



**GEORG
MORDECHAI
LANGER**

POEMS AND SONGS OF LOVE





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Translated by
Elana and Menachem Wolff



GUERNICA

TORONTO • BUFFALO • BERKELEY • LANCASTER (U.K.)

2014

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Michael Mirolla, general editor
David Moratto, interior & cover design
Guernica Editions Inc.
1569 Heritage Way, Oakville, ON L6M 2Z7
2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.

Distributors:
University of Toronto Press Distribution,
5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8
Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills, High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.
Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit — Third Quarter
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2014934787
Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Kafka, Franz, 1883-1924
[Short stories. English. Selections]
A hunger artist & other stories / Franz Kafka ; translated
by Thor Polson.

(Essential translations series ; 20)
Title on added title page, inverted: Poems and songs of love / Georg
Mordechai Langer ; translated by Elana and Menachem Wolff
Issued in print and electronic formats.
Text mostly in English with some in Hebrew.
ISBN 978-1-55071-867-6 (pbk.)--ISBN 978-1-55071-868-3 (epub.)--
ISBN 978-1-55071-869-0 (mobi)

1. Kafka, Franz, 1883-1924--Translations into English.
2. Langer, Mordechai Georg, 1894-1943--Translations into English.
I. Wolff, Elana, translator II. Polson, Thor, translator III. Wolff,
Menachem, translator IV. Title. V. Title: A hunger artist and other
stories. VI. Series: Essential translations series ; 20

PT2621.A26A6 2014 833'.912 C2014-900985-2 C2014-900986-0

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*for Zaidi: Shimshon Senderovits
in memory*



Like a man raised up at night from the depths of his heart
by the terror of a dream,

thus I awoke from the slumber of my life, and behold:

All creation was as if immersed in a magical sleep,

within which everything restlessly works performe.

All the empty space of the world sleeps too, the celestial
wheel as it turns, and time as it hastens away.

Earth and everything on her slumbers: the greenishness
of the valley, the mountains, the water, the air.

As heaven's lightning flares on high, and the din of God's
thunder is heard on earth, everything sleeps.

The entire universe drowzes: the buzz of the bee in the field,
the chirp of the bird in the wood, and their echoes rest.

In sleep nations rise, in hibernation they murmur, their
downfall comes in slumber.

All the acts of man are slumber, napping is the heart's regard.

And there are those, hastening as if to awaken: prophets,

masters of mysteries, bards, philosophers—all in vain;

from their repose there is no exit.



כַּאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר חֲרָדַת חֲלוֹם מִתְּהוֹם לְבוֹ בְּלִילָה הֶעֱלַתוּ,

לֹה הַקְצָתִי קְצַת מִתּוֹךְ תְּנוּמַת חַיִּי, וְהִנֵּה:

הַבְּרִיאָה כְּלָה כְּאֵלוֹ הִיְתָה שְׁקוּעָה בְּשָׁנַת קְסָמִים,

מִמְּנָה עַל-כִּרְחוֹ הַכֹּל בְּלִי-מְרָגֵעַ יַעֲבוֹד.

נָם כָּל-הַחֲלָל הַרִיק שֶׁל הָעוֹלָם, גִּלְגַּל הַכּוֹכָבִים

יִשׁוֹן יְנוּעֵי, וְנָם הַזְּמַן.

רוֹדְמַת אֶרֶץ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ: יִרְקַק הָעֶמֶק,

הַהָרִים, הַמַּיִם, הָאֲוִיר.

בְּרַק-שְׁמַיִם כִּי יִבְהִיק בְּגִבָּה, רַעַשׁ רַעַם אֵל בְּאֶרֶץ

כִּי נִשְׁמַע — הַכֹּל יִשׁוֹן.

נָם הַיָּקוּם כָּלוֹ: זְמַזְמוֹם דְּבוּרָה בְּאָחוּ, צִפְצוּף צְפוּר

בַּיַּעַר, וְנָם הַדָּם.

בְּשָׁנָה קָמִים עַמִּים, בְּשָׁנָה הוֹמִים, נוֹמָה מִפְּלֹתָם.

שָׁנָה כָּל-מַעֲשֵׂי אִישִׁים, נִמְנוּם שְׂרַעַף לִבָּם.

וַיֵּשׁ אֲשֶׁר כְּאֲצִים לְהַקִּיעַ: נְבִיאִים, מְאָרִי דְרָזִין

שָׂרִים, פִּילוֹסוֹפִים — הַכֹּל לִשְׂוֹא;

אֵין מִתְּנוּמַתָּם מוֹצָא.



Even upon our freedom of choice sleep has been decreed
for it is given to us against our will.

Once again I have opened my pupils wide and behold:

All of creation resembles a woman in labour.

Baying in terrible pain, like a birthing mother in bitter despair,
and the angel Gabriel standing above, fiery forcep in hand.

He pulls the fruit of wickedness from her womb till her muscles
scream,

but the foetus cannot emerge because of its girth, for it is great.

And all creation wallows in its blood, roaring like a lion
in its sorrow—and there is no help.

וגם עלי חרות בחירתנו נמנום נגזר עליה

יען על פרחנו לנו היא נתנת.

עוד פקחתי בתעיני והנה :

הבריאה כלה דומה לאשה בציריה.

בכאב נורא שואגת, כאם יולדת במריאוושה,

וגבראל השיר עומד בזה וצבתאש בידו;

עוקר אתפרייעולה מתוך מעיה עד חרוק שריריה

אך הילד אינו יכול לצאת, מפני גדלו, כי רב הוא.

והבריאה כלה מתבוססת בדמיה, נוהמת כארי

בצעה — ואין משיע לה.

LIKE THE DYING INSIDE



(Sung in the Eastern European tune for *Lamentations*)

The sun has already set,

the last

twilight

of a spring evening

has ended and gone.

Slowly the silence has donned the garments

of darkness and spread its wings over the garden.

With my companion the black sadness, who will never betray me,

onward I wander

far from the clamorous city.

The moon's luster decants its magic

in a whisper upon trees,

the nightingale in the distance

pours on the rosebush sorrow from its song.

And I continue walking, moving farther into the lap of the night.

Silence upon everything—

the rustling of the tree has ceased,

כְּגֹעַ פְּנִימָה ...

(יושר בנגון איכה כמנהג הארצות)

הַשְּׁמֵשׁ בָּאֵה־כָּבֵר.

דְּמִדוּמֵי

עָרֵב אָבִיב

הָאֲחֵרוֹנִים

תִּמּוּ סֶלְקוּ.

אֵט הַתְּלַבְּשָׁה הַדְּמָמָה בְּלְבוּשֵׁי

הָאֶפְלָה וְתַפְרוּשׁ עַל־הֶגֶן כְּנָפֶיהָ.

עַם רְעֵי הֵיגוֹן הַשְּׁחֹר, לֹא יִבְגְּד־בִּי עַד־יָעַד,

הַלְּאָה אֲרַחֵק־הֶנְדוּד

מִקְרִיָּה הַסּוֹאָנָת.

זֶהר הַסֵּהר מוֹסֵף אֶת־קֶסֶמוֹ

בְּלַחֵשׁ עָלֵי אֲלֹנוֹת,

הַזְּמִיר בְּמֶרְחֵק

עֶצֶב מִשְׁפִּיעַ עָלַי־וְרִדִינָה מִשִּׁירוֹ.

וְאֲנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ, הַלּוֹךְ וְהַרְחֵק אֶל־חֵיק הַלֵּיל.

דוּמְיָה עַל הַכֹּל —

אוֹשֶׁת הָעֵץ חֲדָלָה,

and the trilling of the nightingale in the distance
is dying down,
like the dying inside
the heart of man—
tremours of a secret love
you dare not
love
to the end.

וּסְלוּלֵי הַזְמִיר בְּמִרְחֹק,

הוֹלְכִים וְגוֹעִים,

כְּגֹעַ פְּנִימָה

— בְּלִבּוֹ שֶׁל־אָדָם —

זַעְזוּעֵי אֶהְבָּה חֲשָׂאִית

שְׂאוֹתָהּ לֹא־תִהְיֶיןָ

לְאֶהָב

עַד־הַתּוֹם.

TO MY COMPANION



Just as the clouds scatter in the sky on high sometimes
and the ever-clear eye of a star looks down on earth,
thus did you appear to your lonely servant
and without knowing cause his desperate heart to quake.

— — — — —

And when I saw your perfect pliant height,
strewing sparks of charming youth,
as I gazed in thirst at your faithful eyes,
in which God impressed his endless depth
and there is no completion to the grief of his sweet secret—

then I sighed and my soul quivered
like a taut harp-string touched by a hand
and the song waves of my vigour washed towards you,
for you ignited the sea of my cold eternity
with the heat of your tranquillity—

כְּבִהְפֹזֵר לְפַעֲמִים בְּשִׁמְי־רוֹם עֲנָנִים
וְעִין־כּוֹכַב צַח־לְעַד עַל־הָאָרֶץ תִּשְׁקִי,
כִּכָּה הוֹפַעְתָּ פִתְאוֹם לְעַבְדְּךָ הַגְּלָמוּד
וְאֶת־לְבוֹ הַנוֹאֵשׁ בְּלֹא־דַעַת הִרְעַשְׁתָּ.

— — — — —

וְכִרְאוֹתַי קוֹמְתֶיךָ הַגְּמִיֶשֶׁה הַתְּמִימָה,
הַמְפִיצָה רִשְׁפֵי־אֵשׁ שֶׁל שְׁחָרוֹת מְקַסִּימָה,
בְּהִבִּיטִי בְצִמָּא אֶל־עֵינֶיךָ הַנְּאֻמָּנוֹת,
שֶׁבָּהֵן שִׁקְעִיָּה אֶת־עֵמְקוֹ בְּרֵאִין־סוֹף
וְאִין תְּכִלִּית הַתּוֹגָה שֶׁל סוֹדוֹ הַמְּתוֹק —

אִז נֶאֱנַחְתִּי וְנִפְשִׁי תִזְדַּעַזַּע
כְּמִתְר־נֶבֶל מְתוּחַ שֶׁנִּגְעָה־בוֹ הַיָּד,
וְגַל־שִׁיר שֶׁל־עֲזִי אֶלֶיךָ יִשְׁטוֹפוּ,
כִּי אֶת־הַיָּם שֶׁל־נִצְחֵי הַצְּנוּן
הִצַּת בְּחוּם רִגְעֶךָ. —

and whenever I recall that hour of happiness,
the beauty of that night in which the two of us strolled
in the street,
and peacefully you placed your arm on my shoulder
—then I remember (as if shrouded in fog)
an ancient fable tugging at the heart:

about the affection of two companions
who embraced each other with great yearning,
and in the inebriation of their embrace
were silently elevated
to supernal worlds, to the gardens of repose,
in which there is constant light and love without end.

וְהִיא כְּאִשֶּׁר אֶעֱלֶה עַל־לִבִּי אוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה שְׁלֵאִשֶׁר,

יִפְיֵה־לִּילָה הֵהוּא, בּוֹ שְׁנִינּוּ הִלְכְּנוּ בְּרַחֹב,

וּבִנְחַת הַנְּחֹת אֶתָּה עַל־שִׁכְמִי אֶת־זְרוּעֶךָ

— וְזָכַרְתִּי זְכוֹר (כַּמְכוּסָה עֲרֻפָּל)

אֲגִדָּה עֵתִיקָה, שְׁתַּמְשׁוּךְ אֶת־הַלֵּב:

עַל־חֲבַת שְׁנִירֵעִים, אֲשֶׁר בְּכֶסֶף גְּדוּל

אִישׁ אֶת־רַעְהוּ חֲבָקוּ;

וּבְשִׁכְרוֹן חֲבוּקִימוֹ דוּמָם הַתְּנַשְׂאוּ

לְעוֹלָמוֹת עֲלִיוֹנִים, אֶל־גְּנוֹת הַהֶשְׁקֵט,

שְׁבָהֵם תְּמִיד־אוֹר וְאֶהְבֶּה בְּלִיקֶץ.



ENDNOTES ON POEMS



A VISION

1. There are sixteen references to sleep in this poem, all variations of three roots/words in Hebrew: yūd-shin-nūn—sleep; nūn-vav-mem—light sleep; resh-dalet-mem heavier sleep. In order to avoid the clink of excessive repetition in English, we opted for seven variations in English: slumber, sleep, drowse, rest, hibernate, nap, and repose.
2. The phrase “And all creation wallows in its blood” in the last line echoes *Ezekiel* 16:6: “... I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood” (translation, *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2000).

LIKE THE DYING INSIDE

This poem was written with cantillation marks, and, as noted by Langer in his epigraph, meant to be chanted in the Ashkenazi (European Jewish) tune for the book of *Lamentations* which mourns the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the exile of the Jewish people. As mentioned in the Introduction, we did not include the cantillation marks in the Hebrew.

TO MY COMPANION

This is the first of six poems in the collection in which the homo-romantic content of the poem cannot be read from the translation, as English does not carry gender markers. In line three—“thus did you appear”; line four “and cause his desperate heart to quake”; line five—“your ... height”; line seven—“your eyes”; line twelve—“towards you”; line thirteen—“you ignited”; line seventeen—“you placed your arms”; line twenty—“two companions”; line twenty-one—“each other”; and line twenty-two—“were ... elevated” all carry masculine markers in Hebrew.

THE STRENGTH IN SPLENDOUR

As he relates in his Introduction to *Nine Gates*, Langer was deeply steeped in the mysticism of kabbalistic literature through his association with the Belz Hasidic community, and the title of this poem is quite clearly kabbalistic. According to kabbalistic thought, the infiniteness of God interacts with the universe through ten energy emanations, known as the ten sefirôt, or the tree of life. Gevurah—strength, and Tiferet—beauty or splendour, are two of these emanations or qualities. Gevurah is seen as a restrictive quality. Tiferet is the central emanation in the tree and is the quality which is said to mediate between the emanation of Hesed—loving-kindness and the severity of Gevurah—also translated as judgement. (See *The Essential Kabbalah*, by Daniel Matt. New York: Harper Collins, 1995.)

A MEETING

This is the second poem in which the English translation does not indicate that Langer is addressing a male: “you delivered” in line two and “you spoke” and “your lips” in line four carry masculine markers in Hebrew.

THE ARIELITES WILL SWEETLY SING

Again, the translation does not reveal that Langer is addressing a male in line three—" ... my pure beloved, ascend with me ..."

MY SONG!

Langer does not specify the name of the song by Gustav Mahler referred to in his parenthetical citation, but it is probably the first piece, "Drinking Song of the Misery of the Earth" ("Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde") from Mahler's celebrated large-scale work for vocal soloists, *The Song of the Earth* (*Das Lied von der Erde*), composed in 1908-09 and first performed after his death in 1911: Both Mahler's song and Langer's poem feature drinking, misery, and the Earth. In his work, Mahler made use of translations of poems by T'ang dynasty Chinese wandering poet Li-Po (701-762), also known as Li-Bai or Li-Tai-Pei. (See "Introduction" to *The Selected Poems of Li Po*, translated by David Hinton. New York: New Directions, 1996). Langer was inspired by the same poet, as evidenced by his piece "On the Poems of Li-Tai-Pei." Interestingly, Kafka was also inspired by Chinese culture and literary motifs, as seen from his stories "An Old Manuscript from China" ("Ein altes Blatt aus China"), "The Great Wall of China" ("Beim Bauer chinesischen Mauer"), and "An Imperial Message" ("Eine kaiserliche Botschaft").

ON THE POEMS OF LI-TAI-PEI

In the original Hebrew, the full title of this poem is "On the Poems of Li-Tai-Pei the Chinese." We decided to suppress the descriptor "Chinese" as it sounds awkward in English. See previous note.

ON THE DEATH OF THE POET

It seems that the term “Hashmalonim” on line twelve is a variation of Hashmalim. The second century text, *Sefer Yetzirah* (*The Book of Creation*)—the oldest and most mysterious of kabbalistic texts—enumerates ten classes of angels, one of which is the Hashmalim. (See *Sefer Yetzirah, The Book of Creation in Theory and Practice*, translated by Aryeh Kaplan. San Francisco, CA: 1997). The word “hashmal” in the singular appears three times in *Ezekiel* (1:4; 1:27; 8:2), each time in association with God’s revelation in fire and light. In modern Hebrew, the word “hashmal” means electricity.

ALONE

1. This is the fourth poem in which the translation does not reveal that Langer is addressing a male. Line thirteen—“you sat beside me”; line eighteen—“I did not press you to my breast”; line nineteen—“my arms did not envelop you”; line twenty-one—“I did not tell you”; and line twenty-four—“And now you are gone” do not carry masculine markers in English.
2. In the third last line, Langer mentions “the strings of my violin.” As František relates in his Foreword to *Nine Gates*, Langer took up playing the violin after he returned from the Belz community to Prague at the end of World War One. According to his older brother, he had “remarkable talent” and played a variety of music with “ease and passion” (pg. xxiii).

TO AN ESTRANGED FRIEND

1. This is the fifth poem in which the translation does not indicate that Langer is addressing a male. The title words “Estranged” and “Friend”; line four—“ I opened up my heart to you”; line six—“ ... and you stabbed me”; line

seven—“ ... set a blackening fire ... ”; line twenty-four—“And you whom I loved so”; line twenty-five—“will never know it”; twenty-six—“ ... you will never hear ... ”; line thirty—“My song you won’t hear ... ”; thirty-three—“ ... what angered you, and why you refused me”; and line forty-five—“ ... for you forsook me” do not carry masculine markers in English.

2. The line “set a blackening fire to my bones” at the end of the first stanza recalls *Lamentations* 1:13: “From above He sent a fire to my bones ... ” (*JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* translation)
3. What we have translated “willing slave” in the last stanza is literally “pierced slave” in Hebrew. The source of this idiom is *Exodus* 21:5-6: “But if the slave declares, ‘I love my master ... I do not wish to go free,’ his master shall take him before God ... and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall then remain his slave for life.” (*JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* translation)

ON NEW YEAR’S EVE

This is the sixth and final poem in which the translation does not reveal that Langer is addressing a male. Line five—“Distance stole you away from me ... ”; line thirteen—“ ... that you loved”; line fifteen —“ ... drink a toast to your life”; and line seventeen—“ ... you cross my thoughts ... ” do not carry masculine markers in English.

ROBED IN GRANDEUR

The title of this poem is drawn from Psalm 93:2: “the Lord is kind, He is robed in grandeur.” (*JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* translation).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



We wish to acknowledge the generous support of Guernica Editions publishers Connie McParland and Michael Mirolla for underwriting this work and for their ongoing dedication to authors and books in challenging times. We extend a further note of gratitude to Michael Mirolla for his editorial acumen and for his personal appreciation of the literature and world of Franz Kafka. Kenneth Sherman graciously read the final draft of the manuscript and provided kind and insightful comments—his contribution of a cover comment is also very much appreciated! Last but not least, thanks to Carlos Garcia and Steve Lennox at Premiere Systems and Irving Bernstein at Fabulous Printing for their invaluable technical help, and to David Moratto for his design ingenuity and care.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS



Elana Wolff has published four collections of poetry with Guernica Editions, including *You Speak to Me in Trees*, awarded the F. G. Bressani Prize for Poetry. She is also the author of *Implicate Me*, a collection of essays on contemporary poems; co-author with the late Malca Litovitz of *Slow Dancing: Creativity and Illness* (Duologue and Rengas); and co-editor with Julie Roorda of *Poet to Poet: Poems written to poets and the stories that inspired them*. A bilingual editions of her selected poems, *Helleborus & Alchémille*, was released with Éditions du Noroît in 2013. Elana has taught English for Academic Purposes at York University in Toronto and at The Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She currently divides her professional time between writing, editing, and designing and facilitating therapeutic community art courses.

Menachem Wolff grew up in Jerusalem and immigrated to Canada in 1972. He attended the University of Toronto where he graduated from the Faculty of Dentistry. In addition to being in private dental practice, Menachem holds a longstanding interest in Hebrew and Biblical studies and regularly serves as leader of synagogue services. The collaborative translation of Georg Mordechai Langer's poetry collection, *Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot—Poems and Songs of Love* —is his first literary work.

ABOUT GEORG MORDECHAI LANGER



Georg (Jiří) Mordechai Langer was a Hebrew poet, scholar, folklorist, journalist, and teacher. Born in 1894 to an assimilated Prague Jewish family, he converted to Hasidism in his teens, lived five years in the Hasidic court of the Belz Rabbi, and remained unconventionally religious for the rest of his short life. His writings include *Devět bran* (*Nine Gates*)—a compilation of Hasidic tales; *Die Erotik der Kabbala*—a psychoanalytic study of Hasidic Judaism; and two small collections of poetry, including the homo-romantic *Piyyutim ve-Shirei Yedidot*, here translated as *Poems and Songs of Love*, containing an elegy to his friend Franz Kafka. Langer escaped Prague in 1939 and made his way to Tel Aviv where he died of the nephritis in 1943.