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Just Above Silence by Anna Greki

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Lynda Chouiten
Just Above Silence

Anna Greki
Juste au-dessus du silence

I talk low, just above silence
So that even my other ear can't hear.
The earth sleeps in the open and lingers in my head
With the rigor of asphodels.
I've re-peopled a few deserts and walked a lot
And now I lie down in my fatigue and my joy—
Those wracks thrown ashore by Summer waves.
In unknown countries, bits of me are seeding.
Boughs of my tenderness, they give
Oases where days are merry-making orchards,
Where man drinks amniotic vigor.
Happiness is falling in the public domain.

*

It will be a day like others
A familiar morning, with well-known joys,
Felt because they are daily joys,
With sky-burning words,
With route-charting words,
Which make happiness a matter of patience,
Which make happiness a matter of confidence,
And those women, so proud of their belly
Reddened by dint of re-giving birth to their children
Every dawn; those women, who are blued with patience,
Who have too much voice to learn silence.
Strong like a woman whose hands have been rusted by steel,
You cuddle your children with care,
And when their tiredness gets hurt by your patience
You walk in their eyes, that they can have some rest.

Anna Colette Grégoire, alias Anna Greki, was born in the Algerian city of Batna in March 1931. A French schoolteacher's daughter, she interrupted her education to take part in the Algerian struggle for independence and was jailed and tortured on account of this. After independence, she resumed her studies, graduated in French literature, and worked as a teacher of French at Emir Abdelkader Secondary School in Algiers. In parallel to teaching, she regularly published poems in the weekly newspaper *Révolution africaine* (*African Revolution*). She died at the age of thirty-five, while giving birth.

I first discovered Greki's poems as a schoolgirl, in a textbook; but I rarely, if ever, hit upon any of her poems after that. She seemed to have fallen into oblivion in all memories, including my own, until, in a conference which took place about a year ago, I met a native of her region who spoke passionately about her simultaneously naïve and perplexing poetry. This triggered in me a wish to rediscover and translate her poems. The poem given here is my first attempt at translating Greki's work, but I am currently working on others of her poems.

"Juste au-dessus du silence" ("Just Above Silence") is taken from *Temps Forts* (*Powerful Times*, 1966). Written in the wake of Algerian independence, it reads as the end of a long epic, with years of struggle, patience, and exile giving way to the simple, tranquil routine of peace and daily happiness.

I have tried to be as faithful to the original as possible, but this has not always been an easy task, for Greki's verse is filled with unfamiliar, surprising images which seem to bear the imprint of surrealism and which make their meaning far from obvious. Rereading the lines several times was necessary not only because of the poet's rather surrealist metaphors but also because of the length of the poet's sentences, which sometimes stretch over several lines. The idea of introducing punctuation—commas, semi-colons, periods and dashes that are absent in the French version—was, at first, no more than a technique which helped me confirm my understanding of the poem. Then I thought that in giving clearer contours to sentences, punctuation can make the translation easier to understand for readers; so I decided to keep it.