Three Poems

By Miguel Hernandez

Translated by Thomas Merton

This issue of The Merton Seasonal concludes the publication of Merton's translations of the Spanish poet Miguel Hernandez. (See the Summer issue, pages 7-12, and the Fall issue, pages 12-14, for further information.) The first of the poems, “Qué quiere el viento,” is taken from Hernandez's Cancionero y romancero de auscencias (Songs and Ballads of Absence), mainly composed during and after his first stay in prison in 1939 but not published until 1958 in Argentina. The second, “Canción Última,” is the final poem in El hombre arecha (Man the Spy) — eighteen poems written toward the end of the Spanish Civil War but not published until long after his death that express his disillusion with the war that he had initially supported strongly. The final poem, “A Mi Hijo” (“For My Son”), is an elegy from Ultimos Poemas for his child Manuel Ramón, who died in September 1938; Merton's note indicates that it was translated on November 26, 1966. The first translation is untitled and the latter two retain the Spanish titles.

The January wind
What does it want to do
Roaring down the ravine
Rattling all the windows
While my arms
Coat and enfold you?

To defeat us
Drag us away

Defeated, dragged off
Our two lives hauled apart
What more does it want
This wind
With its mounting fury?

To estrange us.
Cancion ultima

Painted is my house
Not empty, painted
With the color of the greater
Passions and disgraces.

From laments
Where it was exiled
It shall return
With its deserted table
Its bed in ruins

Kisses will bloom again
Upon the pillows
The sheet shall build
About our bodies its intense
Nocturnal
Fragrant vine

Outside the window
Hate grows dim.

The claw shall turn kind

Leave me this hope!

A Mi Hijo

You refused to close your eyes, my own
Dead boy and they remain two swallows
Open to the sky: its color crowned with Junes
As dew and leaves for morning regions

Today is like a day under the ground: dark
Under the ground, rainy, no one there
Witness unlit by sun, my future body
As under ground I would possess* you buried

Since you are dead the mornings bring no joy
Finding no fire-joy in the suns, your eyes;
October beats its wings against our windows
You let in fall and night fell on the seas
The sun devoured you, deep and only rival
And the far shadow flung out of his flame;
Light thrust you down and took you all the way
Swallowed you whole: gone back to the unborn.

Ten months in light coming around the sky
Dead sun, buried, eclipsed, betrayed to night
Your skin dried up not passing through its day,
Dawned on one side only your body

Declined to its setting. And the bird inquires
Where are you body of the east, flesh born of dawn
Needed for joyfulness baby of embracing
Laughter so only some few flowers

Die with your smile. Gone gone
Like the summer swallow from the ice
Escaping on new-fledged delicate wing
Wrecked in the seasons of enemy flight

Flower unable to grow teeth
Or reach the lightest signs of fury
Life like leaf of opening lip
Leaf that falls with the first sound.

No use to you were the sea's counsels. . .
I come from knifing the soft sun
From burying bread in oblivion
I come from spreading over eyes

A handful of nothing: green-red-brown
Green-blue-gold
Latent colors of life and gardens
Middle of flowers for your feet
Dark, black, sad; grave white rigid.

Woman in the corner: look it is day
(Eyes without setting, always on the dawn)
But in your womb, your eyes my woman,
Desolate the night – it keeps on falling.

*Merton enclosed this word in parentheses and put the Spanish original (haberte) in the margin, perhaps indicating he was not satisfied with his translation here.*