

THE RHODODENDRON FOREST

with a translation of

The Legend of Alvargonzalez

by Antonio Machado

Denis Doyle

ISOBAR
P R E S S

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EARLY CALL

At six, fog erased the fields
And the cuckoo drew me up the lane.
The gate stood on the white banks of nothing
As the call wheeled outside our atmosphere.
I stood at the point where expeditions falter,
Numbed by the repeated statement I had failed to grasp.
The first and last thing in the field
Was a clump of white flowers, stitchwort.
I thought: that plant is a gatekeeper,
Yet I turned back.
But still I felt bound to pass on the coded message,
Pulling the receiver into the cottage garden
So that in London your drowsy ears
Would hear the cuckoo's call,
Still ringing unanswered at the edge of the world.

LINES

I shall be spending March at a high latitude,
In a city like St Petersburg or Aberdeen,
A schoolboy, crunching through stone squares,
Counting hexameters,
Far above the northern limits of the vine;
Ice and angles
In a city the Romans never reached.
Today I met a southern suggestion
In a girl's dark eyes,
And a fisherwoman with red hands like a fierce dawn
Told my lowered head
That the ice was breaking at the harbour mouth.
My spring began today and this makes me different.
I should keep it to myself – some people here would not approve –
Yet I want to announce my deviation.
The ice will not allow me to emerge from my greatcoat
But I think I will unbutton the epaulettes.
The equinox will be here before we see a flower,
Light will come off rationing
And the broad blank stone days will disturb me.
But just now I am happy
Though exiled by imaginary lines.
I shall construct a March poem calm as Latin,
Vine leaves appearing, a dance of young girls
And fig trees covered with white blossom –
I suppose they have white blossom.

ALFRED WALLIS DOES HIS SPRING CLEANING

The white sun moves on the rocks,
Passes into the old rocks,
Deep as a gull's reflection
Flying over wet sand.
April in St Ives
And the sun has a companion,
A small man in black, old and lively,
Hurrying like a cloud shadow over the headland,
Two tins of ship's paint hooked over each arm.
Under his Methodist shell,
A black which contains all colours,
The energy charging his body
Dances on his skin like fleas.
Can't stop, have to paint my home,
The town, hills, every one of those boats.
Not the sea; that isn't my home.
And it can't get me now.
Anyway, the sea has no colour;
I'll prove it to you.
Long ago, I caught the sea in a bottle.

PEONIES

They were wild in Spain;
I saw their leaves in the mountains.
Even in our soft ground and gentler seasons
They push into the air, already in bud.
Their first leaves are brown hands shielding heads
Like orphans anticipating blows.

In Spain they said,
'You must see the gypsy dancer;
She's nineteen now and perfect,
But these people lead hard lives;
She won't last long.'

In hard red, the dancers form a line
And hold the perfect pose
Without needing to move,
Though the blue of old age
Has already entered the scarlet
And the white seed-pods show through like skulls.

LACUNA

When the fields opened like a Book of Hours,
When April had just struck me on the shoulder
And thrown me blue favours to wear in my buttonhole,
When I set out to do battle with bullocks
Or scale the swaying citadels of crows,
I never saw you, a girl in the fields,
Singing an old song, conscious of my coming,
From a green turret at the edge of the wood.

I am the curator of my childhood;
Something in me keeps the glass case dusted
And turns over one of the pages every day,
But now, alone, admiring my Book of Hours,
I think, with sudden regret, you were not there.

Because I saw you cry like a child over nothing
And could not comfort you as a child would have done
I cannot calm myself with illuminations.
The desolate O of your mouth is a hole in the parchment,
A lacuna in the spring.

A SINGLE MAN

I seldom get up early to scrub sheets in the sink
And throw them over hoops of dead grass
To construct ragged sierras
In the blank garden I have always neglected.
Now, lying flat, one forearm across my eyes,
I cannot blame the sun for a morning's lapse
From the indolence I readily resume.
Last week, I saw the sun through dusty glass unmoved
And knew it was still winter.
But today the light infected me;
I was driven for a while, but it is over.
Now I can be impervious
To the thrust of green, the gathering of bird calls
And the flap of the sly wind animating the sheets.
One of them, already risen,
Stumbles into the bushes in a torn shroud
Like Lazarus recalled to be a beggar.
I can resist the urge to cut a pole for a clothes line.
I scrub sheets in the sink so rarely,
It might be better to plant a tree for it.
It is March; there is still plenty of time.
A black poplar – up in five years –
Or, better still, an aspen,
And then the wind could test my stillness all summer,
Make the white wink of its leaves
Suggest the purposeful run of the sea.
But I shall be under the branches, defeating all movement
By finding the one leaf like the one wave
That always seems to stare out at you;
Drawing your gaze, a ship suddenly trapped by green glass
With the wind filling its sails, its sheets, its shrouds.

THE GOOSE GOSPEL

A monk who had learned how to whistle
Wrote at the door of his cell;
The curved letters wound in a helix
And his prayers were the sound of the shell,
But the margin he left on the missal
Was gilded with light. His work done,
He shifted his bones, future relics,
And wrote in vernacular, *Sun*.
The quill in his hand seemed to quiver
And pull with the will to migrate,
The letters were slanting, subversive,
Like geese making heaven a slate.

*Sun swarms on the mountain / the river
Rolls stones by my cell, and the land
Is reviving / I cannot be cursive /
The long chain is loosed from my hand.*

THE DOCTRINE OF SIGNATURES

It is time I returned from the sea
To the fields round the place of my birth
And I can only regret
That it will not now be as I planned it.
I will never go out in old trousers, striding the fields like a rook
With wads of leaves weighting my coat.
There will be no derelict cottage
Where I sit at the smothering fireplace,
Hands always busy with herbs.
A village sight, vague through brown windows,
Webbed with cracks from the stones of scared boys.
Today, by chance, I discovered that the fields
On which all this depended have gone.

Now I hear my feet crunch
On new gravel, by a new gate.
Aimless I stand. In the raw house,
The receiver is stealthily lifted
And they tick down the wire, three digits;
A live fence cuts me off from the past.

I shall tell my tale to the blue van:
'I believe in the Doctrine of Signatures.
I am here to gather foxgloves;
Their leaves are good for the heart,
As they're heart-shaped, you see,
And there was one clump in particular
That used to lean out of the hedge here.
Just here. Just after the war,
When I was a boy, and when this was a hedge,
And I know I have travelled the world
In the power of that memory.
Good for the heart.'

So I have dictated this letter
To say it will not be my fault
If, when they abandon politeness,
Try to order me down to their station,
I attack them with useless ferocity,
Like a dog guarding a grave.