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Translator's Preface

Marc Elihu Hofstadter

Yves Bonnefoy is the best-known poet in France. Born in 1923, he became famous with the publication in 1953 of his first book, *On the motion and immobility of Douve*. Influenced initially by Surrealism, he quickly consolidated a distinctive style that fuses Surrealist imaginativeness with a passionate, noble quest for truth. Like his admired predecessor Rimbaud, Bonnefoy is not merely a weaver of attractive verbal tapestries. He is in search of "la vraie vie" ("the true life"). In his third books of poems, *Pierre écrite* (*Written Stone*, published by Mercure de France in 1965), from which these three lyrics are extracted, Bonnefoy found his way to a visionary accommodation with reality that anchored his art, once and for all, in a serene acceptance of life as inherently meaningful. Bonnefoy infuses archetypal language with an intensity and music unprecedented in recent French verse. These translations attempt to carry Bonnefoy's universalizing, essentializing language over into idiomatic, concrete English.

ART DE LA POÉSIE

Dragué fut le regard hors de cette nuit.
 Immobilisées et séchées les mains.
 On a réconcilié la fièvre. On a dit au coeur
 D'être le coeur. Il y avait un démon dans ces veines
 Qui s'enfui en criant.
 Il y avait dans la bouche une voix morne sanglante
 Qui a été lavée et rappelée.

Selected Poems by Yves Bonnefoy

Translated by Marc Elihu Hofstadter

ART OF POETRY

Night had its vision dredged from it,
 hands stilled and dried,
 fever dropped. We told the heart
 to be itself. A demon haunting the veins
 fled, weeping.
 A dull, bloody voice
 was cleansed, called home.

LA LUMIÈRE DU SOIR

Le soir,
Ces oiseaux qui se parlent, indéfinis,
Qui se mordent, lumière.
La main qui a bougé sur le flanc désert.

Nous sommes immobiles depuis longtemps.
Nous parlons bas.
Et le temps reste autour de nous comme des flaques de couleur.

EVENING LIGHT

Evening,
these birds, muffled, whose songs criss-cross,
who bite their own tail feathers, shining.
A hand moving over a deserted flank.

We've been still a long time.
We murmur low.
And time spreads around us in still, colored pools.

UNE PIERRE

Nous prenions par ces prés
Où parfois tout un dieu se détachait d'un arbre
(Et c'était notre preuve, vers le soir).

Je vous poussais sans bruit,
Je sentais votre poids contre nos mains pensives,
O vous, mes mots obscurs,
Barrières au travers des chemins du soir.

A STONE

We roamed those meadows
where, sometimes, a god emerged from a tree,
evening's proof.

I pushed you silently,
your body heavy against our pensive hands,
oh you, my dark words,
barriers across evening's paths.