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### *First Mill (excerpts)* by René Char

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Nancy Naomi Carlson  
First Mill (excerpts)

René Char  
Moulin premier (extraits)

II

Earth, future of my abyss, you are the pool  
where I ponder.

XIII

“The female nude is the blue sky.” Astrology  
has soaked up watercolor.

XV

I do not piffle with pigs.

XVIII

The canal advances to meet the river. Both  
equal in depth, both equal before the dawn.

XXXVIII

Here, the male image pursues the  
female one all day, or vice versa.  
Over there, where they finally meet,  
the creator dies and the poet is born.

Hailed by Prime Minister Jacques Chirac as “the greatest French poet of the 20th century,” René Char’s literary career spanned over sixty years. In 1952, Albert Camus called Char “France’s greatest living poet.” Martin Heidigger praised Char as “a tour de force into the ineffable.” Char, whose surname was an abbreviated form of Charlemagne, was born on June 14, 1907, in Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, in Provence, France. When Char was eleven, his father died. Char moved to Paris after completing his education at the University of Aix-en-Provence. It was there that he began his association with such surrealist writers as André Breton and Paul Éluard, signing *Le Manifeste du surréalisme*. Although he valued the idea of poetry as a spontaneous activity, he renounced the Surrealists five years later, arguing that poetry must remain free of limits imposed by ideologies or affiliations.

During World War II, under the “nom de guerre” Captain Alexander, Char led a Resistance unit in the French Alps, for which he was named to the Legion of Honor. The publication of *Seuls demeurent* in 1945 led to wide acclaim in France. Throughout his life, Char preferred that interpretation of his work not be limited to a personal or historical context. Instead, he emphasized the poet’s moral responsibility, which was also reflected in his life when he fought in the Resistance, as well as when he later opposed nuclear proliferation. He was a champion of social justice and the rights of “the working man.”

Char’s work is known for his economy of style, including his aphorisms and his short bursts of prose, as well as the sense of mystery that pervades each text. Char was influenced by such French poets as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Paul Valéry, as well as the German poets Friedrich Hölderlin and Rainer Maria Rilke. In addition, one can see the influences of Friedrich Nietzsche and Heraclitus, the ancient Greek philosopher.

The poetic aphorisms in this set were drawn from *Moulin premier (First Mill)*, Char’s collection of 70 aphorisms, first published in 1934 as part of *Le marteau sans maître (Hammer without a Master)*. This collection of aphorisms was the first of many more to come. Subtle sound patterns emerge in the music of his aphorisms. I have tried to honor these patterns, especially the alliterative elements. For example, the three percussive *ps* in the following aphorism literally jump out at the reader, and in so doing, create a humorous effect: “Je ne plaisante pas avec les porcs.” After much time wrestling with this challenge, I was able to come up with “I do not piffle with pigs,” with its humorous undertone. More times than not it is difficult to reproduce the exact sounds of the source text, especially when many sounds do not exist in English, such as many French vowels. This case was the exception.

Another challenge posed by these aphorisms was the urge to make semantic leaps for the reader, based on my understanding of the historical and political context in which they were written. Returning to aphorism XV, I was tempted to modify the word “pigs” with the word “German” to allude to the rise of the Nazi

Party during the time the aphorism was written; however, I dismissed the idea on rhythmic grounds, as well as my desire to stay as faithful to the text as possible. In addition, I wanted to preserve the text's sense of mystery.

I chose these particular aphorisms because of their relative accessibility compared to many others. Their evocative imagery based on everyday sights, as well as the juxtaposition of surprising elements, make them especially appealing.