

**Poems read during Clare Azzopardi's Keynote Lecture
The Names They Left Behind
Oxford Crossings Conference, 30 April 2017**

Pietru Caxaro's Kantilena

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Il_Cantilena

Modern orthography

Xidew il-qada, ja ġirieni, talli nħadditkom,
Ma nsab fil-weri u la nsab f'ghomorkom
Qalb m'għandha ħakem, sultan u la mula
Bir imgħammiq irmietni, b'turgien muħsula,
Fejn ħajran għall-għarqa, ninzel f'taraġ minżeli
Nitla' u nerga' ninzel dejjem fil-baħar il-għoli.

Waqgħet hi, imrammti, l'ili żmien nibni,
Ma ħtatlix mgħallmin, 'mma qatagħli tafal merħi;
Fejn tmajt insib il-ġebel, sibt tafal merħi;
Waqgħet hi, imrammti.

Waqgħet hi, imrammti, nizzlet hi s-sisien,
Ma ħtatlix l-imgħallmin, 'mma qatagħli l-ġebel;
Fejn tmajt insib il-ġebel, sibt tafal merħi;
Waqgħet hi, imrammti, l'ili żmien nibni.
U hekk waqgħet hi, imrammti! w erga' ibniha!
Biddilha inti l-imkien illi jewtiha;
Min ibiddel l-imkien ibiddel il-vintura;
Għaliex l-iradi għal kull xiber sura:
Hemm art bajda, w hemm art sewda u ħamra.
Aktar minn hedawn hemm trid minnha tmarra.

Approximate English translation

Witness my predicament, my friends (neighbours), as I shall relate it to you:
[What] never has there been, neither in the past, nor in your lifetime,
A [similar] heart, ungoverned, without lord or king (sultan),
That threw me down a well, with broken stairs
Where, yearning to drown, I descend the steps of my downfall,
I climb back up and down again, always faced with high seas.

It (she) fell, my building, its foundations collapsed;
It was not the builders' fault, but the rock gave way,
Where I had hoped to find rock, I found loose clay
It (she) fell, my edifice, (that) which I had been building for so long.^[2]

And so, my edifice subsided, and I shall have to build it up again,
You change it to the site that suits her/it
Who changes his place, changes his fate!
for each (piece of land) has its own shape (features);
there is white land and there is black land, and red
But above all, (what) you want from it is a fruit.

Excerepts from Mary Meylak's poems. Translations by Albert Gatt

Monument Ġużeppi Meylak

żaqquieq, neffieq u xhin id-dar jingabar,
imqaxqax żgur għax nefaqq kull ma kellu,
...
u bla kuraġġ u jibża' mġar minn dellu.

greedy, a spendthrift who's penniless when
he's at home, for he'll have spent his money
... and cowardly, afraid of his own shadow.

U xalatur u żufjettuż għal darba,
gatt festa bih ma giet, skappat u għaddiet.

A pleasure-seeker and a joker, whose
presence at a party is guaranteed

Monument Tarcisju Meylak

... qalbu sewda jew mhux f'sikkta
...
U jpejjepp kemm fid-dinja hemm sigaretti.
...
Magħmul għalih u f'kollox iżomm lura,
...

...gloomy or out of sorts.
Inveterately smoking every cigarette he
finds.
a loner who keeps to himself...

Monument Mannani Meylak

Li kieku hija wkoll tat ruhha għall-kitba.
Kolombu kienet tkun għall-ilsien tagħna.
Imm'għazlet lil missieri u bennet lili. Flok
qagħdet tikkomponi bhali l-għana.

If only she had given herself to writing.
Our language would have had its own Columbus.
But yet she chose my father, nurtured me.
Instead of writing songs in verse, like me.

Grezz il-Gwerriera

Qabdu l-armi rikbu ż-żwiemel,
Huma wara, Grezz quddiem
U r-riġment għal kontra l-Għarab,
Qiegħda tmexxi mingħajr kliem.

They grabbed their swords and mounted
horses,
They stood behind, Grezz at the front,
As the regiment faced the Arabs down,
With her stood silent at the helm.

Id-Destin ta' St Clement

Mart Sejntklement demmha Malti,
Hekk kif ratu qed jisgiċċa,
Daret fuqu daqs ljunessa,
Xtaqet tqattgħu biċċa, biċċa.

Clement's wife had Maltese blood.
When she saw how he'd retreated,
She rounded upon him like a lioness,
About to tear him limb from limb.

Qaltlu: "Jekk m'intix se ddawwar.
Sabiex thares lin-nies tiegħek,
Ibqa' żgur li l-baħar naqbeż
U dal-vjaġġ ma nkomplihx miegħek!"

She said: "If you won't turn back,
To protect your own people,
I'll dive right into the water
And won't continue this voyage with
you!"

**Excerpts from Doreen Micallef's poems. Translations by Albert Gatt
Fit-Triq tal-Empirew - Along the Emyrean way**

ghax jiena
merkurju
pjaneta taqbad
sa ruhi
ħarrabtha l-infern
sa moħhi sa qalbi
ħa jpattu ħa jbatu
ħa jemnu
ghalik
(Skorpjun fid-Dezert
urini
lil
Alla
Missieri!)

for I am
planet
mercury
ablaze
my soul even
fleeing hell
my mind even my heart
to atone to
suffer
to believe
all for you
(Desert Scorpion
attest
my God
my Father
to me!)

Eżistenzjalità - Existentiality

... u ghajnejja tberrħu fuq
kull sewwa-fija-annifsi,
moħhi kkristalizza sal-ibghad
irkejjen miżliega, -
U ruhi meħlusa! ...
ISSA SIRT MARA.

...and my eyes unbarred took in
all the goodness-within-me,
crystalline my mind up to the furthest
bleary reaches, --
And free at last my soul! ...
NOW I AM WOMAN.

profetika - prophetic

kull meta l-biki tiegħi
int ma tisimghux ghax
widnejk misdudin
bi ħsibijietek
ghall-inqas ħares lejja
jekk ma tifhimnix
f'wiċċi taqrax is-sigriet bejn
is-snug tal-verità ghax
jiena qed inbati bħal
ghanja taċ-ċinju ftit
qabel imut
arani għarwiena bil-ghadam
iċekċek dan id-destin
li waqa' fuq pajjiżi u
twaqqafnix

every time you fail
to hear my wail your
thoughts clogging
your ears
cast a glance at least upon me
if you can't fathom me
do not then read the
secret in-between
the lines of truth because
this my suffering is the swan's song shortly
before death
see i'm naked my bones
rattle this destiny
that has befallen my country
do not stop me

3 poems by Maria Grech Ganado. Translations by the author Relazzjoni - Relationship

Għall-ewwel kull ma lghabna
ongiongiongella;
u wara ftit,
id f'id
dawra durella.

at first, both playing to and fro¹
we drew close, then backed away

then later, hand in hand, our game
was like a ring o' roses

Iss' iżda
logħba noli
li aktarx ma tintemm qatt.

now, though, we play at hide and seek
and I'm afraid we'll stay this way

Rendikont - Balance Sheet

Razzant ilsieni
għax hekk ridt int –
jum wieħed bosta snin ilu.
Baxxejt għajnejja sabiex l-irvell
li beda jqum ibaqbaq ġewwa fija
ma nqabbd u l-ebda triq,
wisq anqas dik li twassal sa ġo qalbi.

I bit my tongue – it's what you wanted
one day, many years ago – I bowed my
head
to stop that fury suddenly bubbling
in my blood from going where it would
especially towards my heart.

Madwarna għajnejn uliedna
ssoktaw hienja,
u hienja kienu għadhom meta telqu.

Our children's eyes stayed serene
and were still so when they left home.

Ma nistax naf x'kien isir minnu
daż-żwieg li rnexxa
li kieku jien, jum fost l-ohrajn,
bosta snin ilu,
erfajthom kont għajnejja,
ħallejt ilsieni
u l-korla qbadt u bzaqtha minn go demmi
qabel ma sarli mrar.

I can't tell what would have become
of this successful marriage, if – one day
many years ago – I'd raised my head,
loosened my tongue and spat the fury
from my blood before it turned to bile.
All that I know is that I'm here today,
my heart, grown mouldy, waiting
passively
for a second death, numb, alone

Naf biss li llum hawn jien
b'dil-qalb li tmermret,
mitluqa għat-tieni mewta, waħdi
mifnija –
fil-waqt li mgħannaq ma' rgulitek ħdejja
hemm,
daqstant waħdek,
int.

while you too by me, embraced by your
male ego, are as alone as I.

¹ Ongi Ongi Ongella is an old Maltese Children's folk song which used to be sung and danced to by children in schools and on the streets. It starts with 2 rows of players facing each other, hand in hand – each row in turn moves towards and away from the other.

Gynaecology by Simone Galea. Translation by Ivan Callus:

Kien hemm raġel
Li kien jaf eżatt
x'inhni mara.

There was a man
who knew exactly
what woman is.

Kellu sensiela ta' figurini fini
Li jgħinuh jifhem it-tipi differenti.

He had a row of fine figures
to help him get her different kinds.

Fil-klinika lanqas ktieb wieħed
Dawk qal, kien tgħallimhom kollha bl-
ammett

In the clinic there was not even one book;
them, he said, he had learnt all of them off
by heart.

U x'hemm bżonnhom
jekk jista' jħares fil-fond tan-nisa
u jinduna li kull darba
li jħoss il-ħitan tagħhom b'idej
dawn jitmermru u jsawru mara ġdida.

What would he need them for
if he can look into the depth of women
and notice that each time that he
feels their walls in his hands
these crumble and make up woman anew.

Parenthesis by Nadia Mifsud. Translation by Albert Gatt

...
ir-raba' jum
ras ma' ras
fuq das-sufan żlugat
subgħajk infexxew jinku 'l żokorti
imbagħad għedtli
fuq ommok
u l-ħadida tal-mogħdija
li kienet theddek biha
kull darba li l-inbid irħis ma kienx
jesa' d-dmugh u l-ħolm imdewwed tagħha
xtaqt lil ġufi jibilgħek dak il-ħin
xtaqt nista' nwelldek dak il-ħin
inħobbok minn fuq s'isfel
u dawramejt
eżatt kif inħob lil uliedi
xtaqt nagħtik sidri
nitimgħek il-fsied
nisqik iż-żegħil
insikket biżgħatek
ħabbejtek ftit aktar dak il-ħin
jien u nbennen 'il ħsibijietek tqal
u fhimt aħjar il-għala
l-ħitan ta' darek kienu kollha
kukur differenti
kukur għal kull burdata
għedtli

iktar tard bix-xmara lewn il-fidda
titheddel f'ħogri

...
day four
as we lay head to head
on this wonky sofa
your fingers started teasing my navel
then you told me
about your mother and
her iron
brandished as a threat
whenever her tears and worm-eaten dreams
were more than her cheap wine could muffle
I wanted my womb to swallow you up then
I would've given birth to you anew
and loved you head to toe
inside out
exactly as I love my children
I would've given you my breast
fed and indulged you
quenched and cosseted you
silenced your fears
I loved you a little more just then
as I rocked your heavy thoughts to sleep
and understood a little better why
your house had walls in
different colours
a colour for every mood
you said

later
with a silvery stream drowsing

ħadt gost nisimgħek
tħoll is-suppstijiet kollha
u terġa' ddommhom mod ieħor
f'kullana bews
madwar għonqi

in my lap
I enjoyed listening to you
unknotting all our shoulds
stringing them back a different way
into a necklace
of kisses

Hangover by Claudia Gauci. Translation by Albert Gatt

Dil-gżira niżżiltha morra f'nifs bħal grokk.
It-tafal irrakkmat fuq ġenbejha għoljiet
ma sakrexx u qas ma tħajjart tinżel
għarkobbtejk, rasek fi hđanha tal-bellus
issoff bil-mod ix-xita fietla tistrieħ fil-qiegh.
"Għoġbitni," għidtlı,
u tajtnı dahrek silwett sewdieni
jitnaqqax b'inkejja fid-dalma tal-blat.
Hsibtha se tieħdok dil-gżira u thallik
imkebbeb fuq sidırha ma tarax art.
Hsibtha se triegħdek bi ġmielha dil-gżira
tleghıgha sal-qiegh tibqa' ġħaxı mbissem
bil-baħar ileqq mitluq roqgha hđejn rasek.
Hsibtek rajtnı nistenna niswied fl-ġħabex
biex tiġi dduqni, ninżillek bħal duwa fl-ewwel dija.

You downed this island sour like a shot.
The clay embroidered on her hilly hips
didn't make you drunk and you'd no wish
to kneel, cradle your head in her velvet arms
and slowly drink the warm rain in her depths.
"It's nice," you said,
and turned your back, a darkened silhouette
teasingly carved into the blackened rock.
I thought this island would have left you gone
curled up against her breast blind drunk.
I thought this island's beauty'd rattle you
you'd knock it back and pass out with a grin
the sea a glittering puddle by your head.
I thought you'd seen my rising shadow at sundown waiting
for you to savour, to down me like a nectar at first light.

Elegija għal ħuti li sejrın - An elegy for my siblings by Simone Inguanez. Translation by Maria Grech Ganado

ma
il-ħjiel t'omm li refghet juġa' – juġagħni
u forsi juġa' lilek ukoll
xi daqqiet

għad baqa' ħuti fik imsakkrın

- se nifgawhom

ma
the thought of a mother who has dried up
hurts – it hurts me
and perhaps it hurts you as well
sometimes

my siblings are still locked inside you

- we're choking them