

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 11, No.4 - Winter 1965

Editor of this issue: Thomas Remeikis

ISSN 0024-5089

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LITUANUS

www.lituanus.org

POETRY OF KAZYS BRADŪNAS

Kasys Bradūnas (b. 1917) belongs to that generation of Lithuanian poets who matured in their native land but produced most of their works during and after World War II. Although their roots are found in the Lithuanian soil, and their poetry inevitably expresses more or less a national spirit, their works have not been unaffected by modern literary currents since their very existence beyond the native land makes cultural isolation an impossibility.

Among his generation of poets Bradūnas was perhaps least influenced by western literatures (though such influences are evident in his earlier works), but he remained always open to and interested in western literary currents. He sought sources for his poetry first of all in his land, in the Lithuanian folksongs and folklore, art and legends. His simple and unadorned but evocative verse expresses the traditional world view of the Lithuanian peasant, the simple land tiller; he subtly blends the vestiges of ancient Lithuanian paganism, still evident in modern Lithuanian culture, with elements of modern Christianity. Bradūnas is perhaps the most national of Lithuanian poets, but at the same time his poetry is unmistakably universal. Although the mood, the landscape, the themes, and poetic means are national, his concern is human; his poetry attempts to penetrate into the inner essence of the Lithuanian, by virtue of which it assumes universal interest and significance.

Bradūnas published his first poems in 1935. The first collection of poetry was ready in 1939, but due to war it was not published until 1944. Like many of his compatriots, Bradūnas escaped the advancing Red Army to Genuiny and later came to the United States. So far he has published eight collections of poetry, the latest one being *Sidabrinės Kamanos* (The Silver Bridle), published in 1964. He has also been an editor of literary magazines and anthologies and presently is the cultural editor of the Lithuanian daily newspaper *Draugas*, published in Chicago.

The Stained Glass Window

*Softly, softly
flows the river Nemunas,
but not so softly as the mother weeps.*
—Folksong

Let my soul be the glass
tinged with the flames of Easter sun,
let my limbs be leaden
to frame the window.

You will be the artist
of the renowned works of Gardinas,
who slowly and surely
fuses the glass.

The clay bank smells of soured bread
and sickens with the bitterness of blood.
Spring day through half-transparent fog
burdens with weight of iron labor
the salty, sweated hand.

My mother bore me,
her eyes fixed on the Nemunas.

Crosses collapsing in her arms,
like Egle she calls out to the white water.
And the great river rolls, almost
at flood, pulsing into the heart.

The dry tree quickened with the thaw.
On graves, the grass from last year sprouted.
My black eyes fixed in the black hole,
I took the rope from Johnny's hands,
white in the frost. I tolled the bells,
that it be stiller in the little grave.
Do not dig, do not dig deeper: you could shatter
crystalline heavens with a single clod
—the last toy of my younger brother.

The clay bank smells of soured bread and
sickens with the bitterness of blood.
Summer day, heavy, flushed, hot yellow,
burdens with weight of iron labor
the salty, sweated hand.

My mother found no shade, no water.
She fainted in the expanse of fields.
She never embraced in spirit
opening, infinite horizons.
She wept. She crumbled the hard crust.

I will not spare the colors
—let them drip down, heavy and thick.
And let a tree stand on the hills,
black as the devil's finger
to stab the conscience.

And I will not spare space!
—I crowd it, flood it with fire:
skinned of their bark, trees crackle.
At evening they will cool,
but the canvas will not dry.
I cannot take with me
my hill, my trees that my hands raised.

The clay bank smells of soured bread
and sickens with the bitterness of blood.
Autumn day, damp, rust, and red,
burdens with weight or iron labor
the salty, sweated hand.

There where my mother gathered flax,
the flax will steep and soak today.
Were the wind ruffles the swept current,
she wades. Her white kerchief flutters,
birdwinds in flight.

... The hanging stump of the willow,
the crossroad by the hill at the field's end.
—I lie, tired from my wandering.
The stork planes high and far
over the skies, and the autumnal sun
wanes into the northlands and their lakes.
Villages chime from river banks.
The sound hovers over the pointed forests.

And it is time to pray for bread,
for work, rest, and the sun that slowly
wanes into the northlands and their lakes.

The clay bank smells of soured bread
and sickens with the bitterness of blood.
Advent day, like the weight of snow on barns,
burdens with heaviness of iron labor
the salty, sweated hand.

There my mother slumbers, lying
beneath still coverlets of loam.
Greedy, insatiable, the loam
enters my mother's wordless heart.
Illimitable, slow, the flood encroaches.

Let my soul be the glass,
midwinter-hued under the gray moon,
let my limbs be the clay
in the bitter thaw.

You will be the artist
of the icebound works of Gardinas,
who blowing on his hand
smashes the glass.

Translated by Andrius Naudžiūnas and Clark Mills

Invocation

Change, spirit,
my first poems into cloth,
and summon the faceless brother
to paint on it Saint Isidore,
nourished with black bread only.

Change, roots,
my next poems into wood,
and summon the lame carver
to hew on it a face of Grief,
featured like a mother's.

Change, earth,
my last poems into clay,
and summon the ancient mourner
beside your coffin smelling of spruce
to weep in a clay-fired vessel.

Translated by Richard Robinson

The Woodsprite's Lament

Oh, who has felled you,
dear oak, my oak?
Who withered your green-feathered crest?
Alien, heartless gods?
Or bloodless hands?

I, I have failed you,
dear oak, my oak.
I did not shield you with my care.
In damp mists, in the autumnal night,
souls of the forefathers must lose their way.
Alas, your branches will not sough together
now, nor your leaves flare.

Translated by Clark Mills

That You Not Be Alone

I scrubbed the windowpane
Near your cradle
That stars should rise,
And risen, shed faint light,
That you not be alone,
Through the night alone.

I shall sway like a willow
By the level road
That a bird should settle,
And settled, sing,
That you not be alone,
On the journey alone.

Up the sad hill I'll go with you,
Like sand I'll flow away
That the wind should blow me,
And blowing, lull you asleep,
That you not be alone,
In the earth alone.

Translated by Jean Reavey

Crystal

The flowering of the lindens
is over. Honey-gathering's done.
And in the granaries
of tillers of the earth
only a smell of wax remains.

Shorter the days. Colder
the time of work. And in the hot palm,
of the salt of sweat, only
a small crystal.

Translated by Clark Mills