

Four Poems by Ilarie Voronca

From *La Poésie Commune* and *Lignes de vie et de mort* (1936)

Translated by Min Straussman

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Translator's Note

[Ilie Voronca](#), Romanian avant-garde writer, was a complicated guy. What drew me to these poems was the energy with which Voronca wrestles with the artist's purpose. He unabashedly argues that poetry ought to impact the world instead of simply reflecting it. The background of these poems is dark, but Voronca has a talent for pointing out the sparks of light. Even as his utopian visions are challenged and he slips into depression, he insists: "It's here, in this clay, among these shadows/that the world of tomorrow readies itself."

While Voronca's novels have been translated into English and a translation of his Romanian poetry is forthcoming in 2023, none of Voronca's French poetry has before been translated into English. I am excited to present this selection from the twin chapbooks *La Poésie Commune* and *Lignes de vie de mort* (1936).

I translated these four poems in the spirit of Voronca's writing—with an emphasis on accessibility and clarity. You won't find any needlessly obscure language or imagery here. Where possible, I kept the original punctuation.

Life, The Poem That I Would Like to Write

No, it's not a glorious poem that I want to write.
No, it's not a song full of delicacies and about which
Connoisseurs exclaim: o! what rhymes, what impeccable form!

I don't have to use
Your ornaments and your linguistic games.
I only know a few very meager words,
They evoke no marvelous vision
But in fact the opposite, a hospital or a jail.

No, there's no sumptuous décor,
There is no rare term,
Like a stuffed bird from the islands.
Nothing but these everyday words, these humble, despised words,
Similar to old rags the daughter of the beggar turns into a soft doll.

The night before me shows me the way
There are these sad back alleys, these silent men, without hope, at the windows,
The day hangs around like a blind man
Who will never cross the threshold of their doors.

There ought to be, however, a spark, an unknown word

That can break this spell, that awakens
 A youthfulness, a joy slumbering deep down,
 Like a palace submerged in water.

It's the moment which has chosen the destination.
 To take the form of a traveler who gets off the last bus of the night
 Her body is frail, her gait hesitating,
 And her mouth is already full of love like a fresh taste.

Darkness is there too. It likes
 The intentions of the author of this poem. "Miss,
 Your hair, your eyes are sweet." And the voice
 Seizes, caresses, better than hands. She covers,

This modest figure, this soul like a sheet,
 On which words leave their moist slime trails,
 But is it really worth it to get into all that?
 I would like to talk of the marvelous appearance, of the apparition

Dear to the poet. Lying. She was a poor, sad girl,
 Without work. Without shelter. She left the hospital.
 And all night, a cough beat its wings
 Like a strange bird, in the room.

Ah! Of course that's not all I wanted to write
 This bitter suffering ... It's something else entirely. But the words
 Take away very little of what cries in me.
 They are there, printed, indifferent. And I want to cry: "It's something else."

Very close, very far, the cities, the seasons,
 And the sunsets and the old legends
 That you read in an antique novel. A province
 Forgotten. A delayed traveler who knocks

On the door of a shelter. A lamp that turns on.
 But what does it matter in the end if I managed to write
 The poem that I wanted? What does it matter
 If I pass through a crowd unknown,

And if the ocean comes up all of the sudden amid these words
 Like a dancer who goes to take a lovely bow?
 What does it matter
 If the poor, sad girl forgot this story,
 If she ignored that a poet spoke to men in her name?

There are so many things. Does one have the time to think of them all? The dinners,
 The receptions. "How much sugar?" And a smile,

Carefully studied, accompanies the hand that offers the cup of tea,
 “We have a Brazilian singer”... “And the great Poet,

Is here as well.” “He will read us some poems.”
 “Why yes, it’s a lovely evening.” The murmurs
 Of approbation. Then the shadows that darken hands like soot.
 These hours that erase themselves... What is still left?

I know, a room, and then another
 Perfumed, rich, silent like the bass notes
 Of a piano... Outside, fresh, cars
 More and more weightless, dissolve like phantoms,

And then these words which fall on the page like cinders
 To dry other secret, invisible words.
 These saline odors, and these daybreaks crowned with weeds
 And the life, the humble poem, that I would like to write.

The Poet’s Country

I saw men conspire, under complicit trees.
 They spoke silently, gesturing meaningfully,
 “Here, we will put up a wall, a door, a window.” Then they glued
 Their ears to the floor, to listen for the sound of new hoofbeats from the future.

Are the days shorter? And does hope
 Like a bird that loves light distance itself
 From these lands? Among the twisted rocks and roots
 My steps scatter in the wind like snow.

Very far away, like lightning, pass trains
 Full of memories of a happy life, urbanite.
 But there were people, phantoms, around me
 Speaking softly, worriedly, about walls to raise and future harvests.

It’s here, in this clay, among these shadows
 That the world of tomorrow readies itself. It’s here
 Among these anxious men, that a new life
 Grows like a journey in the trunk of the tree we will use to make a boat.

And I keep myself close to them, still left, still sad

Like during the period of my youth when I was foreign
 Because I belonged to a future time. But, now
 I want to mix in with this crowd. I share its life.

Are not all the notes of a scale on one single violin string?
 Likewise, in the heart of one single man all men,
 All countries touch.
 I feel welcomed with love. And I am in the midst of this crowd
 Like a feeble call, happy, in an immense shell.

Here or Elsewhere

He happens sometimes, alone, sad, a stranger.
 He stops and one hears his gentle tales,
 Full of weeds. He asks "Have I bothered you?"
 He would like to leave again, but he no longer knows where to.

In his ears the ocean sounds — some shells?
 His forehead, his eyes too large for this low horizon,
 Another reason to leave. His travels
 Are there before him, full of seas, of mountains.

One thus allows night to descend very gently
 Which mixes up bodies, hands, voices,
 Become almost spirits... The soul can understand
 Better — like the touch of the blind — this time.

I Have Been Among You, But Maybe Sleeping

I have been alive like you, my friends and in provincial,
 Sad gardens, I have made long confessions
 And I have also been the wanderer who wants a familiar shelter
 And who has no clothes but light and rain.

O! To be your companion, to recognize you
 Once again. My sight full of things in this world

Like very fish-filled water. And this look of the dying
 Drunk in by the face, like a river that dries.

From this promontory you see the ocean,
 Like a softly lit window
 Behind which, very late, during a winter's evening,
 The poet looks for a new dawn among his manuscripts.

But this slow transfusion towards immobility, towards death
 These corresponding vessels — life and death — which I am waking up to,
 This source which is in us from our birth
 And which only springs up at the exact moment of our death,

Will it finally make us understand everything? These colors,
 And this lofty day, without daybreak, that we approach.
 The face is here but its outline is elsewhere
 You can distance yourself from it, you always stay close.

All of this belongs to another era, o! my friends!
 And this door where we knock. And when we open it
 No one is there. O! How I would have liked
 To recognize whoever was there on the threshold,
 Without body and without voice. For I was alive like you.

But today I am the very one
 Who your eyes search for in vain
 In the darkness, through the gaping doors.
 Encircled by great waters like invisible dogs
 Whose panting breath you hear nearby.

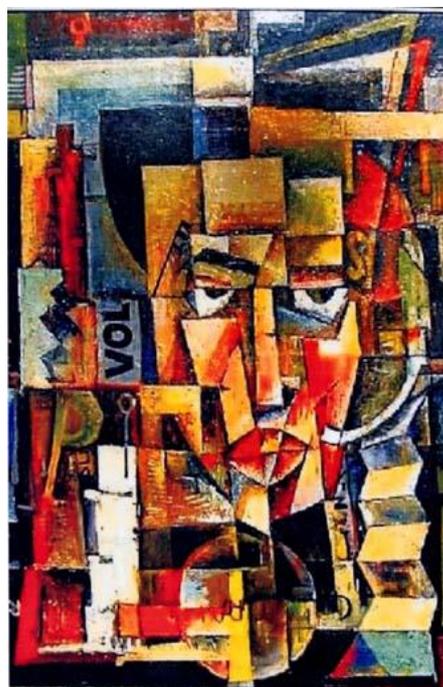


Image: Portrait of Ilarie Voronca by Victor Brauner (1925)