

BILL MINOR

The Fortunate Isles

I once lived in the Fortunate Isles—
and for several months I stroked
a living tortoise shell with dry
fingers, the golden belly
of a small guitar, turning her over
and rapping gentle rhythms on her
yielding backside as she slept--

just as I, healthy, naked, young
dove from the cove in which my wife
dozed, and eased my way through
mellifluous waters, and rose only
when I found my nose embedded
in the surfacing breast of a Scandinavian
maiden on vacation, leaving

a hospitable imprint, *xenia* the Greeks
would approve of. In a cove of rock
we called our own, my wife and I
lay side by side, reading, dreaming,
dozing off, shy of any thought in mind,
and time tramped by so slowly
if it moved at all in the tender air.

O where, where are you now, blessed isles?
Imbedded in memory, free of time,
rich and ripe with the honey and wine
and song of light-footed respect, this visit
as reverential as any two people wed
for twenty-three years dared get,
and that year ended free of all regret.

The Real Thing

How the dead must laugh at us,
finding us as devoid of life
as they once thought death would be,
but discovered otherwise. I don't
think life is death, but have long
found it a sort of kindergarten,

a getting started, warming up,
a “just begun,” not like the beginning
of love, an affair opening
on infinite possibility already
carting its own unique death
within its heart perhaps--but resembling
that birth, our own, we knew
nothing of but grew into over
a lifetime.

Do not attempt,
at the end, to convince yourself
that it was all a dream, a single act
of deception and deceiving, for all
you are leaving was *real*, the Real Thing,
experience to relish even when you felt
you could not abide it: for *that*
is the gift of life: the wondrous
unknowing that it truly *is* a gift—
yours to believe and live in,
even if only an introduction:
a semblance, an intimation
of what’s to come.

Nothing But Herself

After Osip Mandelstam

Why were the other women I loved
an echo of one another
and the one I most love, you,
just nothing but herself?

O let me sing your primordial silence—
the origin of life, its plain
purpose-ordained beginning:
a song that was truly sung

from the whole divided heart
(the only kind we mortals can possess),
the sound of recognition and love
emerging from pressed fingers

and arms we could not hold back,
nor lips, nor words, nor gratitude

for any gift of love—but cherish this
that remains: only you, only this.

The Song the Other Sings

I could drink deep seas of oblivion
endlessly, and am slowly learning
not to—but not tonight. What is this
strange peace that descends, even after
my favorite team just lost a key game
or I learned a friend I've recently made
may provide a whole new world
of wonders for me? Why is failure
equal to success (and who's counting)?
Why is recognition that sets my heart
to racing at a rate I should enlist
a cardiologist's appraisal of seem
no more important than long and loving
moments of rest that set my heart
at ease? The body is not the soul, but
leaves its own window slightly ajar—
so I may hear the song the other sings.

My Soul, On a Leash

I do not need a dog:
to strut my stuff
that way, as seems to be
the fad, the fashion today--

a pet that bears
a deliberate and unfortunate
resemblance to me, a creature
I've dressed in *haute couture*

clothes, a cute little dog
with a custom-made collar,
a biker's leather jacket
or my family's tartan plaid.

I do possess the cane
I carry following surgery
on my knee—and consciousness,
or what I still prefer to call

my *soul*—the soul I take for a walk
each day, and cherish because
it does not bark at strangers,
even if tempted to, and

if it should ever dress
as I do, it's by choice
not imposition for effect.
My soul would never mistake

a yellow fire plug for
true love, and then attempt
to impress or mount it, or
any other object for that matter.

My soul is just itself, always,
and learns “by going where
[we] have to go,” seldom uncertain--
not constantly changing its mind

about which direction it should
take (like so many people, and dogs,
I know); my soul leads me
here and *there* at its own pace—

never frenetic, restless, hyper
like those obnoxious canine aristocrats
that entangle me in leashes that resemble
over-extended bungee cords,

while owners (with insipid smiles)
compare the merits of their respective
breeds. Assaulted by ill fortune,
my soul knows how to take

a stand, and not just on its
hind legs; and it has trained itself
to *sit*, to *stay* in one place, steady
and strong throughout both joy

and sorrow, granting exclusive ground
to neither, as the poet Archilochus
prescribed. My soul has been made
an instrument of peace as St. Francis

prayed; not over anxious
to be let either “out” or “back in,”
but remains at the core of itself, acknowledging
the insight of Meister Eckhart:

the world *is* made for the soul’s sake,
so it might eventually grow strong
enough to bear divine light, with nothing
above it, not even God--

that light in residence within. My soul
is well-housed, no sycophant
with its tongue hung out to dry all day.
My soul does not require a silver

water dish or silk-sheeted bed with soft
down comforters. It would never
allow itself to get spoiled that way,
unlike all those small

high-strung dogs with names
like “Babeich” or “Puppykins.”
My soul does not crave comfort.
nor drooling attention all of the time.

My soul only asks that I toss it
a crumb of myself on occasion, and
take it on our daily trek, alone,
humbly assisted by the walking stick

I carry, and consciousness—that
other invaluable cane.

Bill Minor has published six books of poetry, the latest *Some Grand Dust* (Chatoyant; finalist for the Benjamin Franklin Award). A YouTube video of him reading his translation of Osip Mandelstam’s “No, never was I anyone’s contemporary” can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxliLhcnyAY>. He has published three nonfiction books on music: *Unzipped Souls: A Jazz Journey Through the Soviet Union*; *Monterey Jazz Festival: Forty Legendary Years* (also served as scriptwriter for the Warner Bros. film documentary of the same name); and *Jazz Journeys to Japan: The Heart Within*. He has published a memoir: *The Inherited Heart: An American Memoir*.

A professional musician since the age of sixteen, he has two CDs of poetry and original music (*For Women Missing or Dead* and *Mortality Suite*), and he was commissioned by the Historic Sandusky Foundation in Virginia to write a suite of original music to accompany a married

couple's exchange of letters throughout the Civil War—another CD, *Love Letters of Lynchburg*. He was “first grand prize winner” in a national essay contest, “What Music Means to Me,” sponsored by RPMDA (Retail Print Music Dealers Association). His website is: www.bminor.org.