THE
COLLECTED
POEMS
1952-1990
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Edited by Albert C. Todd
with the author and James Ragan

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Two Blacks

An enormous black man
lies near the ocean in Florida.
He throws pebbles in the sky,
catches them,
and the disturbing question:
"What are you doing?"—
does not dawn
on his violet lips.
Blacks now do not lionize
Harriet Beecher Stowe—
and if a black,
an anguish black,
groans—
he prefers to do it at night,
at home.
But here, on the beach,
he spreads out a newspaper,
and in truth
is proud
of his blackness,
and exposes to the sun
his white heels
so they will turn a little dark
beneath the sun.
And next to the black—
are another's faded jeans.
An odd kind of white man
with gooseflesh.
He's running away

as if from the jailer
of life.
He's completely overwrought,
knowing
that he's a fugitive.
They catch him, they return him...
No, they won't hang him.
but once again chain him to the job
that's killing him.
And the black—could
give him useful advice,
how to get away.
But the white is afraid to ask questions.
And he envies
the black sprawled out,
when he sees his body,
all taut,
his blissful devil-may-care languor,
the loftiness
of a slave, now free.
And in coming to this shore
the white thinks,
to rest his nerves in nature
at least a little:
In all the world
there's neither black nor white,
in all the world
there are only jailers
and victims.

Two Negroes lie here.
Where is he— their common John Brown?
Two Negroes lie here,
not consulting,
not quarreling,
and the all-understanding,
arcing sea
licks the wounds
of mankind.

1972
Florida
TRANSLATED BY ALBERT C. TODD
Saints of Jazz

The Saints of Jazz are playing.
Gray hair shakes to the beat,
and oldness, of course, is terrible,
but like youth, it comes just once.

Senile quick movement is sad,
yet age is younger than youth,
when a youngster grown wiser
pounds the keys within.

Looking like a kitchen cook,
the mulattress cross-handed
hangs jauntily on a baby grand,
and, fat and black, it dances away.

Without envy for green youngmen,
an old dodger clowns on a trumpet,
and his unbuttoned collar
plunges into a mug of beer.

His neighbor lists decrepitly,
but with a cagey wantron in his eyes,
he plucks the double bass
like a gorgeous giggling girl.

The drummer's hands are a ballet.
Where's old age in a gray-haired tombay?
Like a white lady, a smile
dances on the black face.

Their throats and thoughts are hoarse,
but the sounds are refreshing and youthful—
now slack, like the Mississippi,
now, like Niagara, stormy and wild.

Ah, how much the jazz artists
of all countries have stolen from here,
but nevertheless New Orleans
was not taken from New Orleans.

The Saints of Jazz are playing—
magnificent old people.

You, our blasphemer-age, be compassionate—
safeguard at least these Saints!

Earth's not crowded with saints,
and if it's up to us,
then let there be art—
jazz, at least, as last resort.

The harsh slave market of the stage
wrings dry its slaves,
and if the slaves are a trifle old,
they will be hidden in a grand piano of graves.

Life goes skidding downhill,
and if there is no way out,
them to the blues let it roll on,
ringing twilight in the end.

Sunset is not the end for a poet,
nor is death for you, musician.
The eternal strength of dawn
is in you, O noblest sunset.

1972

New Orleans

TRANSLATED BY ALBERT C. TOLDO

From Desire to Desire

To H. Sand

My honeymoon was strange,
both a joy and a wound.
The sweetness of honey,
the heaviness of honey,
in my exhausted body.

My honeymoon was bitter,
a crazy chase
from desire to desire,
with desire behind the wheel.
The fulfillment of desire
and there is no friend,
and no father to be found.
Don't I have the right at last to despair,
don't I have the right
not to hope?"
But something shone blue like a cornflower
while I walked
and wheezed through the blizzard
like a forgotten distant relative of the sky:
"Désespoir."
And the snow spat out:
"Désespoir..."

From the
desperate, impenetrable sky
I had not heard man's word of God
but a woman's living God word:
"Well, it's true,
I have despaired too..."
And suddenly it penetrated once and for all:
Despair is
not the worst misfortune.
There are things more despairing than despair—a
soul
that is incapable of despair
means no soul at all,
but simply a storehouse
of false hopes
in which there is only poison.
All nice little smiles are dressed
in false hopes
concealing the essence.
Despair
is a shyness of hope,
when it is afraid to deceive
the hopeful,
which someday...
So these were the thoughts
given to me
by this not quite so simple old woman,
when as a forgotten distant relative
she suddenly appeared out of a blizzard.
How terrible
if, with illusory conception,
we grew accustomed to consider frivolously,
as forgotten distant relatives—
conscience
and honor—
seven times removed.
How terrible if during the snow-drifted night,
irreparably far from us,
like a forgotten distant relative, our Motherland
is afraid to touch the bell.

1984
TRANSLATED BY ALBERT C. TODD

Fuku: A Poem (Excerpts)

Knocking innocence from me,
a kid,
they sprinkled wisdom over my borscht
along with the cockroaches.
Wisdom was whispered to me,
in a murmur,
by the fleas
sewn into the seams
of my patched shirt.
But poverty is not wisdom,
and money is not wisdom,
yet, inch by inch,
I grew up clumsily,
in a jerking motion,
after they punched me in my empty stomach.
I used the high-flown argot of knives.
I smoked cold saliva in somebody's dropped cigarette butts.
From my guts I learned the hunger of war.
My ribs taught me the geography of Russia.
Nobody gave me
so-called fame,
I snatched it myself
by the neck, like a chicken.
My soul filled up
like a wartime train station
with screaming,
clambering,
crying people.
In my soul are more than seventy countries,
al the concentration camps,
all the monuments,
and the card sharps
and the presidents.
Swallowing the epoch and choking on it,
but never puking out of squeamish disdain,
I know no less than dust or dirt,
and more than all the ravens with their doubtful wisdom.
But I grew too proud,
too cocky for my own good.
I became so impossibly vain
you’d think I were a special stamp
across my forehead
with the confidential phrase:

Top Secret.
In vain I turned my nose up to the ceiling,
taking pleasure in the childish thought
that they’d bump me off soon—

because

I knew too much.
In Hong Kong I tried to land on a knife,
in Vietnam I flirted with bullets.
I’d been impatient to be killed,
to be a hero,
but they punished me skilfully,
by postponing my death.
And I remained alive—
humiliatingly—
externally unwounded,
hurt only inside.
They hassled and harassed me,
they ate me alive,
cunningly torturing me to death
with nondeath.
Shamefully whole,
I’m not decorated
with pleasant battle scars
or other gifts.
There may be a reason why they haven’t killed me:

What if my knowledge doesn’t scare them at all?
That bitter thought took away my swagger
and the remnants of my former conceit:
my deeds lag behind my inner needs,
my words lag behind my inner worlds.
If you grab life’s mystery by the tail
it slips through your hands so smoothly.
The more mysteries we understand,
the more the main mystery becomes bottomless.
We ourselves have buried so much on the bottom,
and the accursed abyss of knowledge
has swallowed up such famous ships,
gobbled up such mighty states.
And I have lost myself on this earth,
from a torturing lack of talent,
feeling like a gnome crushed by the burden
of a weathy and crippled Atlas.
Probably in the same way Christopher Columbus
lost himself with his desperate drunken crew,
setting sail over blood into the depths of the mystery,
the tumbling mystery melting in fog...

And I went into the streets of Santo Domingo
clutching the year ’41 to my breast,
and some sweet childish fear resurrected inside me
was expecting somebody’s switchblade knife.

And again I was that kid who got away from pursuers,
who didn’t scare easily, who still doesn’t,
jumping down from the policeman’s palm, so sticky,
before his palm would become a fist.

And I went into the streets of Santo Domingo,
clutching the year ’41 to my breast,
while a Siberian ground-wind blizzard
like witch’s breath followed and ran ahead.

I was followed by a crowd of sorrows,
as if a Trans-Siberian train ran past these Dominican palms,
and women rubbed one felt boot against the other,
lined up for bread under Columbus’s bronze stare.
And behind me, through magnolia canopies, 
like ambassadors of old but endless war, 
stood widows, orphans, wounded invalids, 
carrying on their faces the unmelting Russian snow.

Lobsters moved their claws in stalls so easily, 
pineapples lay dreaming, heaped in the shade, 
and I couldn't believe that there was no line, 
that people weren't writing numbers on their hands.

But through everything that seemed exotic and luxurious 
and begging for color film or an easel, 
unshaven faces came, like ghosts, 
with a sadness of blurred, half-Indian features.

Pus oozed from eyes under straw sombreros. 
Pleading, begging for at least a penny, 
crooked fingers with broken nails 
flocked around me like Hitchcock's birds.

I was like a white crow. I was a stranger, 
and they were tarring me apart. 
The kids all tried to shine my supervisio 
and the whores all dragged me into the bushes.

And like a clot of universal blackouts, 
near the entrance to the glittering hotel, 
a Haitian boy who had fled here 
tried to sell me one of his naive paintings.

How lonely he must have been, 
self-taught and not quite fifteen, 
if he had escaped from Baby Doc's paradise 
to this land where all artists were hungry.

Who invented this global barrier market?
"Abyss for abyss, madhouse for madhouse."
What a choice—to flee from one hell with hope 
and to land in a different hopeless hell.

Here the aggression of begging poverty 
debuted me in street after street. 
My sleeve was plucked, pulled, and grabbed, 
and finally the pursuit wore me down.

And to the sob of distant Siberian accordions, 
and the song "Glorious Sea, Holy Baikal," 
I ran from the vile word money! 
I ran from my brothers in hunger.

For so many years the line fed me nothing 
but wartime black bread cut out with wormwood— 
and now at my heels, all the hungry, all the starving, 
stood in line for me, as for bread.

These panting people did not know 
that I myself was once a hungry kid, 
that the war hit me hard, 
making two childhoods and two of me.

I went into the slums. Two Creole nymphs, 
were my bodyguards, risking their bodies. 
Their wigs from Taiwan, their shapes under tight dresses 
around the drinkers in the sleazy bars.

Here the aggression of poverty vanished: 
only the kids fought, brown skins naked, 
and a cripple in rags offered me coconut, 
straight from the bottle, unafraid of my plague.

And they posed for my Nikon, without hiding; 
they didn't reach for my pockets or threaten with knives. 
I was a guest, and with me were las buenas muchachas, 
and no one asked me for anything.

The mothers were strict, though it was Saturday, 
picking up the children playing in the dust, 
and sighing, instructed, "Time to go to work..." 
And the children went off to beg again.

And on a fence, grinning triumphantly 
like an ad for a tailor who makes tuxedos, 
fluttered a torn poster: "Everything for the Poor!" 
and under that, a fat-faced, pre-election jester.

I asked one of the nymphs, "Who's that guy?" 
and she laughed like I was crazy. 
She covered her lips with a finger, which stuck to the lipstick, 
and whispered a strange word: "Fuku!"
I asked carefully, "Fuku is a name?" and she, now convinced I was stupid, laughed harder, swayed her tight hips, and slyly replied, "Just the opposite."

And all the poor folk, with teeth of steel and with toothless mouths teasing the stranger, turned to the poster and laughed, repeating, as if blowing out a candle, "Fuku!"

The jester on the poster squirmed, one of the gang of other thugs who promised miracles, thugs, who with the knives of false beggars extract votes from the hoodwinked poor.

Those guys, multiplied on every fence, minted medals out of the people's hunger, make bombs out of the people's hunger, make tuxedos out of the people's hunger.

I cannot contemplate poverty calmly. What can I do to turn my body or spirit into the bread of salvation, into millions of crumbs, chunks, pieces, and loaves?

In the Gothic cathedral of Santo Domingo two sisters, two creatures of Creole nights, unexpectedly shy, with a quiet hesitation, lit ten candles before the Madonna.

One of the sorrowful pair explained, as a wax drop hardened on her sleeve, "For our dead sisters and brothers. Ten died. We two survived."

And the expected voice from heaven did not thunder, only a tear glistened on the Creole cheek, and my childhood Siberian hunger drew close to the hunger of the world...

It was so unbearably hot in Santo Domingo that it looked as if Columbus's statue, unable to stand it any longer, would tear off its bronze doubler, but the grave marker in the cathedral, where, if the sign was to be believed, the admiral's bones reposed, gave off a damp cemetery chill. That marker was like a fine-
brought the wheel and then broke us on the wheel.
We were stupefied by rum,
killed by thunder,
thrown face down on anthills.
We were conquered by the cross
and called savages,
and promised the freedom to get drunk.
Who was more treacherous?
The most savage savagery
is civilization.
Columbus, is that why
you came to our lands,
where you dug your own grave too?
By what right
did you eat our guava
and by what right did you discover us?
Europe wasn’t sleeping,
it was busy capturing slaves,
and Africa wept like a widow
when, lashed by whips,
black flesh filled
our cursed isles.
The slaves broke their shackles
and ran for boats,
but a noose on a branch awaited them.
It was during the capture of people
that the word was born,
that African word fuku.
Fuku is not naive.
Fuku is a taboo
on a name that has brought misfortune.
You use the name
and trouble will follow—
that’s the work of the name.
Like the dust of retribution,
fuku eats through shackles,
and the first “Fuku!”
invoked here
was on the bones of the Genoan
who rotted with his sword at his side.
No Dominican—
priest, tramp,
shoemaker with nails in his mouth,
drunkard from the tavern—
Would ever say out of superstition:
“Cristóbal Colón” or “Columbus.”
A Creole mother can’t frighten
her kids with threats of a wolf,
so she whispers, in fear of body’s wrath:
“If you don’t stop crying
el almirante will come!”
In museums even sweating guides
with oily smiles
won’t say “Columbus,”
but only “Come closer.
Here are the bones of el almirante.”
No one will utter the name.
Killers and crooks erect monuments
to other killers,
and that’s clear to any fool.
But the point of folk wisdom
is to shake them out of memory
and put on all killers a fuku.
You, celebrated bones,
stop knocking at the door
of the poor man who fell asleep with a sigh,
if, vainglorious,
you reckoned whose bones you are,
the poor man’s answer will be: “Fuku!”
We are those islanders
who are more Christian
than all the killers in the name of Christ.
You can’t scrape the injury from our genes.
Fuku on the bones of that Antichrist
who came with a fake cross!

The sea took its revenge:
it scattered
the admiral’s bones
after his death.
Gray tangles of hair crept from the skull
and the bones began wandering the seas.
Secretly
on the queen’s orders
they were transported by caravels.
Keeping his eye out,
an empty eye,
at night the skeleton clambered from his coffin
and raised a periscope over the world,
pushing it to gaping sockets,
and from his decayed boots,
without support,
with a clatter,
The spurs fell.
His fingers,
flushless,
did not tire;
they grabbed
the stars
as if they were gold.
But they,
grasped by bones,
turned spitefully to glass beads.
Without its plumage,
battered and alone,
the skull attempted to shout, "I am Columbus!"
but the wind moaned,
"Fuku!
Fuku!"
and back to the lousy hold would go
the discoverer of the false India.
From island to island the bones sailed
like uninvited guests.
It's said they are in Santo Domingo.
Of course, that is very doubtful.
Perhaps, in the vault smelling of decay,
there is just emptiness
and Trujillo's dust?
It's said those bones are in Seville.
Tourists poke their walking sticks at them.
And once,
with unexpected agility,
the skeleton grabbed a stick:
apparently the tip was gold
just like the rings of the chieftain's daughters.
It's said
those bones are in Havana,
as if alive,
writhing in anger,
quivering and clicking, they desperately want
to discover and conquer someone else.

If the admiral has three vaults,
does it mean there were three skeletons?
Or did the thirst for fame,
the thirst for power
tear the bones
into three parts?
The thirst for glory
is the path to ignominy,
if that glory is bloodstained
redder than rust.
Such is the glory that has ignominiously besmirched
the admiral's bones.

The Spanish conquistadors got Indians drunk on "fire water," the Indians later
sharpened the pieces of broken bottles and made arrowheads out of them.

Oh, how I would like to bury forever
in the mud, beneath the remains of their statues,
the new name for killers, "occupier,"
and the old one, "conquistador."

Why did you carry chains in your holds?
Tell me, what kind of courage is it
to turn all the blank spots on the map of the world
into bloodstains?

When you were dying, Admiral,
and turning from side to side,
raspig, you tore at the blood
of Chief Kaotabo on your gory hands.

Blood binds the world together
and the blood of the murdered chief
lay like a brand on Columbus's grandson,
who paid for the sins of his grandfather.

But my own Santa Maria
was an oily fish barrel on Lake Baikal.
Why am I fated to suffer this guilt?
I'm ashamed to play the good guy.

I didn't nail anyone to the cross
or put anyone behind barbed wire.
But my hands burn with the crust
of all the blood spilled by men.

The faces of the Inquisition are now legends.
Now the whole planet is an execution block,
and like typhus-bearing fleas
shivers of fear go crawling about the world.

And the Middle Ages, roaring like a bear
under somebody's tasseled banner,
reappear as a "witch-hunt" someplace
or as a conquista called a "peace-keeping mission."

A poet in our age is the age itself.
All the countries are like wounds on his body.
The poet is an ocean cemetery for everyone,
those in bronze and those unknown.

The poet is despised by the people
when out of pitiful conscience
he betrays the poor for his own profit
and eats at the expense of the hungry.

The poet understands in all times
that each age is ruthless,
that immortality is doomed to be part of war
as long as oppression is immortal.

The poet who has not surrendered to the Middle Ages
is the ambassador of all the oppressed.
Not eternal glory but eternal shame
is due to those who are glorified by bloodshed.

In every border post
there's something insecure.

Each one of them
is longing for leaves and for flowers.

They say
the greatest punishment for a tree
is to become a border post.
The birds that pause to rest
on border posts
can't figure out
what kind of tree they've landed on.

I suppose
that at first, it was people who invented borders,
and then borders
started to invent people.
It was borders who invented police,
armies, and border guards.
It was borders who invented
customs men, passports, and other shit.
Thank God,
we have invisible threads and threadlets,
born of the threads of blood
from the nails in the palms of Christ.
These threads struggle through,
tearing apart the barbed wire,
leading love to join love
and anguish to unite with anguish.

And a tear,
which evaporated somewhere in Paraguay,
will fall as a snowflake
onto the frozen cheek of an Eskimo.
And a hulking New York skyscraper
with bruises of neon,
mourning the forgotten smell of plowlands,
dreams only of embracing a lonely Kremlin tower,
but sadly that is not allowed.
The Iron Curtain,
unhappily squeaking her rusty brains,
probably thinks:
"Oh, if I were not a border,
if jolly hands would pull me apart
and build from my bloody remains
carousels, kindergartens, and schools.

In my darkest dreams I see
my prehistoric ancestor:
He collected skulls like trophies
in the somber vaults of his cave,
and with the bloodied point of a stone spearhead
he marked out the first-ever border
on the face of the earth.
That was a hill of skulls.
Now it is grown into an Everest.
The earth was transformed
and became a giant burial place.
It's "French Week" on the local T.V.

Aznavour from the screen
sings into the room
of former camp barracks,
full of whispering gloom.

Could you,
as you listen to Dalida,
remember the watchdogs on leashes?

Da?

Could you,
as you watch Gilbert Bécaud,
not forget Comrade Beria & Co.

But a nineteen-year-old driver,
in his truck,
hung a portrait of Stalin,
for good luck.

And next to this mustache,
a Playboy bunny attempts
to turn Siberian pants
into tents.

"Why are you bugging me,
Pops,
with the past?"

In a pair of real Levi's
I could be
twice as fast."

Wake up, you silly unremembering son,
it's your grandfathers and fathers
you're driving on.

Rusted wire will remind you of the past,
as it aspires
to burst all of your stupidly speeding tires.

You won't get far
in any jeans
if you forget
what history means.

If you forget the victims
of yesterday's sorrow
you could become
a victim of tomorrow.

Overcoming my sadness,
like an inner night.
is unending and wrestling an unending fight.

My opponent's arms are incredibly able, pushing camp topics from our table.

"Here, have a glass, join our repast." For those who don't think, there is no past.

How stupid you are to feel no alarm, and to be blind followers of a strong arm.

If you forget the victims of yesterday's sorrow, you could become a victim of tomorrow.

In a chic dress, Mireille Mathieu is on the screen.

In Siberia such rags are never seen.

If Kolyma girls could dress that way, they'd learn to sing better in half a day.

The table under our elbows shakes.

My opponent fights without mistakes.

He argues the camps never caused any harm, the camps never caused any harm,

he simply wants to bend down my arm.

My arm, why are you so weak, like the arm of a prisoner who will die in a week?

But with a splintering crunch growing through the tabletop, hundreds of dead blue arms come to make the wrestling stop.

And bend to the songs from Paris-town.

That almost victorious arm down.

There is a third choice—to choose nothing, when two lies are being slipped to you, not to change, in someone's dirty games, into an ass-licker or a slanderer.

It is more honest to die in a ditch than to prefer the dubious honor of escaping from your own bastards only to be embraced by bastards abroad.

It is shameful for a true writer who is proud of his unrecruited soul to break with homestead reaction just to be reactionary elsewhere.

When your enemy is a jackal, the shark is not a friend. There is a third choice: amid all the biting, to sit between two chairs, if both, in their own way, are dirty.

I despite licking both assa. I consider it equally fine to fawn, bowing your back before your native country, and to turn your back indifferently on your homeland's pain.

It's too early to say my last word— I speak almost at the end, like a half-vanished ancestor dragging my body between two eras.

I am an accidental scrap, an apple core of this century that left no leftovers.

History choked on me, gnawed on me, but didn't swallow me.

Almost at the end:
I am
a cracked but exact
living death mask of wartime evacuation,
and to be recognized,
I need no name tag.
In a blizzard I was sculpted
by the rusty hands of the Trans-Siberian—
the scraping buffets of train cars.
Almost at the end:
In pants rough as the devil's hide
I walked like a see of hell.
Each pant leg thundered in the frost
like a frozen drainpipe,
and the "Devil's hide" grew on my own
and wouldn't pull off.
and in fight saved my backbone,
fragile but unbreakable.
Almost at the end:
Once I cried
in the shadow of weathered, roadside branches,
leaving my head
on the red and yellow "No Thruway" sign,
and everything that they tried to squeeze down my throat,
at their glistening banquet,
I picked from my guts,
turning them inside out.
Almost at the end:
History danced on my many toes
in muddy boots and ballet slippers.
I was not on stage,
I was the stage, in the blood of my epoch,
in the vomit of this age,
and everything in my life,
which seemed to you not my blood,
but just the thirst for fame,
I do not doubt
someday you'll call heroic deeds.
Almost at the end:
I am just the ragtag voice of all the voiceless,
I am just a faint trace of all the traceless.
I am the half-scattered ashes
of somebody's unknown novel.
In your respectable entrance halls
I am the ambassador of all dead-end streets.

I am a ghost of barracks and plank beds,
bedbugs,
lice, flea markets,
and thieves' dens.
Almost at the end:
Half my life
I searched hopelessly with a bent fork
for even a hint of meat
in caucused cutlets.
Once, when not even ten,
I screamed a mother oath
in front of my horrified aunt.
I will come to my successors
as though in Lermontov's epaulets,
police hands on my shoulders,
with their polite suggestion:
"Let's go, buddy!"

Almost at the end:
I am
the same age to all ages.
I am
the countryman to all countries,
even to faraway galaxies.
Like an Indian in the rusty handcuffs of Columbus,
before my death I shall rap out:
"Fuhu!"
to those falsely immoral tyrants.
Almost at the end:
A poet today,
like a coin of Peter the Great,
has become really rare.
He even frightens his neighbors on the globe,
but I'll find understanding with my successors
one way or another.
Almost candid.
Almost dying.
Almost at the end.
1963–1985
Havana—Santo Domingo—Guatemala—Lima—
Managua—Caracas—Venice—London—Zima
Junction—Gal'ripsh—Peredelkino
TRANSLATED BY ANTHONIA W. BOUSIS
"ALMOST AT THE END" TRANSLATED BY ALBREY C. TODD