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Nattsanger

“Nightsongs”

by Abbie Betinis

*Seven poems by Rolf Jacobsen (1907-1994)
for high voice, clarinet, and piano*

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Nattsanger (*Nightsongs*)

Seven Poems by Rolf Jacobsen* (b. 1907, Oslo; d. 1994, Hamar, Norway)

I. Aftenrøden (*Red sunset*)

Som om alt var godt
holder bergene frem sine skåler
for søster Dag når hun vasker dine sår.
Tankefullt tømmer hun ut sitt lys i dem
—blod, alltid denne blodstreng,
dette grums av død på bunnen
sier hun til søster Natt mens hun brer deg ned
og klirrer med stjerner ved din seng.

*As if all were good
hills and valleys offer up their basins
to Sister Day when she nurses ev'ry wound.
Thoughtfully emptying out her light in them
—blood, always in these bloodstrings,
these grounds of death below them
she says to Sister Night as she tightly tucks you in
and rattles the heavens by your bed.*

II. Når de Sover (*When they sleep*)

Alle er barn når de sover.
Da er det ikke krig i dem.
De åpner hendene og puster
i den stille rytme som himlen har gitt menneskene.

*All people sleep so like children.
Only then is no war in them.
They open their hands a bit and breathe
in the quiet rhythm that heaven gives to all of us.*

De spisser munnen som små barn
og åpner hendene halvt alle,
soldat og statsmann, tjener og herrer.
Stjernene står vakt da og det
er en dis over hvelvene,
noen timer da ingen skal gjøre hverandre ondt.

*They purse their lips just like a child,
open their hands a bit more, all,
soldiers and statesmen, ev'ry slave and master.
Stars above all stand guard
and there is a haze over ev'rything,
just a moment, some hours, when no one can dare do
harm.*

Kunne vi bare tale til hverandre da
når hjertene er some halvt åpne blomster.
Ord som gylne bier
skulde trenge inn der.
—Gud, lær mig søvnens sprog.

*Would that we all could talk one to another then
when our hearts are blooming as half-open flowers.
Words like golden honeybees
would squeeze in there.
—God, make my language “sleep.”*

III. Mose, rust, og møll (*Moss, rust, and moths*)

Mosen kommer ut av jorden.
Lydløst som nattens flaggermus
setter den sig på stenene og venter,
eller nede i gresset
med sine askegrå vinger.

*Moss comes rising from the soil.
Quiet as nighttime's tiny bats
settles upon the solid stones and wait there,,
or it hides in the grasses
with its ashen wings folded.*

Rusten går fra nagle til nagle
og fra jernplate til jernplate i mørket
og undersøker nøiaktig
om tiden er inne.
Når stemplene er gått til ro;
når bæresøilene er langt inne i natten,
skal den gjøre sitt blodige, stille arbeide.

*Rust starts passing socket to socket
and from iron to iron in darkness
and very closely examines
when the right time will be..
When all the pistons come to rest;
girders and purlin beams are deep in the darkness,
it will then do its bloodying, silent employment.*

Stjernenes hvite møll
sitter i klaser på himmelens mørke glassruter
og stirrer
og stirrer på byenes lys.

*Stars like moths, white and pale
cluster in heaven at windowpanes distant and murky
and stare down
and stare down at so many lights.*

* Used by kind permission of Trond and Bjørn Jacobsen. Singing translation amalgamated by the composer from a variety of sources.

IV. Lavmaelt (*Whispered*)

Ord
bare små
små ord
og lavmælt
nesten uten pust
for oss

*Words
very small
small words
and whispered
almost without breath
for us*

som brukne strå
ord uten lys
og nesten uten form,
ord som hos trær,
små halv-ord
som i søvn
for oss.

*like broken straw
words without light
and almost without form
words here in trees
small half-words
lie in rest
for us.*

Mellem alt det store
små, små ord
å gjemme bort
på baksiden av en hånd
og ved din øreflipp
små ord
helt uten lys
som dyr
og gress.

*Amidst all this greatness
small, small words
to hide away
on the backside of a hand
or 'neath your earlobe
small words
so without light
like deer,
or grass.*

V. Lyktestolpen (*Lamppost*)

Så isnende alene i natten min lyktestolpe.
De små brosten hviler hodene tett omkring den
der den holder sin lysparaply opp over dem
så ikke det vonde mørket skal komme nær.

*So glacially alone in the nighttime, my little lamppost.
The small pebbles 'neath it nestle their sleepy heads
around,
where it holds its umbrella of light up over them
so never will wicked darkness dare come close.*

Vi er alle langt hjemmefra, sier den.
Det er ikke håp mere.

*We are all so far away from home, it says.
There is no hope here.*

VI. Nattmusikk (*Nightmusic*)

Stjernebildene skal forandre sig,
Karlvognens stang
skal strekkes ut mot syd
og Orion miste sitt sverd
før den siste smerte er forbi
sier stenen.

Det er målt til
også for mig.
Som fontenens glitrende støv
springer opp og faller ned i sig selv,
kommer alle mine dager inne fra mig selv,
målt til i en skål av sten.

Det er rolig lys over gamle trær.
De lar vinden løpe gjennom løvet
og stjernene gå høyt over sine kroner
i majestetiske tog.

*Stars shall turn and the night sky rearrange,
the Big Dipper's arm
will stretch and Southward fly
Orion's sword will fall away
ere the final stinging pain is gone,
says the stone.*

*See it's painted here
also for me.
Just as the fountain's glittering dust
springs up and falls again into itself,
Somehow all my days are coming from inside myself,
doled out in a bowl of stone.*

*There's a calming light over aged trees,
They let the wind flow through their lovely leaves
and stars again passing high
in their majestic parade.*

VII. Sjøfugl (*Seabirds*)

Morgenen kom med sjøfugl
som snefokk under en styrtet himmel
og hese rop: Hvor er vi?
Nåde. Nåde.

Som etter en plutselig forvandling:
—Dunbryst, kolde, kulerunde øyne,
røde klovne-neser, hvit pudret hals
sammensnørt i skrik:
Hvor er vi? Nåde.

*Morning comes with the seagulls
like blizzards under a falling sky,
and raspy cries: Where are we?
Mercy. Mercy.*

*As after a sudden transformation:
—white clown breast 'o down, cold and hollow eyes
round,
Punchinello clown nose, white powdery throat
tightened in a shriek:
Where are we? Mercy.*

Nattsanger (*Nightsongs*) is a cycle of seven songs exploring the mysterious nature of the period of time from sunset to dawn. Each movement explores a small feature specific to the night, including the setting sun, REM sleep, the non sequitur aspect of the dream state, the relationship of a fixed point to the ever-skewing night sky, and the often confusing fluctuation between dream states and reality. Initially conceived as a partner piece to Dominick Argento's song cycle To Be Sung Upon the Water, it borrows not only its instrumentation (*sans* bass clarinet), but also aspects of that piece's arched symmetrical form.

This piece was brought into being with generous help from soprano Jennifer Swanson, The Schubert Club, and native Norwegian speaker Melissa (Holm-Johansen) Culloton, who took great time in coaching me on pronunciation, translation, and the rich connotations of these exquisite Norwegian words. To these lovely people, and to the estate of poet Rolf Jacobsen, I extend my deepest gratitude.

- Abbie Betinis

NATTSANGER

I. —Aftenrøden

(Red sunset)

ROLF JACOBSEN

ABBIE BETINIS

Slowly, freely, as a conversation

p

Soprano

O, _____ Som om alt var godt
Oh, _____ as if all were good,

Clarinet (B \flat)

n _____ *mp* _____ *mf*

Sop.

3 warmly
hold - er ber - ge - ne frem sin - e skål - er for søs - ter Dag når hun vask -
hills and val - leys of - fer up their ba - sins to Sis - ter Day when she nurs -

Cl.

mf

Pno.

pp

Red. _____

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Sop.

- er din-e sår. —
- es ev'-ry wound, —

Cl.

mp

Pno.

mp

Red.

7

Sop.

Tan - kefullt tøm-mer hun ut sitt lys i dem
Thought-ful-ly emp-ty-ing out her light in them

Cl.

mf

poco rit.

Pno.

mf

poco rit.

11

Sop.

-blod, all - tid den - ne blod - - - streng,
-blood, al - ways in these blood - - - strings,

Pno.

mp espressivo

Red. *ad lib*

13 *mf*

Sop. *mf*
 det - te grums av død på bun - nen
 with these grounds of death be - low - them

Cl. *mp* *p*

Pno. *mf* *p*

16 *mp*

Sop. *mp*
 sier hun til søs - ter Natt mens hun brer deg ned
 she says to Sis - ter Night as she tight - ly tucks you in

Cl. *f* *mp*

Pno. *f* *mp*

Red. _____

18 *p* *half-whispered*

Sop. *p* *half-whispered*
 og klir - rer med stjern - er ved din seng.
 and rat - tles the heav - ens by your bed.

Cl. *p*

Pno. *p*

8va - - - - -
 rattley *p*