

## HISTORY OF WORLD LANGUAGES

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*They spoke the loveliest of languages.  
Their tongues entwined in Persian, ran  
And fused. Words kissed, a phrase embraced,  
Verbs conjugated sweetly. Verse began.  
So Eve and Adam lapped each other up  
The livelong day, the lyric night.*

*Of all known tongues most suasive  
Was the Snake's. His oratory was Arabic,  
Whose simile and rhetoric seduced her  
(‘Sovran of creatures, universal dame’).  
So potent its appeal—  
The apple asking for eating,  
To eat it she was game.*

*Now Gabriel turned up, the scholars say,  
Shouting in Turkish. Harsh and menacing,  
But late. And sounds like swords were swung.  
Fault was underlined, and crime defined.  
The gate slammed with the clangour of his tongue.*

*Eden was gone. A lot of other things  
Were won. Or done. Or suffered.  
Thorns and thistles, dust and dearth.  
The words were all before them, which to choose.  
Their tongues now turned to English,  
With its colonies of twangs.  
And they were down to earth.*

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**HISTOIRE DES LANGUES DU MONDE**

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*Ils parlaient les plus beaux idiomes,  
Leurs langues s'entrelaçaient en persan, couraient  
Et fusionnaient. On pouvait voir les mots s'embrasser, les  
locutions s'étreindre,  
Les verbes se conjuguer suavement. Le vers était né.  
C'est ainsi qu'Adam et Eve se lapèrent avec ardeur  
Tout le long du jour et de la nuit lyrique.*

*De toutes les langues connues, la plus persuasive  
Était celle du Serpent. Son éloquence était l'arabe  
Dont les images et la rhétorique la séduisirent  
("Reine des créatures, dame universelle").  
Si puissante était sa persuasion—  
La pomme réclament d'être mangée—  
Qu'elle eut le cran de la croquer.*

*C'est ici qu'apparût Gabriel, selon les dires des savants,  
Vociférant en turc. Sévère et menaçant,  
Mais en retard. Sifflant telles des épées, des cris furent  
proférés,  
La faute soulignée et le crime défini.  
Puis le portail claqua avec la clameur de sa langue.*

*L'Eden était perdu. Bien d'autres choses  
Furent acquises. Ou exécutées. Ou supportées.  
Épines et chardons, poussière et pénurie.  
Tous les mots s'offraient à eux: lesquels choisir!  
Leurs langues se tournèrent alors vers l'anglais,  
Avec ses colonies de nasillements.  
Et eux se retrouvèrent au ras du sol.*

**POEM TRANSLATED FROM A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

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*My mother once told me  
Never to sleep with flowers in the room.  
Since then I have never slept  
With flowers.*

*I have slept with prostitutes  
(But never with flowers in the room)  
In general they were amiable  
A few were not unhumorous  
One was rather acid.*

*None of them smothered me.  
One of them desired a silver pen  
Another removed a traveller's cheque  
But never my precious oxygen.*

*My mother never told me  
Not to sleep with prostitutes in the room.  
She did not tell me to stay awake.  
These days I sleep with pills.  
I sleep with daffodils in the room.*

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**POEME TRADUIT D'UNE LANGUE ETRANGERE**

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*Ma mère m'a dit un jour  
De ne jamais dormir avec des fleurs dans la chambre.  
Depuis lors, je n'ai jamais dormi  
Avec des fleurs.*

*J'ai couché avec des prostituées  
(Mais jamais avec des fleurs dans la chambre).  
Dans l'ensemble elles étaient gentilles,  
Certaines ne manquaient pas d'humour,  
L'une d'elles était plutôt revêche.*

*Aucune n'était encombrante.  
Il y en avait une qui voulait un stylo en argent,  
Une autre qui me subtilisa un chèque de voyage  
Mais jamais mon précieux oxygène.*

*Ma mère ne m'a jamais dit  
De ne pas dormir avec des prostituées dans la chambre.  
Elle ne m'a pas dit de rester éveillé.  
Je dors maintenant avec des comprimés,  
Je dors avec des jonquilles dans ma chambre.*

**LIFE AND LETTERS**

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*I sat on the parapet, swinging my legs, close under  
A luminous sky: a bright night city lay to my right:  
Beneath me the seething trams, and a song, long and sad,  
From a white cafe. And history—my own--oh nothing more  
portentous—  
Pressed me both ways.*

*The near stars smelt of jasmine, and the moon--that hugh  
fallafel--faintly of garlic.  
Electric crickets sang. And bats displayed their talents  
In rings around me, which I was too afraid  
To fear. It was a time when superstitions drop away.  
All day I walked under ladders, forgot to boil the milk.*

*For history--in the smallest sense--had fallen about me:  
Held for a moment between those toppling towers,  
Unable to understand, hatefully lost in cheerless ways, I sat  
Suspended, dumbfounded, uneasily contained within my  
debris,  
Bare above the hard road, the stiff steel, the tight-faced trams.  
Two natives noticed me and jeered: a bored policeman  
sauntered up:  
I went inside.*

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*Which is why I try to write lucidly, that even I  
Can understand it—and mildly, being loath to face the  
fashionable terrors,  
Or venture among sinister symbols, under ruin's shadow.*



*Once having known, at an utter loss, that utter  
incomprehension  
—Unseen, unsmelt, the bold bat, the cloud of jasmine,  
Truly out of one's senses—it is unthinkable  
To drink horror from ink, to sink into the darkness of words,  
Words one has chosen oneself. Poems, at least,  
Ought not to be phantoms.*

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**REFLECTIONS ON FOREIGN LITERATURE**

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*The stories which my friends compose are very sad.  
They border on the morbid (which, in the literatures  
Of foreign languages, we may licitly enjoy, for they cannot  
really  
Corrupt any more than we can be expected to discriminate).*

*(Sometimes I ask myself: Do I live in foreign countries  
Because they cannot corrupt me, because I cannot be  
Expected to make the unending effort of discriminastion?  
The exotic: a rest from meaning.)*

*(‘The officer shall engage in no activities whatsoever  
Of a political nature,’ says my contract, ‘in the area where he  
serves.’  
And all activity, it seems, is political.)*

*Anyway, the stories of my friends are very sad.  
I am afraid they are largely true, too, discounting the  
grace-notes of my elegant friends.  
At the heart of the ideogram is a suffering man or woman.*





*I remember my friend's friend, a barmaid in Shinjuku, at a  
literary pub—  
Neither snowy-skinned nor sloe-eyed (though far from  
slow-witted),  
Neither forward nor backward, of whom my friend  
(A former PEN delegate) said in a whisper:  
'Her life-story would make a book. I shall tell you one day...'  
The day never came. But I can imagine the story.*

*My friend's friend also made special ties out of leather;  
My friend gave me one as a parting gift, a special memory of  
his country.  
It has an elegant look; but when I wear it, it chafes my skin;  
Whispering that nothing is exotic, if you understand, if you stick  
your neck out for an hour or two;  
That only the very worst literature is foreign;  
That practically no life at all is.*

*Je me rappelle l'amie de mon ami, serveuse de bar à Shinjuku,  
dans un pub littéraire —  
Ni blanche comme neige ni noire de prune (bien qu'elle  
n'eût pas les yeux dans sa poche),  
Ni effrontée ni stupide et dont mon ami,  
Un ancien délégué du Pen Club, me disait à l'oreille:  
"L'histoire de sa vie ferait tout un livre. Un jour je  
te raconterai..."*  
*Le jour n'est jamais venu. Mais je peux deviner l'histoire.*

*L'amie de mon ami fabriquait aussi des cravates spéciales  
en peau;  
Mon ami m'en donna une—cadeau d'adieu—un souvenir  
spécial de son pays.  
Elle a l'air élégante, mais quand je la porte, elle m'écorche  
le cou;  
Murmurant que rien n'est exotique, si on comprend, si on  
veut bien tendre le cou et prendre quelques risques  
pendant une heure ou deux;  
Que seule la pire littérature est étrangère,  
Que la vie, pratiquement, ne l'est jamais.*