

## POEMS

By J. AQUILINA

## OBITUARY

No more shoe-banging scenes. Kruschew is dead;  
 Left the U.S.S.R. and his hospital bed  
 To join a new world, after having shed  
 The insignia that made him a prominent Red.  
 It did him good to look up God instead,  
 Beyond where astronauts and missiles sped.

12.ix.71 – Balzan

## A WIDOW'S SORROW

A sorrowing widow kissed for the last time  
 Kruschew's pale forehead, folded arms at rest.  
 How many sorrowing widows kissed the foreheads  
 Of their dead husbands killed in Budapest?

25.ix.71 – Balzan

## WESTWARD HO!

As the time for packing up gets near,  
 The time for going back home,  
 I pray the Captain of the boat  
 To steer us clear of doubt and fear,  
 The fear of the hazards of the trip  
 That has sunk many a ship.

Oh, Captain, Steerman of the Boat,  
 As you call us all aboard  
 And count us one by one,  
 We pray you steer the Shadow Ship  
 Westward ho!  
 Towards the rising sun.

1.xi.72

## LEPTIS MAGNA

Ruins of Sabratha  
 The thud of the centuries by the Blue Glass Sea  
 Fill me with admiration  
 Awed by the dread of the Vulture,  
 Man-chasing cormorant,  
 For the architects that designed the city,  
 The Forum and the Temple,  
 The *hamamat* by the blue  
 Warm sea – ever the same  
 Warm blue sea.  
 (Hello, ghostland! Who goes there?)  
 The dead city, the shadow city,  
 Fills me with tearful pity  
 For what the unearthed city  
 Was once and is now  
 No more – the Dead City, the Shadow City.  
 Hawks overhead –  
 Solitude and pity  
 Time, the grave-Digger, dangling his feet  
 On the broken colonnades.

15.xii.72 – Tripoli

## TIME'S CLOWN

I have long been gliding,  
 Gliding down, gliding down,  
 Turning somersaults like a clown  
 In Time's circus (Time's Clown)  
 Sliding down, always down  
 The slippery back of a Bear,  
 Bear Black, Bear Brown, Bear White,  
 Bear of the North Pole.  
 Gliding down every moment of my life  
 I have now reached the bottom of its spine  
 Right at the beginning of its tail

From the beginning to the end of the story –  
 Tip end of the spine  
 (How it hurts!)  
 A laugh, a whimper, a whine.  
 Pray you be ready to collect me  
 On your arms, on your lap,  
 When I slide off the last vertebra  
 Of the Spine of Time.  
 Collect me kindly on my way back  
 Lest I break my neck on the Rock of Time;  
 Collect me as the midwife  
 Collected me on her arms  
 Before I was put astride  
 The slippery back of the Big, Big Bear –  
 Wandering Bear  
 That is Time –  
 This World its Den.

16.xii.72 – Tripoli

#### ATHENS

This is Athena's City, proud, unique,  
 Belovèd of the gods that made her great,  
 From where Olympus ruled her warriors' fate,  
 Launching the Ulyssean Odyssey of the Greek.  
 'Tis here that Mind and Vision touched the peak,  
 And Phidias' luminous statues re-create  
 The epic of the Body, bards narrate  
 Battles at sea and shipwrecks in the creek.

From where the Parthenon guards its ancient glory,  
 Poseidon's temple dominates on high  
 Like an eagle's eerie, I espy the City  
 With its *stora* and *agora* near by,  
 Haunted by myths that people Homer's story:  
 These broken columns wrench my heart with pity.

Athens – 27.iii.73

#### FAME

What would not a man do to attain immortality!  
 I think he would not mind a little vulgarity.  
 Lord Byron, for instance, did not scruple to scratch his name  
 On a column of Poseidon's temple to win a double fame.  
 Now with Poseidon he shares the limelight and the glory,  
 Not less the banter of American tourists amused by the story.

Athens – 28.iii.73

#### THE STORM

God, help me weather the storm  
 Before my boat reaches  
 The far-off harbour  
 With tattered sails and broken masts.  
 The oars are not broken yet;  
 But the arms are tired.

20.iv.73

#### SHIPWRECK

Will it not be very cruel  
 If the ship, with all its cargo,  
 Sinks in the harbour  
 Swallowed up by the deep shark sea,  
 As if nothing ever really mattered  
 Good and bad all pushed  
 Down the throat of the shark  
 Blue sea?

20.iv.73

#### DEDICATION

Mary, Dawn of Joy,  
 I instal you Queen  
 Of my Heart and Mind.  
 Govern me by the regality of your love,  
 Mother most kind.

20.iv.73

## QUESTIONS

How long must I stretch my arm  
 To catch and remove the dark cloud  
 That conceals you from my immediate sight,  
 God invisible, yet unmistakable?  
 How long and how often must I push back  
 The attacks of the Bear  
 That claws me from behind?  
 How long, O God, will you remain invisible  
 To my inward searching  
 Behind the dark cloud?  
 How long and how tortuous is the road back  
 Through the Dark Tunnel?

6.v.73

## ACADEMIC BOREDOM

The lecture was scholarly, the lecturer precise  
 and deep,  
 The Chairman, after having sung his praises, fell  
 asleep  
 Enjoying the snooze till the end of the learned  
 communication  
 When he joined the clapping of hands to express  
 his approbation.

29th International Congress of Orientalists,  
 Paris – July 1973

J. AQUILINA

## THE PEOPLE'S FESTIVAL OF FUN AND MIRTH\*

Make room for King Carnival! Blow the trumpets loud!  
 Cry his subjects today that swell the motley crowd.  
 We greet His Majesty with cheers for three Days' Fun,  
 Salute him our Monarch and crown him with our Sun!  
 Come, stand up and salute! King Carnival passes by –  
 Take your place on his chariot for tomorrow you die!

\*Originally published in the Carnival programme of 1958.

J. AQUILINA

## POEMS

by JOE FRIGGIERI

*(translations by Fr. Peter Serracino-Ingloff)*

## STEDINA

Il-mithna li żżaqżaq fuq rasna  
 taf kliemna bħal kredu  
 taf ruħna minn ġewwa  
 u taf il-litanija  
 ta' l-immijiet qabel ma troxx id-dalma  
 meta jiqfilna l-kliem  
 u ruħna tinxef qoxqox  
 ibqa' ejja miegħi taħt il-mithna l-kbira  
 u ssemma' sewwa.

## FAIRE-PART

En grinçant sur nos têtes  
 le grand moulin n'aurait-il appris  
 nos redites comme le récit  
 d'un credo, ne pourrait-il  
 les dédales de nos dedans  
 parcourir, s'il voulait, à l'aveuglette,  
 et aussi les litanies de oui-mais  
 dont nous faisons litière dans la brume  
 qui tombe tout autour de nous  
 en attendant la totale obscurité.

Lorsque les mots ne couleront plus  
 et nos âmes écorchées se dessèchent  
 fréquentions encore cet endroit sous le grand moulin  
 et alors écoute bien.

## GHALIEX?

Ghaliex il-qiegh tal-baħar  
 illum mhux ibeżżagħni  
 u l-krib tal-gawwi fuq il-blat  
 inħossu bħal stedina?  
 ghaliex ir-riħ tax-xitwa  
 qisu tmellisa helwa f'xagħri mħabbla  
 u l-qtar tax-xita f'wiċċi  
 jahraq bħal omm qed tibki?

Tgħid qed tistrieħ il-mewt  
 fuq l-alga sewda  
 u nista' llum sa fl-aħħar  
 nistejqer bl-arja tfuħ  
 u bl-ilma mielah?  
 Tgħid nista' nimxi 'l bogħod  
 illum u għada  
 mingħajr ma nħossu jċedi  
 ir-ramel taħt riġlejja?

Imqar li jkun dan biss  
 illum u għada  
 umbagħad ha tigi l-mewt bil-minġel f'idha,  
 ha tagħmel festa bija, ha tifnini,  
 laqwa li nkun mxejt  
 illum u għada  
 qabel immur nistrieħ  
 fuq l-alga sewda.

## IT-TIENI DARBA

Il-bebbuxu trekken f'xaqq fil-blat  
 ma' l-eku ta' lehinna  
 mal-passi ta' riġlejna

illum ersaqna kisnijiet  
 la int la jien ma wrejna  
 la kelma la ċaqliqa  
 u l-bebbuxu ma raniex

u baqa' jilgħab fuq ir-ramla bajda.

## LA DEUXIÈME FOIS

L'escargot s'enfonça dans une crevasse du rocher  
 à l'écho de nos voix  
 au piétinement de nos pattes.

Mais aujourd'hui nous sommes arrivés à la sourdine  
 toi et moi nous voici  
 sans un mot sans un geste  
 et l'escargot ne s'est aperçu de rien  
 et il continua le jeu sur la plage blanche.

## EPIGRAMM A

Igbor ċagħqa  
 aqta' kewkba  
 tigrix hafna  
 inti u ġejja

hekk għallinqas  
 qabel rasal  
 nilhaq noħlom  
 l'inti hdejja.

## EPIGRAMM B

Jien naqra' driegħi  
 għas-sbieħ għajnejk  
 u naqsam baħar  
 biex niġi hdejk

imma kemm taħseb  
 li int sabiħa  
 biex wara kollox  
 nibqa' bir-riħa?

## LOGHBA

Is-surmast dawwama tond ma' hofra kbira  
 u l-ohrajn kollha qabzu minn tarf sa tarf  
 imma meta mess lili  
 kejjilt l-ixbar b'ghajnejja  
 u bqajt imwahhal  
 f'xifer il-hofra l-kbira.

## GHID

Dan ghalmin hargu t-tfal  
 bil-palm u l-liedna?  
 u ghalmin l-orgni  
 fawwar hnejjet il-katidral  
 b'noti qabbieza?

Mhux ghalina  
 is-sliem tal-flawt u l-arpa  
 u l-ghanja raqqadija tal-flejguta.

In-nisa taghna xuxthom mahlula  
 irahmu f'nofs l-indiema;  
 qarset ix-xema' wiċċ il-bniet imgezwra  
 fl-imnatar vjola;  
 u fuq ras il-bhejjem taghna  
 ghadna rroxxu l-irmied.

## POEMS

by JOE FRIGGIERI

(translations by Theresa Micallef)

## VJAGĠ

Tfajjel aghini idek  
 u hudni 'l boghod sakemm jaghjew riglejna  
 sakemm ma jidhrux iżjed il-kampnari  
 u l-qniepen ma jdoqqux is-seba' moti  
 ta' l-erwieh midinba

hudni fejn ma tasalx  
 il-bikja tan-newwieha  
 u qabel tarani rieqed  
 thallinix.

Umbaghad meta tismagħhom  
 ir-russinjoli fl-arja kaħlanija  
 meta tarah il-lewz ifur bil-bjuda  
 u x-xefaq qed ibexbex  
 umbaghad ejja qajjimni.

## A VOYAGE

Boy, give me your hand  
 and take me far until we're tired out  
 until the steeples fade  
 and the bells stop tolling  
 for the souls of the lost.

Take me where the song of mourning cannot be heard  
 stay until I've fallen asleep.

Only then, when you can hear the nightingales in the blue air,  
 when the almond tree overflows with white  
 and the horizon is streaked with light,  
 only then, you must come and call me.

## QUDDIESA

Int taf

armaj ruhi xrafet bid-dnubiet il-mejta  
 kull platt li ġie laqqattu  
 u meta stajt billejt subgħajja sew  
 fiż-żejt u l-balzmu tal-passjoni l-kbira  
 u talli la qerrejt u la sogħbieni  
 il-ħanin Alla nsieni.

Da' x'kien illejla m'intx tobroxli moħħi  
 bis-seba' sjuf tas-sagramenti l-ġodda?  
 lanqas tikwi f'ġenbejja  
 karattri ħomor b'tarf dufrejk misnuna?  
 x'inhil dir-riħa ta' ġismek sħun  
 bħal qamħ Awissu mxarrab?  
 u x'inhil jsib il-baħar f'għajnejk rotob?

Mhux sewwa troxx il-melħ fuq il-ferita,  
 imma jekk trid, għal-lejla biss,  
 ninsew li ħell l-inbid u l-ħmira qraset,  
 u m qar għal-lejla biss,  
 la hawn dal-plejju jfuh, la haw' l-urieħaq,  
 inqaddsu taħt il-qamar.

## GHEDEN

Thallihx jixref rasu d-dudu  
 tad-dubju seksiek  
 tħallihx is-serp isefsef f'widintek  
 kliem għasli bħal ta' Eva  
 iżd' isħqu bla ma tħares

ma tmurx illejla  
 meta ma tkunx tistenna  
 toħroġ minn ġot-tuffieħa  
 il-qrusa tal-misteru  
 u llejla wkoll  
 bir-riħ li jmelleš wičċna  
 jaqsam id-dlam raġġ Adonajs  
 u ssir taf kollox.

## BIDLA

Hekk meta jiħmar is-sħab  
 u l-palm jitbandal waħdu  
 fuq ġbini tinżel fwieħa rqiqa  
 u minn ġor-ramel titla' s-sinfonija  
 ta' l-ilmijiet hadrana.

Imma meta jiswied is-sħab  
 u l-palm jissara ma' l-irwiefen  
 u r-ramel isir ċaġħaq iniggeż

l-arja timtela bit-twerżiq ta' l-isqra  
 u jekk ma jkunx xi hadd li jżommli jdejja  
 f'tarf l-irdum inħossni qed nistordi  
 u l-baħar ma jridx wisq  
 biex jitla' għalija.

Tiftakar il-baħar  
tiftakar il-blat  
tiftakar ix-xemx u l-qamar  
tiftakar ir-riħ  
tiftakar is-sajf inkaljat u x-xitwa  
tiftakar il-lejl u n-nħar  
tiftakar il-kwiekeb

tliet mitt sajf tiftakar  
tliet mitt xitwa qalila  
tliet mitt rebbiegħa bi tliet mitt tqala ġdida  
tliet mitt ħarifa bla ma toħrof darba

u l-blat inkaljat taħt riġlejha  
u s-silġ ma' kuxtejha  
u l-beraq li jfellel ġenbejha  
u r-riħ bħal azzar ġol-qurriegħa

bil-karba tal-ħlas dejjiema  
bil-ħorħara li ddakkar u terġa'  
fi tliet mitt sajf li ġej  
tliet mitt xitwa qalila  
tliet mitt rebbiegħa ġhajjiema

ma jkunx id-dudu li jnawriha qalbha  
ma tkunx is-ħana li tnixxfilha għeruqha  
ma jkunx is-silġ li jingazzalha demmha.

Tiftakar il-baħar  
tiftakar il-blat  
tiftakar ix-xemx u l-qamar  
tiftakar ir-riħ  
tiftakar is-sajf inkaljat u x-xitwa  
tiftakar il-lejl u n-nħar  
tiftakar il-kwiekeb.

## IT-TIENI DARBA

Il-bebbuxu trekken f'xaqq fil-blat  
ma' l-eku ta' lehinna  
mal-passi ta' riġlejna

illum ersaqna kisnijiet  
la int la jien ma wrejna  
la kelma la ċaqliqa  
u l-bebbuxu ma raniex

u baqa' jilgħab fuq ir-ramla bajda.

## THE SECOND TIME

The snail squeezed itself into a crevice  
to the echo of our voices, to the sound of our footsteps.

Today we came stealthily  
both you and I came  
without a word without a move  
and the snail never saw us  
and went on playing on the white beach.

## IX-XIĦ U JIEN

Meta staqsejt lix-xwejjah  
li jaf jaqra l-ġrajja  
"Xwejjah aqrati jdejja",  
ix-xemx għamietu 'x-xwejjah  
u minn xufftejh imfella  
waqa' bħal haġar jaqta'  
kliem li ma jifhm u hadd

u telaq wahdu biex imiss il-kwiekeb.

## THE OLD MAN AND I

When I asked the old man who reads fortunes  
'Old man, read my hand',  
the sun blinded the old man  
and from his furrowed lips  
cryptic words fell like pointed stones.  
And he set off to touch the stars.