

CEMETERY BY THE SEA*Paul Valéry*

This peaceful roof, where doves walk, without sound,
 Amidst the pines and gravestones all around,
 Pulsed where Noon the just flames on the sea.
 The sea, the sea, always begun anew!
 Rewarding thought with one extended view
 That gazes on divine serenity.

Pure work of lightning, delicate and fine,
 Drowns countless diamonds in foamy brine.
 And when a sun upon its path shall pause
 To linger on the brink, then Time will glow
 Like flaming sparks—to Dream will be to know—
 The two pure works of one eternal cause.

Minerva's temple, rough but lasting jewel,
 Composed of stillness, visible and cool;
 But veiled beneath a shroud of flame, such sleep
 Rests in this eye, in this exacting sea.
 O silence!...soul-house filled eternally
 With gold up to the roof—a glistening heap.

Time's temple, which is summed up in a sigh—
 To this pure point I slowly mount on high,
 On all sides compassed round by my sea-gaze;
 And as my final votive offering shows
 My lasting pride, calm scintillation sows
 The height with its disdainful, regal rays.

As fruit that melts with each ecstatic bite
 Transforms its absence into sweet delight
 On human tongues on which its parts expire,
 So sings the sky to my tormented soul
 Of changing tides in every clamorous shoal
 As I breathe in my future funeral pyre.

O true and lovely sky, see how I change!
 After such pridefulness, after such strange
 But potent torpor, which my soul must shed,
 Now I surrender to this glowing space;
 My shade's frail movements tame me as they pass
 Over the houses of the earth-bound dead.

With flames at solstice flickering on my soul,
 I hold you up, support you, and extol
 You, justice of the stark and pitiless light!
 I offer you, so pure, to your birthplace,
 But giving back the light which fills this space
 Reveals its other half: the somber night.

Oh! for and to and in myself alone,
 Beside a heart, where poems first are known,
 Between the emptiness and pure event,
 I wait to hear my inner greatness sound;
 That bitter, somber cistern will resound
 In my soul's depths where future days are spent.

False captive of the leaves, gulf that devours
 My meager offerings with rapacious powers,
 Bright secrets on my closed eyes, do you know
 What drags me toward its indolent design?
 What pulls it to where bone and earth combine,
 Where sparks recall lost loved ones with their glow?

This place I love, this closed-off, sacred height,
 This earthly fragment offered to the light,
 Imbued with fire where sovereign torches shine,
 Is formed of somber trees, and gold, and stone,
 Where marble trembles over shade and bone
 And faithful waves sleep on these graves of mine.

Great sheepdog, keep away idolatry!
 I smile and watch these graves perched by the sea—
 My cryptic flock of sheep, sublime and calm,
 Which graze beneath my watchful shepherd's eye.
 You drive away wise doves that fill the sky—
 Vain dreams and ever curious cherubim.

In this place, indolence will soon abound.
 The insect scratches at the arid ground
 And everything is burnt, undone, and sent
 Into the air as some astringent essence.
 When drunk on absence, life becomes immense,
 Bitter turns sweet, the soul is evident.

Beneath the earth, which dries their mystery,
 Lie all the dead, rewarmed eternally,
 While Noon on high, sufficient, satisfied,
 Reflects upon itself and is content.
 Full head and diadem with golden glint,
 I am your secret change personified.

No one but I can hold in your dark fear!
 Within your diamond, glaring flaws appear:
 My limitations, truths I have denied.
 But buried in a heavy, marble sleep,
 Entangled in the tree roots running deep,
 This vague, dark people slowly takes your side.

Red clay indulges in its drunkenness,
 Dissolves pale flesh into thick emptiness,
 And flowers receive this gift stripped from the dead.
 Where are the phrases that they knew by heart?
 Their singularity? their practiced art?
 The worm's exuded from where tears were shed.

The piercing cries of stimulated girls,
 Their teeth, their eyelids glistening like pearls,
 The charming breasts played off against the flame,
 The blood that shines on full lips as they yield,
 Those fingers and the final gifts they shield,
 All goes to earth and back into the game.

And you, great soul, are waiting for what dream
 That sheds the gold and wave's dishonest gleam—
 The colors present to corporeal eyes.
 But will you sing when you dissolve to mist?
 Away! My porous presence can't resist,
 And some divine impatience also dies!

Frail black- and gold-hued immortality,
 Consoler crowned with laurels fearfully,
 Who makes of death a motherly embrace—
 That noble lie, that sweet, appealing ruse!
 Who does not know and who would not refuse
 This empty skull, time's morbid, grinning face.

Deep-rooted fathers, uninhabited,
 Beneath the ground where faltering footsteps tread,
 True earth confounding every human deed—
 This gnawing worm, the true consuming pest,
 Is not for you, in your eternal rest.
 It lives on life—its one devouring need.

Could it be love or merely my self-hate?
 Its secret tooth is now so near me that
 All names become appropriate to it.
 It sees, it wants, it touches, and it dreams;
 It craves my flesh, which, on my deathbed, seems
 To feed this greedy being's appetite.

Cruel Zenó, has your arrow pierced my heart—
 That quivering, resonating winged dart
 By which I'm born and by which I have died,
 Which flies but cannot ever reach its goal?
 O sun! what tortoise shadow is my soul,
 Or what Achilles, frozen in mid-stride?

No, no! Arise! Into the coming age!
 I drink the wind's birth into my ribcage;
 My body breaks this pensive form's firm chain.
 A chilly freshness breathed out from the sea
 Returns my soul. O salty majesty!
 We'll run in and come out alive again.

Great sea—wild and delirious within,
 A ragged mantle and a panther skin,
 And countless shining idols to the sun—
 True hydra, drunk upon your own blue mass,
 Who bite your sparkling tail each time you pass,
 Your tumult sounds like silence as you run.

The wind picks up and we must try to be!
The air toys with my pages as the sea,
In powdery waves, dares break upon the rocks!
Fly off, astounded pages! Break, white tide!
And break, you joyful waters, full of pride,
This peaceful roof where sails drift by in flocks.

—*Translated from the French by Anna Schaffer*