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Islands by Blaise Cendrars

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Victoria Le
Islands

Blaise Cendrars
Iles

Islands

Islands

Islands where we will never alight our ships

Islands where we will never touch earth

Islands thick with foliage

Islands crouched like jaguars

Silent islands

Unmoving islands

Unforgettable, nameless islands

I toss my shoes overboard, because—

Because I would like to go near to you

Commentary

Blaise Cendrars was a poet who must have understood, more clearly than most, the wonders and perils of the world. He lost his right arm in World War I, but continued to write (with his left hand) about his travels to Russia, China, and the Americas in long, roaming poems like “Pâques à New York” and “La Prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France.”

“Iles” was included in Cendrars’ 1924 collection *Feuilles de route*, which contains many more reminiscences of voyage and discovery. “Iles” is, in certain ways, a very straightforward poem to translate. It does not rhyme, it is not metered, and its syntax is direct and uncluttered—appealing qualities I wanted to preserve. Still, there are opportunities here to be creative. I decided on more specific imagery in the poem’s third line than is explicitly given, a move I justified given that ships are implied by the poem’s last two lines. I repeat the word “because” in the closing lines both to echo the repetition which scores the entire poem and to highlight the speaker’s emotional state: hesitation and vulnerability cut through with a frisson of implied adventure. I also settled on the particular phrasing of the last line—“I would like to go near to you”—for its elongation, reflecting the quality of cautious but hopeful understatement found in the original French.

Beyond its deft tone and evocative imagery, what specifically drew me to this poem was what occurs in the last line. To describe the islands in the poem merely as a metaphor for desire is, I think, to miss the marvel of the poem’s ending, how one image merges suddenly into another without either one actually subsuming the other. The last line of the poem does not exist to explain or justify the preceding lines; it is simply a surprising destination. In a way quite unique for both the genres of travel poetry and love poetry, this poem enacts the experience of finding oneself in a place utterly new and wondrous. The final unannounced shift stands the reader on new soil. One looks around, and everything has changed.