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## VYTAUTAS MAČERNIS



*This translation was made from the text published in the collected edition of the poetry of Vytautas Mačernis, Poezija, edited by Kazys Bradūnas and published in Chicago in 1961. This edition also contains an appreciative essay by Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, a friend of Mačernis and a fellow poet. The present translation of the Visions is published to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of the poet.*

*Mačernis was born in 1920 in the village of Šarnelė and died in 1944, probably from wounds inflicted by a stray bullet. Thus, at the time of his death, Mačernis was hardly beyond his student days. He had studied English language and literature in Kaunas and philosophy at the university of Vilnius.*

*In his essay, Nyka-Niliūnas, a participant with Mačernis in the same literary movements recalls something of the atmosphere in which the Visions were written. A group of little known students were trying to break away from the more established poetic traditions of independent Lithuania.*

*The foundations of this break were various, among them a familiarity with the existentialist current in philosophy then becoming prominent in Europe. Mačernis enjoyed a special advantage: his knowledge of the English language and familiarity with English and American literature, particularly the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Most Lithuanian writers were more familiar with European sources and, thus, Mačernis had a vast and at the time novel body of literature from which to draw.*

Editor

## VISIONS

VYTAUTAS MAČERNIS

### INTRODUCTION

An angry evening has come to the earth,  
So very alien and restless.  
Only the wanderer wind tosses about outside the window  
And like a traveler knocks at the door.

But I shall never let him in —  
I will shut the door even more securely,  
I, full of unrest, longing for something,  
Drowned in the gravity of the evening, think:

Of this earth and plowed-up hills,  
Those cabins built of thick timbers,

And men, passing from generation into generation,  
Those men, young and full of promise.

I see the golden harvest of their summers,  
The ripe nights of the month of May,  
The fields after harvest, the seed, free-falling,  
And the agony of creative men.

It is they who flutter in the shadows of this evening,  
Becoming clear through gestures and power,  
And slowly they are born again,  
Born again through me.

*Šarnelė, 1938.*

I

When I awake in dreadful midnight and torment whips my heart,  
And at my temples pounds,  
Again forgotten scenes, like swamp lights on an autumn night,  
Pass before me.

And I see my native northern path  
To the home burning with sun.  
There it is midday. A maiden rings the dinner-bell —  
And its ringing so happy and sweet.

Such silence. Like a drop ripe with agony,  
It slowly oozes into the heat.  
While the sun's rays drip onto the maple's leaves,  
Spatter in honey on the boughs.

But, look, in the west the vault darkens...  
I hear thundering somewhere far away.  
Waters come to wash away lights that have fallen on trees  
And to revive the fields.

The jacksnipes chase each other through the air,  
Their singing wings out-spread.  
The wind, asleep in the goblet of a flower, rises  
And the trees begin to wake.

Already the first drops rustle through the leaves —  
The whirlwind chases the rich downpour,  
And from the roofs, girl-like, the streams chatter, —  
Rivulets flow into puddles.

Blue lightning furrows the heavens: clouds thunder and the earth roars,  
And the crashes keep echoing.

-----  
But slowly the darkened roadsides begin to brighten, —  
The storms quieten, as if a drained out spring.

The sun gleams from a cloud again, and skylarks laugh...  
Across the dewy meadows twilight comes wading.  
In the lake's rushes nightingales, gone insane, sing,  
And the song of the thrush proclaims the orchards.

Soon it will be evening: father returns home from the field and the dogs come running across the yard.  
The smoke of supper from the red chimney sprawls along the ground.  
The wind sways the tops of apple trees,  
And in warped windows the last lights end their play.

It is calm in my birthplace. Through the maples the moon gazes at the yard.  
The night is beautiful and divinely bright.

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Only within me it is dark midnight, only in the ashes a small flame wanes,  
And the heart beats frightfully.

*Kaunas, 1939.*

II

I know that on the earth there is one home,  
To which now comes a wonderful morning,  
There the cocks crow longingly in the twilight,  
And the farmer's steps echo about the house.

I bend to the ground and watch,  
Till in the fragrance of the hills damp with the morning dew  
My head reels...  
There far away are fields  
Where only light rye grows,  
Where there are no muddy streets  
Of noise.

I come to listen:  
From where the distant places gleam,  
A sweet trill strays toward me.  
And I see: a shepherd holds a reed between his fingers  
And blows as he walks upstream...

And like that restless river,  
Winding between blue forests, bogs, and swamps —  
That trilling  
Seeps to the deepest depths of my heart.

And in an ecstasy of joy I feel  
How the reed's simple song  
Wakens from sleep valleys and fields...  
The darkness of night leaves —  
And its heavy sorrow rises in a fog...  
Again the black bats hide under the roofs,  
Frightened of the morning light.

---

While I go again with longing for earth  
To burn with the flame of visions.

*Šarnelė, 1940.*

III

One morning walking by an old forsaken orchard,  
I looked in through the paling,  
Over the pond the lazy shadows of the night just past,  
Like birds with wounded wings beat the air,  
And on the bough of an apple tree, leaning toward the water, a scarf, it seems, hung long ago  
Fluttered in the morning wind.

The fringes shimmered among white blossoms, where sleepy bees  
Hummed with distant bells...  
As from a haze rose memories when thinking  
That this was the scarf of my grandmother long dead.

I glanced at my native fields, still drowned in the quiet of the morning,  
When they prayed silently kneeling before the rising sun,  
And in a bright vision I saw grandmother, radiant in a bridal gown,  
Rising from the solitude of the old orchard...

With light steps she rose to walk through fragrant earth,  
With clear, clear eyes like two deep lakes in the mountains.

She reached the brook and scooped up a handful of water,  
With cold, cold drops she moistened her brow and lips.  
Then with a brave gesture she blessed the fields  
And wrapping her shoulders in the warm scarf,  
Again wandered away where in the distant sky two little clouds  
White, white, rolled like two small boats at sea.

-----  
Now when I walk by the fenced-in orchard,  
The dreary pond, overgrown with duckweed,  
Where like those birds with wounded wings,  
Flutter the shadows of the past, —  
Always I see her, I see her in her bridal gown...  
With the lightest of steps again she leaves by the gate, —  
Her eyes so clear and blue, like two deep lakes in the mountains.

Now, when the heart is like a traveler fallen in the desert sand,  
When wishes die like weak butterflies lost in the twilight, —  
Often I feel the refreshing drops on my lips  
From her fingers, lifted up toward heaven in ecstasy.

*Šarnelė, 1940.*

IV

1

Today I remembered an event from the years of my awakening childhood, —  
That quiet summer Sunday drifting past us. —  
When grandmother and I — the two of us —  
Had stayed to tend the house.

In the big room, at the table, adorned with flowers from meadows, lakes, and swamps,  
Grandmother prayed from big prayerbooks, secretly sighing,  
And, I, sitting in the rocking chair,  
Long dwelled on the sun's window in the floor.

In the fields I heard the breathing of a summer's midday, —  
Felt it come to me through open doors,  
And with the fingers of a princess seen in dreams  
Touch softly on my face, lips, and eyes...

But suddenly into my window fell the shadow of a bird's outspread wings,  
Veiling for me bright joy and reveries.  
I trembled, rushed to grandmother  
And crying fell into her open arms.

Catching my sorrow, she asked me not to cry,  
Wiped away my tears, and promised to defend me  
From that bird who, flying from a distant land, severed the bundles of rays,  
Forming for me a bright window of sun in the floor.

She told me we can dream, believe, be joyous:  
In the world there is only youth, and sun, and home...  
While the wanderers from distant unknown lands, those birds astray in space,  
Visit this earth rarely.

2

Many years passed. And grandmother died.  
Neither flowers nor old prayerbooks remained in the room,  
And in my heart, of the pure faith of those days  
Not a trace remained.

Though sometimes in my heart the window of sun flashes  
And, like a tree in freedom, each day taller, broader;  
From distant, unknown lands strays the bird, that wanderer in space,  
And throws the shadow of huge wings into the center of my happiness.

And when in hopelessness there is no place to hide the face,  
With eyes dilated by pain I see,  
How the midday withdraws from me, how it slides into the lands of the evening,  
Its steps, which used to ring with joy, weaken,  
Withered grasses whisper in the heat:  
It will never return here, never.

And I see how evening awakes from its hiding in the shadows of the forest's edge,  
I see how it crawls over broad plains  
And with the cold, bony hands of a mother — death,  
Embraces my days of work and torment.

*Kaunas, 1940.*

V

1

In the fields the sun burned. It was summer. And grass, tall and gentle, grew in the forest's shaded glades,  
From rivers a warm wind blew back.  
White lanes, like lonely wishes, reached to the limitless across the plains,  
When I, intoxicated in the sunbeams, walked through the earth in bloom.

I saw the large families of plowmen, scattered in the vastness of the fields:  
Their days of undiminishing work and their restless nights of repose. —  
The fields were already ripe and above them like a quiet spirit  
Hovered the peace of a big harvest.

Then I saw their heavy toil. The coarse hearts of laborers beat slowly,  
Their bronze faces and cold eyes blazed with the beauty of freedom and power.  
Their hands were hard and rough, blackened, cracked, —  
Their souls — clear and bright like those of little children.

Leaning in the wayside grass, piercing the blue spaces with my eyes, I thought about them,  
I thought about their life and future generations,  
Which, come to earth, will grow, mature, and when the bright day will have ended,  
Will bend their proud heads fearlessly to death.

I understood then the deep meaning of blooming and maturing,  
And it was quiet in my soul, when the wind rushed in the hills,  
When the earth, the waters of rivers, the dark, blue forests chanted quietly:  
Live through us, so we can live eternally through you.

2

But once the summer ended. The fields grew quieter. The last birds of lake and swamp  
Turned to warm southern lands.  
And I left home, the homestead, and the grey heights  
And came to the city. While the evening which had come with me, with long shadows covered the parks and streets.

As I walked large drops from dirty brick walls splattered the faces  
Of passers-by, who hurried past me full of strange hopes and unrest.  
Emerging from underground, the laborers were sullen and pale:  
They carried boredom in their faces and secret hatred in their hearts.

Through many years they grew accustomed to glance not, to look not sunward,  
Bent under the day's load.  
So slowly their future's light  
Grew dimmer.

Through many years I too grew accustomed to not distinguishing myself from them, not recognizing myself,  
Like a bit of dust in the street's, I adapted to the carrying stream.

And when at night heavy and uneven thoughts woke me,  
I could no longer find new hope.

Therefore, I came to like the autumn, its sad colours and its wind,  
Which sprinkles with cold rain the mournful, wilting flowers.  
I came to like distant, bewildering roads, by which one cannot return,  
I came to like destroying in myself my growing powers.

And so the last fires of joy died out, while in the soul was born a longing for the end.  
In painful resignation, thirsting for non-existence,  
I glanced at the stars... How many of them through the ages born to burn and glitter,  
On an autumn night run across space and fade away without meaning.

3

When one evening the sun, as if wounded, died slowly in a stream of blood,  
When so indifferent I watched the final minutes of its agony,  
And when the vastness glimmered and the gaping distances disclosed an old, crumpling world,  
Sinking into the depths of the night, —  
I felt returning life, and strength for work and living,  
The fire of inspiration flooding in my veins,  
A wonderful alertness, an endless resolve,  
Coming to rule me.

That night, like a fire hurling its lights into the darkness,  
I flamed with the flame of blood and power created through generations of generations, —  
The river of life, breaking through the flocs of pain and death,  
Flowed toward the future.

That night I saw the word in the light of inspiration, glowing like a new sun, —  
With it rhythmically beat the heart of all things, —  
From the soul, like a bursting fountain,  
Poured out a stream of images of the future.

And in the word — the perfect circle — a new, undying world shone...  
In it drowned oceans, and mountain peaks glanced about haughtily,  
And in the hot sun of eternal summers  
Flamed the hills and fields of my birthplace of plowmen.

*Vilnius, 1941.*

VI

A warm summer night covered the homestead, and the large orchard dozed in the dusk,  
Somewhere far-off was heard the exuberant song of plowmen.  
Huge stars lighted up the road leading back to the homestead,  
And fog, like a white flower, swirled above the meadows.

I sat in the room, just home from a distant journey,  
When from live memories awoke, arose my distant childhood, —  
While from old pictures the stern faces of ancestors gazed at me,  
And in the twilight shone grandmother's smile.

I looked into the past... But slowly my heavy head drooped to breast and scattered thoughts  
Changed into a stream of bright dreams:  
The dream comes — I walk in a large orchard,  
The whitest petals like small butterflies fall into the grasses.  
They spin and whisper and with a strange fragrance  
Intoxicate me as if with wine.

In the middle of the orchard, under a large mellow apple tree, I see grandmother seated,  
Rays, hanging through the boughs like golden threads, cover her face and eyes,  
The wind faintly ripples her white hair,  
And fallen apple blossoms stain her dress.

I approach, she turns and raises her eyes:  
"So you, dear son, have come home...  
Come closer and sit down.  
So many days I waited here, gazing down the road for you.  
Tell me, did you not tire in the world? Tell grandmother.  
Comfort her days, full of waiting and sorrowing."

I sit down and say: "Grandmother mine, if you only knew how much I longed for you...  
For the homestead, for home, those wide fields...  
Remember, in childhood long ago  
We liked walking in the fields, just the two of us."

It used to be hot. Spikes of grain hanging heavy on the stalks. —  
Fragrant with amber, the woods would flame in fire. —  
And in the blue sky, neighboring church steeples, like castles of bone,  
Would appear very white.

We two would walk in the fields, serious, hand in hand,  
We would stop by the lake, clear as the eye of a one-eyed giant. —  
A lonely bird would rise, frightened away from the nest,  
To alight on the other side of the lake, too lazy to fly further.

I, quickly, aboard a leaky boat,  
Would sail to the farthest shores of the lake.  
And when I returned tired, you would say, smiling proudly:  
"My little restless weasel, ever stirring and alive,  
No one knows what will become of you."

But today all that is in the past...  
The blossoms of one sorrowing spring, pressed in a book.  
When I handle them in the books of memory,  
Longing floods my dimming eyes.

---

I remember, as soon as I grew up a little I went out into the world, —  
I was without care, and smiling gazed at the lot of those who work.  
It was the peak of spring. The clouds scattered in the blue —  
Having fled to the edge of the woods, bright and youthful birches budded with leaves.

Being restless without end, I rushed about among my friends.  
All of us followed, playing pranks, the sunny river of time.  
Girls garlanded our heads with flowers. We broke off the budding branches of trees  
And tossed them into the water; let the rolling waves carry them along.

Tired after a day on the road, at sunset seated on hillsides,  
Profoundly quiet, we would gaze below, where plains and hamlets lay,  
Where the smoke of a shepherd's fire rose skyward.  
Then night would come, scattering stars across the sky.  
And their high and noble serenity would enslave us.

Alas, today all that is in the past...  
The blossoms of one sorrowing spring, pressed in a book.  
Longing floods my dimming eyes  
When I handle them in the books of memory.

---

Later, fate parted us and the years added gravity to our faces.  
I set my clear eyes upon a book.  
I was a little tired, in my heart I regretted something,  
While a ray from the autumn sun played on my face.

With bowed head, I entered the icy silence of a large, empty home, —  
Here evening had suspended in the heavens the colors of a fading heaven.  
I lit a candle and worked, listening in the silence

How the north wind was rising in the suburbs  
And how tramps were singing their sad songs.

Sad and tired eyes, finding no truth,  
With anger stared into the depths of night:  
Thus all our days, like moths fallen into the flames of light,  
Shall find only the unknown and death.

Sometimes I feel one should not speak this way,  
I wish to forget happiness and devote my hands to work.  
And powers gather; it seems possible to shoulder away the vaults of misery and pain  
And lead the whole nation out under a new sky...

I fell silent, grandmother glanced at me,  
Then hung her head and long sat in silence.  
Then, taking my hand, she said: "Many words I did not understand,  
But loving you, the heart guessed them..."

When you were small, upon awakening  
You would run up to kiss me, puckering up your lips,  
And then, serious, would play under my window, —  
Tell me, how could I help loving you?

I remember how once, having collected almost all the dogs,  
Like a whirlwind you ran out into the fields  
And did not return... Sadly I went to look for you  
And found you in the rye field... All of you asleep, in one heap.

I picked you up and earring you home; I mused:  
My son will grow up and rule the native land,  
And the land will become like an orchard in bloom,  
And the land of our fathers will be beautiful..."

---

When the morning light, falling on my dreams in purple,  
Awoke me, I jumped up and glanced about the room:  
The sun was rising. The glow of its flames  
Flared ever more widely.

I glanced at the awakening fields. There, rows of early workmen  
Raised their large, firm hands, as if in prayer.  
So work was born. I, too, hurried to join them  
Over the broad plains.

On the way, a light morning wind from the mountains  
Whispered: "Your happiness is on the way..."  
Through the dew the earth, like a face covered with tears of joy,  
Shone immortal and proud.

*Šarnelė, 1942.*

VII

1

In that festival of blessing of the fields and earth of spring  
A joyful mood flooded the home of my forefathers.  
Once evening came, gay lights poured out from the windows,  
And a marvelous laughter could be heard.

For the far-off west's cold northern tribes gathered in their ancestral home,  
Again spoke in the proud dialect of the fathers,  
And their beautiful women, gracefully bending their heads,  
Smiled again with mysterious smiles.



On the green lawn of the yard, their tall, blonde girls, promenading,  
Suddenly felt a light wind swinging in the loose billows of their dresses,  
While evening with the cold fingers of a youth touched their lightly covered shoulders  
And secretly aroused an intoxicating tremor.

That night the wine was very dark, and light flowers  
Spilled intoxicating scents in streams.  
For long hours the overflowing river of joy  
Murmured about the miracles of happiness.

Only in deep midnight all the lights closed like tired eyes.  
And the banquet house drowned in the solemnity of sleep and dreams...  
Only on the fringes of the curtains in my room a moonbeam played,  
And in my heart still trembled the pure light of that evening.

Through the window could be seen the shadowy, wide plains  
And on the dozing hills, the rye swimming out...  
I went through the orchard to the fields where the white road to the distances  
Drew me like a bewitched reverie.

Along the rim of the horizon chains of distant woods lay black,  
White mists glittered above the meadows,  
And suddenly, who knows why, a strange legend came to mind  
About the flower of kings blooming in the east where the sun rises.

...If its rosy petals fall on someone's face or heart,  
The sun of immortality brightly lights up his days...  
The clear words pour out of his mouth  
Ringing ever closer, like a swarm of golden bees.  
And their melody enslaves the hearts of those in pain and misery  
With the secret desire for undyingness...

That night I forgot that it was just a strange legend  
About the fabled flower of the kings,  
For I was very young and sensitive, and the intoxicating flame of the feast  
Aroused in me a longing for the blue distances.  
And I wandered eastward through the meadows of a spring night,  
Believing the marvelous words of the legend.

I went on... Slowly the morning hours neared. The tired golden lanterns of the night dimmed,  
Ruffled birds stirred restlessly in their nests.  
Big, colourless tears fell to the earth from trees,  
And the milky sun climbed slowly up the cloudy sky.  
The cold ray of the everyday  
Again pushed away the lands of legends and dreams.

2

Many days have gone by... But the words of the wonderful legend remain in my heart,  
And every evening tear up the bonds and screws of the everyday.  
The liberated spirit once more flies to the lands of wonderful lights,  
Where the wind flows warm and refreshing.

I go through a land of trembling, gentle shadows,  
Leaving behind me fields asleep and ranks of fragrant hills,  
And with the rising beat of my heart, I feel the nearness of the royal flower,  
And on the horizon see the flames of the blessed east.

Someday I shall return again to the home of my ancestors, carrying in my arms the flower of the kings.  
To meet me will come the proud tribes of the west and the north,  
And their beautiful women, and tall, blonde girls,  
Come to the festival of the blessing of the earth.

*Vilnius, 1942.*

CONCLUSION

*I shall teach you to die an unpaid death  
And breathe into you love for the unseen sun.*

Outside the window it is not evening, not wind. It is the dead eyes of the night  
Rigidly staring at the fading scenes in my soul's hearth.  
The restless heart, like a bird which once beat against the sunny shore,  
This night seesaws its tiring wings above the emptiness.

Non-being, decorating my last thought with pain,  
Marks my spoken wishes with these words,  
And, recognizing her face, the travelers of this night,  
Full of terror, throw themselves into the sad depths of sin.

I know it's not for them to fight against it, that fight, hard, unequal,  
Not for them to pass the earth with a haughtily quiet step.  
But now my heart raves again about a new and meaningful campaign,  
And burning in a flame I see again, —

How on a sandy desert road on a dismal night,  
Followed by painful doubts,  
Though without wails, without complaint, full of concentration,  
Slowly strives ahead a new generation of giants.

It does not thirst for victory. And knows that the awaited sun of recognition  
Will never shine for it through the thick clouds of unknowing.  
But full of an inner unrest, it forges ahead... conquers the world,  
And finally closes in darkness the eyes which longed for light.  
I see it this night... wrapped in myself in the room of my forefathers,  
But here is the hour of assignment...  
In the deaf silence echo the icy blows of the clock,  
And I rise, slightly open the door... the darkness breathes upon our faces.

Rising from my lonely dreams, dizzy with the scenes of my vision,  
I walk at first choosing my steps unsteadily,  
But slowly the gait steadies and uncertainty ends,  
Already underneath my feet thunders the road leading to the great heights.

*Šarnelė, 1942.*

Translated by  
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