

As much as her poetics, Karin Boye's life story has perhaps never been more relevant to contemporary audiences. Yet I am chagrined to say that I did not know of her poetry until my son Jeremiah and his girlfriend Julie gifted me— the Christmas before I was to go off alone to Uppsala on a Fulbright for the half of winter that leads toward Spring (different from *höstvinster*, the autumnal collapse of hope and light which always somehow surprises Swedes as it clamps off the day, the recollection of which makes them shudder)— with a special two-off edition of Boye's first volume of poems *Clouds (Moln)*. that he had downloaded from the Karin Boye website and turned into a perfect-bound insty book likewise via the web.

Saying that I had not heard of Boye is somewhat like a visitor to the United States saying he had not heard of Walt Whitman. For every Swedish schoolchild learns at least one of her poems by heart and some, like my good friend and wonderful Swedish-language informant and collaborator, Gabriella Frykhamn, stay with her into adolescent and womanhood, caught at first by her mystical turns and intricate musical metrics but then later drawn by her bravery of spirit, as a queer woman, mystic, and eventually a suicide. In this way also Boye is perhaps like Whitman, holding dark and ambiguous mysteries that the schoolchild may perhaps intuit but nonetheless must grow into recognition of.

As a novelist Boye is perhaps better known, although still not widely. Her novel *Killocaïn*, named for a lotus-like drug used to control populations, situates itself among Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* as a psychological study of totalitarianism, prompted by Boye's travel and study in both Germany and Russia.

I am certain that my son— who when he was young we called “electronic boy” because of his devotion to video games and other media, yet who now is a wonderful reader as well as a documentary filmmaker— found Boye by typing “poet” and “Uppsala” into Google. Little could he have known that each day I would walk along the corridor of the Karin Boye Biblioteket at Engelska parken, escaping the snow and ice outside as I passed through the buildings to my office in the English department. Nor could he have known

that I would walk some afternoons at twilight just beyond the neighboring cemetery and along the lane where the residence Geijersgården in which Boye lived as a student is situated.

Yet, even if it first resulted from a search engine hit, what my son did was closer than he could have known then both to Boye's spirit, and the fundamental uses of poetry, fitting out a traveler to get him through the dark, offering a lens to what at first might seem an alien space, and finding consolation in friendship and the spirit.

Jeremiah's gift edition borrowed its bi-lingual texts from David McDuff's comprehensive collected poems available online through the Karin Boye Society website, <http://www.karinboye.se/verk/index-en.shtml>. While the English speaking world owes a profound debt to McDuff for his elegant translations, I had a sense from the first— one somewhat informed by a reading knowledge of German that proved helpful in confronting the Swedish— that in attending to Boye's mystical turns and musical metrics, McDuff did not fully convey the spirit and sinew of Boye's poems as well as their erotic and ecstatic qualities. Another set of Boye's poems translated by Jenny Nunn on the Boye Society site perhaps better captures some of those latter qualities that Gabriella and I have concentrated upon in our translations, including the one published here.

This is not to say that we have abandoned Boye's complex music nor her extraordinary spiritual and psychological leaps and attendant dark descents. Since I do not speak Swedish, Gabriella's contributions have been substantial, a translating of spirit as well as word. I have learned to read her facial expressions simultaneously with learning to read Boye, attending to a certain silent composure of her brow when my reworking of her and my transliterations were infelicitous or simply wrong; responding in wonder and thanks when Gabriella would suggest a surprising phrase, almost always prefaced with a hesitant question, such as "Could you say something like this in English?" or "I wonder if this makes any sense." Likewise when my English made no sense, or inverted the sense of the Swedish, she said so directly. So, too, however did she celebrate when she thought we had it right.

With every poem, we began each working session by Gabriella' reading Boye's Swedish aloud followed by successive readings of the English as we refined it, interspersing the latter with repeated Swedish readings and attempt to get the sonics right, or at least signal their extraordinary complexity, as well as to refresh our wonder. Sometimes the solution to a poem that ticked along in Swedish was the articulate the English as if bringing attention to a metronome by slowing it. Often the almost (James) Joycean enjambments of Swedish *sammansatta ord* (compound words) have had to migrate to apposite phrases, yet many times we managed to find (which is to say, in truth, Gabriella found) ways to retain their imbricate quality and composite evocations in English.

This quality of imbricated image and text makes Swedish a deeply poetic language, and to some extent one suited for modernist and post-modernist poetic concerns alike. Thus, for instance, the contemporary Swedish poet, Aase Berg, cascades condensed poetic *sammansatta ord* to magical effect in her poems. In his introduction to the United States edition of Berg's collected poems, Daniel Sjölin describes Berg's "image and sound symbiosis, in which the most foundational words... have been mutated into strange configurations," a description that, perhaps less radically, could be applied to Boye's own poems.