

Potter's Seconds

Poems by Daniel de Montmollin
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Translated by Brother Anthony of Taizé

Where did all those little scraps of paper stained with clay come from? Season after season they gathered in the potter's workshop. They would barely be enough to light the stove with . . . On each one a few words can be read, hurriedly noted down in a few seconds . . .

This potter is not Japanese. His tercets have nothing but their brevity in common with the haiku: small frames for such great images! Just as seconds form part of time, so they measure a few fragments of life. And perhaps precisely because they show the present, they offer a glimpse of the invisible which, decked out in words, would soon vanish.

Spring

Handless?
Clay gives you back
your hands.

Snowman
in sunshine caught a cold,
his nose is running.

Candlemas.
The first snowdrop
drives doves mad.

A pot newly born
bright with birth-waters.
Whose is it?

The snow's come back.
Forgot something?
Forgot to melt.

Spring cleaning
in the pottery.
What about you, little mice?

Spring's courting me,
says the snowman's
foot.

Little pot that I cherish,
what beauty will be yours
once you have left me?

Noisy flight of a dove
amidst maple blossom.
Winter waters are ebbing.

I had been thinking of glazes.
First snowdrops.
I sharpen my secateurs.

One dandelion in flower
and one goldfinch--
have a good day!

Robin on my spade,
who are you?
As yet, no reply.

Despite your tears,
April snow, you perceive
the fragrance of wallflowers.

From daybreak
spring's chubby goatskin flask
blows blackbird whistles.

Little by little
a bird builds its nest.
Great weariness.

Spring rain
cannot keep the forsythia
from blazing.

Beneath my feet
the young meadow, waterlogged,
chuckles like a red-legged partridge.

The chestnut tree
raises a thousand sails
but fails to cast off.

Poor ivy, stripped away,
you only wanted to live,
but so did the lilac tree.

Today the white dead-nettle
is crowned with a tiara--
dancing bees.

Chaffinches delirious.
On which branch is their nest ?
Winter will tell.

A wren.
Who stuck feathers
onto that whistle?

Roots, reek of nettles,
stench of ruins
and of springtime.

Through a spyglass, see,
inset at the tip of a sprig of box,
a yellow bunting.

A bush cut back short.
Its arching roots
stretch taut.

Shut tight,
the snapdragon
at sunrise.

Ah, what a thing life is,
obliging me to walk
on daisies !

Walnut leaves
darkened by frost.
Dandelions flourish.

Squall from peak
to valley bottom.
Winter sounds hollow.

Hedge-clearing's all the rage!
But in the undergrowth
there's the carcass of a car.

Winter's back.
The undergrowth's dimmed down
its daffodils.

Still underground,
the bindweed's
already squirming.

Is Mrs. Blackbird
changing her dress
in the blossoming apple tree?

Asleep among the reeds,
a fawn.
Shall I pick water-irises?

Hail and pouring rain.
Acacia flowers blow
right under my wheel.

Peonies in flower.
High in the sky
a plane is buzzing.

Easter morning.
My umbrella blocks out
the nightingale's song.

April sets the first flower
on the blackthorn,
which takes it for the gardener.

It's incomprehensible,
says the bread.
Amen! Says the wine.

The wren's having fun:
picking a thousand holes in the blown-up balloons
of pigeons.

A patch of sunlight, one fly,
then more flies,
robin!

Hissing
of snake's head fritillaries.
A bad dream.

A farmer weeps
over a dead lamb.
Violets in the hedgerow.

Pasture with orchids,
bullocks
chewing straw.

Under the flowering apple tree,
stomach-deep in buttercups,
a cow.

An apple in springtime,
wrinkled, fragrant,
a little old lady!

Why are slugs
so unwilling to eat
bindweed?

Violets along the embankment.
Trundling by, humdrum,
a freight train.

Springtime plowing.
Will the earthworms
ever stop growing?

The moon
hesitates
to cross the flowering rapeseed field.

Rainy May.
Buttercup petals
speckle my boots.

At dawn today
one thing was clear:
the blackbird sings in Chinese.

Without meaning to,
the old dog
squashes a slug.

Summer

The sun is rising.
Sunflowers,
stand at attention!

Spearing its own reflection
then bringing out a minnow,
a kingfisher.

How come the water's so clear?
asks the tench.
Jump! Says the carp.

So green, the grass beneath my scythe!
Yet over all the earth
is blood.

That yellow snail
high up on a hop vine
believes in Noah's Flood!

Weeds at daybreak
perspire dewdrops,
the sun's breakfast.

Here comes night.
Give your color some rest,
marigold!

Forest felled.
Let there be raspberries,
and there were raspberries.

The pouring rain
strikes a pebble
making it sing!

Midsummer noontide.
Chilled, the oak tree's shadow lies
snug beneath a quilt of sheep.

Wind takes a stroll,
barley stalks bow.
It will soon be harvest time.

In the undergrowth's aquarium
an old beech falls.
Cascades of light!

The swift's diamond scream
leaves a scratch
on the sky's window.

What skeins
for such fine knitting-needles--
sheep!

Scorching sunlight.
Pumpkins shut
their sunshades.

This bramble
blocking my path--
such vitality!

Willow once pollarded
now abandoned--
what long tresses!

Set at the top of the path
a star--
yet the earth is round!

Misty reeds.
The river flows down.
The sun sails upstream.

Numbers in blue
on the backs of the sheep--
a race to the butcher's block?

Black, shining
silent giggle--
sparrow in dust-bath.

Look, a rainbow,
Cuong!
—In Vietnam we have too.

At the spout of the fountain
a bindweed blooms.
The water flows.

Snow in July.
The rock roars its avalanches.
The jackdaw grazes its shadow.

The cock or the hen?
Between the child's fingers
an ear of grass.

A pebble decorated
with a shadow of vetch.
The sun sets.

I've been listening to you
for fifty years now.
Quack away, ducks at dawn.

Awake in the night.
That moon again
and its crickets!

See how they moon-gaze,
the umbels
of wild carrots!

Forgotten beneath a leaf,
become a cucumber now,
that gherkin!

Water rushes down the granite.
Who will hear the voice
of the snowbells?

The bumblebee rings the bell
of the convolvulus.
The sun rises.

On its way to the slaughterhouse,
a bull
shakes off its flies!

Beneath my steps
the path goes marching on.
Where's it going?

In the time it took to change its source,
the brook
dried up.

Clinging to my sleeve,
a goosegrass burr.
At my feet a butterfly.

Just as sixty years ago,
a calm river and doves.
Such is eternity.

Of all the jay's feathers,
it's always the little blue ones
that you find!

It's pouring with rain.
I'm going out for a walk,
says the earthworm.

A swarm of mosquitoes
over my drying pots.
Ah, this childhood smell!

On the bacon
in the mousetrap
flies are laying eggs.

Heatwave miracle:
a hermit rockrose
and its bee.

On its own, the clay is dead.
It only lives by water
and fire.

When will the crickets
have finished
counting the stars?

Imprisoned in barley,
no escape for
the wind's swell.

Rain at last.
A slug
turned on its back.

A trio by Schubert.
Time enough to turn
ten jugs.

This cool breeze
under the willow.
No more headache.

No concert
without clothes pegs.
What wind!

Water with no bottom,
water with no shore,
mortal dream.

Yet the river
rejoices
at reflections of trees

and the pebbles
make the torrent
sing.

Autumn

Against the golden sunset,
starlings adorn the church spire's cross
with fleurs-de-lis.

Gray, heads bowed,
the funeral processions
of sunflowers.

Ridden by the wind
the wooden horse
rocks.

Flies quench their thirst
at the cut stump
of the freshly felled tree.

Damp cold,
so the hornbeam puts on
stockings of moss.

The path
turns away
from the tree fallen across it.

Kiln opened,
a vein of pebbles
and carbuncles.

Under the fig tree
a drop of water
shelters from the rain.

The solitary old woman has passed away.
Around her house,
red dahlias.

The meadow sends up
its first agarics.
Summer's over!

Last flowers, first seeds.
Butterflies and goldfinches
jostle one another.

I have just split open an apple.
Two black pips
are looking up at me!

On the back of cow
number forty-two
lie leaves yellow and red.

That devourer of game,
the fox,
has been shot by the hunter!

I walk
as people harvest.
Food must wait!

My clay
is rather soft today.
I will turn plates with it!

From freshly plowed furrows
clods fly up—
crows.

The merry-go-round
is turning all on its own.
What a wind!

The robin
takes over
from a thousand swallows.

In blue, the sweeper-up of dead leaves.
In verdigris
the Bourgeois of Calais.

Everyone is looking at you,
last leaf left
on the cherry tree.

Such a fog!
The crows have nothing
but their voices left.

Two doves peck
on the dead man's
windowsill.

In purple grass
the sheep are spinning
the sun's last rays.

I put handles on my pots.
First snow, first bullfinches--
dear window!

Such a fine tree
felled,
such a fine pile of firewood.

The hand holding the wood
suffers
more than that doing the sawing!

One degree above zero
and a sparrow is bathing.
I catch a chill.

The ripe chestnut
is reunited with the humus,
broken fragments of dead leaves.

First frost.
The maple lets fall
her yellow dress.

Early morning frostfall.
That distant bell
murmurs in my ear.

Winter

Snow at last!
Insatiable,
I feed the birds!

Upright in the snow,
the umbelliferae
are blossoming anew.

Snow and fog.
No shadows
beneath the pergola.

I turn white balls of clay.
My wheel's
a raptor's nest.

Village under snow
with its princely castle
water tower.

Great tits
all dressed in similar frocks
for the meal.

Still the sun rises
red
above the cleared forest.

Frost and fog.
The landscape's
in its underwear.

Gray is the sky
and black the river,
says the snow.

Parked there at the roadside,
the poplar counts
up to one.

Tawny owl
striking the night's
frozen bell.

On the lemon balm seeds,
bullfinches and goldfinches.
Hoarfrost in flames.

Frozen December moon.
Inside the sheep's hoarfrost coat
the lambs are snug.

Amidst falling snow
a hoarse rook
appears then vanishes.

No pathway.
On the snow
a hare preceded me.

You sing, tawny owl.
Giving the fieldmouse
a chance!

In the night,
cat lanterns.
I dim my headlights.

Say what you like about snow.
Still, a bullfinch
makes a change from sparrows!

The wintery sun is setting.
A solitary walnut tree
loaded with rooks.

On the willow branches
mistletoe balls and moonlight.
Advent night.

The cat comes to drink.
No fear strikes
the decoy duck.

The decoy duck
pulls the quilt of snow
up to its chin.

A star and an ash tree
on a frosty blue background.
Frozen paintbrush.

What games do people play?
Marbles, hopscotch,
death of God.

Wise potter.
Into the fire
with folly!

The cobbler
under the lamp
makes long hikes.

Finger-lopped cabinetmaker,
no longer
a guitarist.

A no-good pot.
Yet it contains
the perfect circle.

Think of the effort I put into you,
my pots,
for ever motionless!

January.
Homeless squalls
The purple orchis puts out leaves.

Shaggy-coated nag
rasping the frosty skin
of badly-shaved winter.

You leave me,
all of you, my pots.
My tercets remain with me.

With my past
I apply myself to my present.
That is my future.