of Bischwiller and moved to the United States, where he became a professor of French literature. He once described himself as a "Jew and an Alsatian, thus doubly Alsatian and doubly Jewish". As well as a prolific poet who has won the Prix Goncourt de la Poésie Française in 2008, he is also an essayist and a translator.

The poem from which this extract is taken is an ode to the family, childhood friends and country he was forced to leave behind, as well as a tribute to his native dialect, which many children were forbidden to speak in schools when French became once more the official language. For many Alsations, the famous quotation attributed to Max Weinreich: "A language is a dialect with an army and navy" has had to be taken literally more than once. Yet the different registers of this poem, which range from the elegiac to the comical and grotesque, could be read as a testimony to the idiomatic and colloquial forms present in *all* languages.

Being a mere "silent" practitioner of Alsatian (I understand much of it but I do not speak it), I would like to thank my mother and aunt for helping me with this translation.





Reflet, par Alfred Dott.
Détails pages 227-228.

