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# Without Flutes or Flowers.

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# **WITHOUT FLUTES OR FLOWERS**

**By**

**Jason A. Vafiades**

**B.A. University of Maine, 1999**

**A THESIS**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the**

**Requirements for the Degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**(in English)**

**The Graduate School**

**The University of Maine**

**August, 2001**

**Advisory Committee:**

**Constance Hunting, Professor of English, Advisor**

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Date: July 13, 2001.

# WITHOUT FLUTES OR FLOWERS

By Jason Vafiades

Thesis Advisor: Professor Constance Hunting

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
(in English)  
August, 2001

In this collection of poetry, the scope and mode of every poem is translation. All three sections, "Wildernesses", "Silences", and "Translations" each bear in their creation, the sense of translating one world into another. Yet, it is only in the last section, appropriately named "Translations", where the general resemblance to any method of the usual sense of translating appears. For the first two sections, all the poems found their creation in the attempt to put into poetry a vision and emotion that had yet to be contained by language: a way of interpreting the language of the natural and physiological realms and reconfiguring them into poetry, which is, for me, an integral method of inquiry at gaining knowledge and wisdom in composing poetry.

And though the first two sections generally exist as linguistic re-creations, or translations, of "being" (that is to say, life), it is the larger "Translations" section where the main scope and focus of this collection takes shape. As far as the general definition of the verb "translate" (to put into another language) takes us, most assume the word connotes a literal sense. That is, if I were to translate a poem, I would write the same poem in another language, taking efforts to find the closest fit, word for word, of an original text. But, if I apply a less strict method of translating, "loose translation", I can free myself of the boundaries put in front of me as translator of word for word, in so doing, bringing ideas and emotions into English from other languages, letting not the exactness of language

convey the original text's power, but the exactness of emotion.

This exactness of emotion frees itself of language in the spaces between them. For instance, in his essay "The Task of the Translator",<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin writes that "[i]n translation the original rises into a higher and purer...air, to be sure. It cannot live there permanently" (it comes into another language). By this he intimates at a more ethereal existence of language, and it is from this ethereal existence that I translate. In this collection, I have chosen translation as a mode. In the titles that have a name beneath them, there was an original text (both French and Ancient Greek have been translated in this collection). For these poems, I give thanks to the translators Brooks Haxton (Greek) and Wallace Fowlie (French) of whose work I consulted off and on in my efforts. But in the titles where no name follows, there has been no original text. These poems have come been written as if they were plucked out of the higher ether of being which Benjamin illustrates. They simply had never been created in another language, but they still exist as if they were translated into English. Of these poems, a sense of the Chinese poetry of Li Po and Tu Fu are essential to a reader's understanding.

To be sure, the following poems cannot be considered translations of meaning, and they do not wish to be. Rather, they are translations of emotion and physiological spaces, and in that medium, attain an authenticity that direct translations lose in the crossing.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, Illuminations, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: New York, 1968 69-82.

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# **Wildernesses**

## **Flower**

**In May  
a moment of aerial fusion  
as two hummingbirds  
met against the shield of sky,  
darkened by evening's song**

**from behind the kitchen window  
I watch their necks bind**

**their petal-wings,  
indelicately flounced  
in their lovemaking**

**setting the tips of the apple tree afire.**

## **Jobu Hunts Butterflies**

Lodged in the lawn's corner,  
a parchment wind pushing the boundaries  
of the world with arcane breath  
as if he were Cortez's whole fleet  
all in one feline,  
Jobu launches across a yard of grass,  
paws and nose converging at landfall.

Every year he does this.

Leaving delicate tatters of yellow hues  
stirred by May breezes across the ground,  
a scattering of conquest,  
disassembled flight,  
too heavy with pollen to leave earth;

The grass rises, bends, and freezes  
around his domain,  
the walls of cedars and fence  
lean in towards him,  
black-gray quasar of teeth and tail.

## **An Opera of Swans**

Unseen among the springing reeds,  
the proud swan would behold his mate  
as she settled onto the dark slate of their stream,  
thinking she stretched her sinews and airy  
frame in soliloquy, no witness but for the  
burgeoning moon, specter of the evening sky.

And he knew the terse of his body,  
a votive of passion and strength,  
the sharp influx of desire,  
as he hid within the shadows and she glided

like April earth shaking frost from her hips,  
a cold span of winter tempted by warmer thoughts  
as she extended her wings up into the  
expanse of incoming evening,  
her grace mirrored by the dusk-lit waters,  
the esthetics of her supple  
neck that flowed into her back,  
concavity of a higher beauty  
where her feathers glow in aria  
about her form;

but he remains silent,  
a spectator to her art,  
his heart sick with the suspicion which will undo him.

In former seasons  
that delicate precision of her profile  
mated with ones who moved her  
body in finer music than he can know

And switching sullen  
for a gathering of pride,  
he swims for her,  
invoking a grace which eludes him.

## **Apotheosis**

**In the snow-backed hills  
a fox stills himself  
in the penumbra  
of a tilted moon,  
spaces where  
the edges merge.**

**Far-seer,  
the fox echoes  
a trail where  
a squirrel has broke  
the flowing of the hills  
with its foraging.**

**In deeper snow  
the fox pours  
into the wilderness,  
a diver in the white throw,**

**to surface yards later,  
a warm glow across the landscape.**

## **Silences**

## **The Wind Moving Her Hair**

Sounding sentiments  
within

her ears

where the caesura  
of the here  
and now

finds us  
unstricken  
along the pebbled shore

where life, pendulous grief,  
offers joy in the intermezzo.

## **After a Night-Piece**

The thoughts he would bring into being  
were born dry,  
emerged from old wishing-wells,  
leadened with small gestures for favors,  
a quick glint of something once dropped  
into the watery-door to the underworld,  
where heroes of the light bear no answers.

But walking  
he looks down  
and hears muses in his own voice  
as the wind grasps the trees  
where the stars circle and blaze  
beneath the void.

He has, for now, been granted  
to sift inside himself,  
the river where the planetaries, wet with birth,  
exude in their newness.

## **Parting**

November  
and the trees have emptied their pockets  
for us.

Nothing good can come from our meeting here:

An elm, brown and pallid, strikes the empty sky.

## **Elegy for My Lost**

After life together, you have spanned the years of loss  
that had abyssed the fields where once we roamed,  
you, old man, with your young, pleading dog,  
pacing near you while you rest on the bench  
across the street that deadens our embrace.  
Both a hand of restraint and affection,  
you stroke the head of your dog,  
whose ears gently rise to fuse to the brown  
building behind you, where the window above  
displays the painted acacia rows,  
trapped in their permanent bristling,  
and you motion that I must cross the tract that separates  
me from you as you reach into air,  
pluck me from painting and soundly merge me with earth,  
my face a constellation of all that needs to be done.

## Requiem in Snow

In the month of silence and interminable dark  
when the sky stills itself among the rings of trees  
and night settles thick as the world when first we stepped through it,  
the spaces between earth and sky fill with snow,  
as you sit reading at your desk,  
the ground heaving under the working fates,  
and you hear the falling rhythms of storm and wind,  
reminding you of how once a name was given you  
in the warmer regions of your mind.

On this night you place candles in the window,  
Like a voice seen from the wilds and dirt road  
outside the house where visitors travel to your door,  
and call while you tend to your life,  
when the exigencies of your being circled above you.

But now you raise your head from the verses on the page  
and hear the skipping feet outside in the darkness,  
sounds that return to a place they left long ago,  
while inside the lighted house, it is as if the past occurs,  
and you know that you must raise the ashes of your voice  
as you read, pull the shades down to close out the night,  
and insist that you let go your dead,  
who, reluctant, would cling to cold, ancient earth.

## **Translations**

**The Lyricist**  
Archilochos

I may carry my lord's spear,  
but I have found favor with the Muse.

## **The Delphic Last**

Anonymous, 4th century A.D.

Word to your kings:  
our storied pillars sink to dust,  
the Golden prophet, Apollo,  
visits here no longer,  
leaves no laurel,  
graces no priest,  
the rims in our earth are silent,  
waters evaporate,  
speak only to the arcing sun.

## **This Art of Patience**

**With sun such as this  
peach blossoms  
will melt from their perch.**

**Be still.**

**Let them gather about your elbows  
and drift you over this stream  
carved between us.**

**I am here  
among the chrysanthemums.**

## **Walking Through the Garden**

I clasped you at the stem  
as we spiralled to the garden soil,  
your body shaking  
beneath my lips.

We are a maple, sprung from sky,  
mingled at the waist on our way towards  
earth.

## **The Beauty Merchant**

While you were away at market  
The beauty merchant came to see me

He set all but the *ch'i* at my feet,  
Wanting you in trade.

That was him you just passed;  
I gave him your portrait  
And a jar to collect his weeping.

## **Child**

**A shaft of wheat  
taken by the sun.**

## **The River Just Frozen**

**I sit opposite your form  
Waiting for the sun  
To crack the day;**

**As you sleep  
There are sorrows forming on my lips**

**Some snow gathers and huddles along branch-lengths,  
The rest sinking to mingle with earth.**

## **Chipped Wineglass**

**Every sip brings  
blood from my mouth**

**as I sit  
and peel  
myself away in layers.**

**Outside,  
the last of the leaves  
drive to the ground;**

**I am missing the blossom that is you.**

## **As You Await My Return**

**I am hillsides from our door,  
knee-deep in river Ash  
with my hand wrapped about  
your longest lock of hair  
that I took at our parting;**

**as temperatures wane  
you hear cicadas outside the window.**

## **My Initial Sense of Purpose**

**Her laughter was  
a wind teasing the leaves;**

**my heart skipped  
waves over the bay.**

## **The Pairing**

Here where clouds banter  
Across the roof of the world,  
I have come to scrawl in rock-face:

Girl, bring water from the fields  
And hyacinths on your hips,

I am rivers of fire along this expanse of earth.

Leave now; snow comes.

## **As She Watered Our Plants**

**The foliage within her eyes  
implored me to sing of our growing season;**

**but her presence  
makes a stone  
of my stomach  
and I feel as if  
I will choke on  
rockdust.**

**Odysseus's Companions**  
Archilochos

While afloat in the soft tresses  
displayed in the salt seas,  
we shut the death-like gifts of Poseidon  
out of our consciousness,  
and prayed to see our homeland.

**Dark Hair**  
Archilochos

Under the scent of myrtle  
and near the young rose,  
she smiled and sang a lullaby,  
her hair a darkness that broke  
onto her shoulders and seeped  
into her back.

**Daughter of Amphimedo**  
Archilochos

With one hand this beguiling youth  
brings cool water;  
the other a conflagration.

**Girl About to Step Through the Doorway**  
Praxilla

She lingers in midstep,  
her unscented hair free to the wind,  
a virgin by the blush of her face,  
though her sex bristles below.

Mind yourself, girl,  
ever stones conceal the scorpion's tail,  
but may they never draw your heart from your chest.

## **November's Orchid**

**Winter's first pushing wind  
empties the orchid of its color**

**As I ladle away the evening,  
secreting with the sky how once  
you rested your head  
Against my chest while  
I braided myself into your hair.**

**To Charon**  
Zonas

You who stir the depths by oar,  
who greet the no-longer breathing souls,  
who leave them at the crossing  
and slide solitary across the black swamps,  
may you clasp my boy's hand  
as he climbs down to the dark floor.

Look:  
His sandals loosen and trip him,  
and, you understand,  
he fears to put his bare skin there on the splintery wood.

## Ophelia

Arthur Rimbaud

I

On the flat black river where stars lie  
white Ophelia like a great lily,  
Drifts slow, carried by the long veils,  
-- in the far woods on can hear the sound of the kill.

Over a thousand years, teary-eyed Ophelia  
has passed, a white shade, over the long flow,  
over a thousand years, her sweet madness  
has whispered its romance to the dusk and wind.

The breeze kisses her breasts and spreads in a bouquet  
her long veil held softly by the water;  
the shaking willows weep over her shoulder  
and over her long dreaming brow reeds bend down.

The rattled water lilies sigh about her;  
sometimes she awakens. But in a alder that sleeps,  
a soft whish of wings escapes from its nest;  
-- a mystery of song drips from the gold stars.

II

Pale Ophelia, beauty like the snow,  
Yes, you died, child, and were borne away by the flow,  
-- for the winds rushing from the high mountains of Norway  
had spoken to you in hints of hidden freedom.

And it was breath, swirling your bountiful hair,  
that carried to your dreaming thoughts hurtful rumors;  
for your heart listened to the sounds of nature  
in the plaintives of the tree and soft billowing of the night;

It was the voice of the mad seas, an immense howl,  
that shattered your child's heart, too human and too supple;  
it was an April morning, a beautiful pale knight,  
a poor madman, who settled to your knees, mute.

Heaven. Love. Freedom. All a dream, poor mad child.  
You evaporated in him like snow in a fire;  
for your sweet visions strangled your words  
-- as terrifying infinity seized your blue eyes.

III

-- So says the poet that below the light of stars  
you come collecting, at night, the flowers that you once picked,  
and he saw over the river, lying in her long veil,  
the pale Ophelia drifting, as a great lily.

## The Pride of Orpheus

i

The only red was along her ankle,  
a wander-mark from the fields,  
like a pomegranate split open from too  
much handling, its fleshy parts  
roused through her pale skin;  
nothing was made of it  
as the conjugal torches would not take fire  
when I called my cousin to the ceremonies  
to toss petals and distribute myrtle wreaths,  
and still, the torches gave no warmth,  
but spit ash and coarse smoke  
into heavy air, silently, into the folds  
of spectators and be-liliated naiads.

So like a sun-starved sky,  
the crowd converged into grayness behind us  
as she faltered beside me on the path to the temple,  
clutching my arm so that, unthinking,  
I dropped my lyre on the hard,  
pale shafts of emerging grass  
and offered both arms to her shaking;  
she stepped no further

But looked upon  
my newly-come cousin, Hymen,  
wrapped in yellow and solemnity  
against an April chill.  
And exchanged with each other  
the unthinkable fate,  
her lips immovable against eternity;  
then fell to ground,  
her wedding-clothes unraveling about her,  
a white palm holding her, tenuously,  
above warm earth; I bent to her  
unspeaking.

And Hymen left the scene  
in faintest embers,  
gone into the clouds like smoke,  
so then my marriage couch with  
Eurydice became unyielding earth,  
wrapped in grass,  
her virginal blood, our night together  
reduced to poisoned blood,  
shattered ankle paling the tuneless sky.

iii

And having wound my way to  
the navel of the underworld,  
standing, solid flesh before the gods,  
I raised my lyre.

(Tantalos, eternally submerged  
in his consuming, shadowy heart,  
standing straight-away,  
suddenly free of his desire  
to drink wine and taste fruit  
so that his pangs settled  
down under my melodies,  
wafting through the black,  
thick with earth-warmed mist,  
caverns of Avernus.

And Ixion, filled over with pride,  
ceased from his permanent  
fate of spinning over sharp stones  
on his wheel,  
but now, his strapped hands,  
for the moment not chafing,  
but cupped in the fog to catch  
the music, which rang out,  
rolled to the furthest reaches.

Even terrible Tityos, racked  
upon a desert plain,  
found medicine in song,  
while the liver-gorging  
raven nestled to his rent breast,  
his blood-wet beak turned away  
from his duty, closed in meditation.

My song found them all,  
Chiron at my heels, away from his ferry,  
the daughters of Danaos resting at the well,  
And the life-judging Titans, inscrutably weeping.)

"Hades,  
 know that I have not come  
 as the other heroes, brash  
 warriors or subtle thieves,  
 but as one bereft of love.  
 I do not conceal shears  
 for the serpentine fleece  
 of your Kerberos, feared  
 guardian, nor do I have  
 soft entreaties for your Queen,  
 Persephone, to escape  
 to the daylight.  
 See me clothed in respect for the dead.

Yet I do harbor a favor...

Hades,  
 recently, a young woman  
 has passed your gates,  
 her hair still bristling with youth,  
 soft Eurydice, the wide-loved,  
 too full of virtue to be thus  
 robbed of life, too young and  
 unfinished in the ways of Fate,  
 to be constricted to this realm.  
 It is for her that I have come,  
 suppliant, mysteriously past  
 the pit-falls of your kingdom,  
 so that I could bend before you,  
 imploring that you let her live once more,  
 to finish our days together as  
 our desire demands."

vi

But the dark-god  
remained unmoved, ashen  
and fixed on his intricate throne,  
and I felt his head lower  
to me, his breath molten granite.

Rock, earth above shook  
in revelry at his voice,  
dusty, immortal grinding  
of eternities on his tongue and lips;  
'who was I to question the ways of the three Fates,  
not to accept the ways of life and death?'

And I raised my eyes from the ground,  
releasing my voice,  
the first of living men  
to hold Hades in a glare,  
my fingers quickening over lyre-strings,  
a procession of dead behind me,  
and my face fell away in anger.

'Who am I, Hades,  
but the arranger of rock and grass,  
for it is I who move men thus:  
do not let it slip your mind,  
god, that when first you  
heard Persephone wading  
through the bending fields of wheat,  
it was my song that split  
open the earth for you,  
my notes drove the boulders from  
your path,  
parted the pools and lakes  
to aid your chase,  
and softened a heart that  
would not have you, then.

Am I to be so easily turned away?

My strings once triumphed for you,  
and now I've come adorned  
in the solemn robes of grieving,  
and though my eyes do not  
close with the gold coins of death,  
I will not climb the slopes to surface  
to sunlight without her,  
Eurydice, my wife,  
now the darkness of all I know.'

ix

And let the lyre fall once more to my side,  
When a rush of wings echoed in the caverns,  
all turned, gods, ghosts, and I,  
to see the spirited one, Hermes,  
striving through a sea of dead,  
intent, somber, his shoulder and arm  
stretched behind him,  
leading a figure.

x

And my eyes, still daunted by the face of gods,  
began to soar with life at her,  
tall shower of beauty, my love,  
unflawed in a graceless mob of past forms.

'Take her while it is allowed,'  
came the river of voices from within  
molded rock walls,  
'but once upon the winding path to life,  
have faith in our favor,  
and do not look to steady her,  
still limping with her former pain.'

Hours, we ascended the steep  
 unwavering texture of the mines,  
 my hand left arm, and shoulder  
 dipping behind to lead her,  
 weightless soul of mist in my hand,  
 that with every breathing step towards  
 the surface  
 would constrict around my fingers,  
 as if she would attach herself,  
 even now so close to living,  
 to the life she had not yet reclaimed.

But as the darkness of the mines  
 dissipated from black to shadowy,  
 and the air stirred for being  
 such a small distance to open space  
 and autumn breezes,  
 we seemed to move imperceptibly,  
 the train of our forms,  
 me reaching behind,  
 her leaning towards air,  
 were likenesses of carvings  
 on the stone-wall.

I ceased the ardor of surfacing and spoke:

“Eurydice,  
 sweet being of heavenly forms,  
 twice lived and ever loved,  
 near lies the exit to sweeping plains  
 and wondrous earth,  
 the remainder of our life together,  
 and yet I mourn,  
 for in the span of a few more paces,  
 we will walk out under the stars  
 and breathe in the mortal skies,  
 and for a while sparkle in our bliss,  
 but soon the reality of our lives  
 revisits us, of how I once  
 sung the flaming river into stillness,  
 and how our love can never be as perfect as this,  
 we emerging triumphant from the swaying  
 stability of fates.”

xii

And spent the last of my glorious days  
looking on her,  
just seconds from the infinite skies,  
she all grace,  
the sole luminary  
of a broken poet's heart,  
receding into the black depths,  
my greatest song.

**You Who Never Existed**  
Sappho

No one calls to you in dreams,  
nor thinks of the curve of your face,  
nor pulls roses from earth in longing for you,  
as you skirt the edges of Tartaros,  
drifting, unfelt, unheard, unseen,  
in the vacancy of Hades' house,  
submerged in aimless souls,  
among the ugly, immemorable dead,  
a stone flung into the ocean bottom.

## **BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**

Jason Vafiades was born in Bangor, Maine on February 12, 1976. He was brought up on pessimism, pizza, and old-time morality until he graduated from Bangor High School in 1994. After a brief brush with fame at Boston University, he returned to his native state and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English from The University of Maine.

After receiving his degree, Jason will travel with his muse, who more than likely will be residing in Boston. Jason is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in English from The University of Maine in August, 2001.