

Dan Andersson

DAN ANDERSSON was born on April 6, 1888 in Grangärde parish, Dalarne, Sweden. He grew up in an atmosphere of simplicity, poverty and deep piety. At the age of fourteen, he came to America to visit his father's relatives in Forest Lake and Tamarack, Minnesota, but went back to his native land at the end of eight months.

His working life as forest-laborer and charcoal-burner began soon after his return home. Many of his first stories and poems were written in intervals between tending his charcoal kilns "by the dim glow of a sooty lantern, swinging from the smoke-grimy roof of his sod-cabin."

In 1915, he attended the winter course at the Brunnsvik Folk High School near Ludvika. He married in 1918. His death through accidental asphyxiation occurred in Stockholm during the night of September 15, 1920. He lies buried on a lovely knoll in the Ludvika churchyard, overlooking Vessman Lake and the mystic, forest-clad ranges of his native Dalarne.

An edition of five volumes constitutes the poet's collected writings: *Charcoal-Burner's Tales; The Three Homeless Ones & David Ramm's Inheritance; Songs & Ballads; Posthumous Stories; Gleanings, Verse & Prose.*

Recognition accorded so meagerly during his lifetime came with the poet's death. And interest in him has not waned with the passing years. All unconsciously, Dan Andersson stimulated a host of young authors, particularly members of the working-class, who have contributed so refreshingly to both Swedish poetry and prose.

The translations offered here, part of a collection done long before the days of "blood and tears," are fairly representative of the poet's moods. His rhymes are not here, but perhaps something of his restless, challenging spirit hovers above these pages.

— Caroline Schleef

The Beggar from Luossa

Translated by Caroline Schleef

From Luossa came a beggar singing to the village folk,
Round the watch fire they lingered while he sang
Songs of pilgrims and of beggars, song of wondrous, wondrous things
And of his yearning did he sing the whole night long

"There is something beyond mountains, beyond stars and all the blossoms,
Something, too, behind my song, behind this burning heart of mine
Listen — something goes and whispers, goes and lures me and beseeches
Come to us, for earth below is not the kingdom that is thine!"

I have listened to the lapping of waves upon the shore,
I have dreamed that the wildest seas were calm and still.
And in spirit I have hurried to that contourless land,
Where the dearest we have known we'll know no more.

To a wild, eternal longing were we born of ash-pale mothers,
And from travail, anxious, painful, rose our first, our wailing cry
Were we tossed on plain and hillside, just to tumble round and frolic,
Then we played at elk and lion, beggar, God and butterfly.

Did I sit beside her, silent, she whose heart was as my own,
Did she tend our home with soft and gentle hands,
Loudly was my own heart shouting, "What you own there is not yours!"
And my spirit drove me onward to find peace.

What I love is lying yonder, lies concealed in dusky distance,
And my rightful way leads high to wonders there.
In this clamor I am tempted to beseech Him, "Lord, O Master,
Take all earth away, for own I will what no one, no one has

Join me, brother, beyond mountains with their still and cooling rivers,
Where the sea is slow to slumber in its peak-encircled bed.
Somewhere far beyond the heavens lies my home, have I my mother
In a gold-besprinkled vapor, in rose-tinted mantle clad.

May the black and brackish waters cool our cheeks with fever reddened,
May we be from life far distant where the morning is awake
Never was I one with this world, and unending tribulation
Suffered, restless, unbelieving, suffered from my burning heart.

On a seashore sown with cockles stands a gate with roses laden,
Where in slumber, vagrants perish and all weary souls find peace.
Song is never heard resounding, viols never echo, ringing
Under arches where forever cherubs of salvation dwell.

Canada Memories

Translated by Caroline Schleef

I

My memories run to a land without sun
in a clanking, clattering chain!
Like yarn they break from the weaver's loom
and silently fall to earth again.
Some blow away with the warm summer wind,
where redskins went gliding by night-hidden waters,
and wounded, a roe deer was swimming to land,
and vapors rose high above white phantom islands,
where turtles ta-rump-umped, and muskrats swam,
and a god moved in seesawings there
amid meadow blossoms and homesteaders' smoke,
and red cherries, too, in his hair.

II

I heard a little child sob in forests,
in forests encircling Step Prairie where the mighty beeches are souging.
Through ancient oak trees and elm trees, my sob went stealing.
As I stood shaking in blazing, streaming sunlight,
I cried out — I listened, I had no answer save my own homeless heart-throbbings,
and I knew it to be my longing that had to burst its binding band.

III

Far from maple sugar trees and purpling wild grapes,
they ready for the dance as twilight shadows fall.
While tar-flames illuminate melons that are mellowing
the moon is rising stilly in God-father's spacious hall.

Strong fair-haired lads go dancing there with half-breeds who are shy,
and rubber boots go stamping to Karl Swansson's clavier.
While love-tuned winds go blowing o'er the lake at To Toma
in Orsa-polka melodies, to M'Garvis homestead there.

A dark-haired lassie is with me at the sheepfold,
my heart, a king's, is beating as it never beat before.
Oh, had I but a gift of diamonds and of rubies,
I could then enter joyfully through love's blissful door.

IV

Grey squirrels are frisking and woodpeckers, calling,
a beaver dam is mirroring balsam and hazel.
While o'er a settler's hilltop, the morning comes a-climbing,
a-rustling through the poplar trees, whispering, "Farewell!"

My beloved I will leave now and sail o'er the ocean,
o'er the ocean and to Finnmarken's resinous spring.
Though I know that my heart will for long years be buried
in thickets white and thorny, in To Toma's lovely dale.

V

How sweet to love in stillness there beneath the trees and hedge,
to waken to the pheasant's cluck and summer's gentle rain
that fell so soft and cooling on scorching pine and sedge,
and played on giant grasses its muted guitar tune.
But sweetest is that loved one I will never see again —
dear virgin land, we'll meet once more — farewell, farewell to you!
O never, never ending sunflower-yellow prairie land
where flocks of geese go splashing in the mud and lagune!
I cannot longer, longer stay, another love has come —
it claims my heart, how strangely to my land of ice I'm drawn!
Great Northern, King's highway of steel for thousand miles and more,
give me a horse of Pittsburgh iron, swift as the redskin's dart,
and speed me over lonely rails straight to the eastern shore
where laden steamers ply the deep, and home again depart!

The Charcoal Tender

Translated by Caroline Schleef

Patient, manful waking,
cherished sleep forsaking,
I watch my coal all night.
Tired hands and sinewy,
stir the firebrands wearily,
and crackingly and glowingly
the fiery flames move flowingly
and give the copses light.

Smoke compresses chokingly,
vapor rises weavingly,
hot and strong and rank.
Charcoal's cooling clinkingly,
snappingly and ringingly
in heaping trenches, threatening,
'neath frozen pines, a-towering
o'er ash-besprinkled bank.

Long are hours in loneliness,
deep in forest wilderness,
miles from folk who pass.
Foxes hunt so stealthily,
victims whimper plaintively,
like hunger-cries from forests,
from pastures and from clearings,
and frozen moorland grass.

Flames go leaping glowingly,
move in billows warmingly
toward my manly breast.
Flick'ring flames are playfully
sending kisses lovingly,
warmth for one who's freezing,
joyous glow, delighting
eyes that need to rest.

Soon the dawn is breaking,
ogres then go chasing
down to Hanga vale.
Hushed the junipers down there,
there within some stony lair,
trolls will find a harborage
in deeply hidden passages
near never trodden trail.

Epilogue

Translated by C. D. Locock

Good-night — good sleep I wish to ye,
To all you wandering men.
Our singing's done, we part — maybe
We shall not meet again.
I have said what little I had to say,
Of the flame that so soon died down in me;
But the love that was there — that shall not pass away:
Good-night — good sleep to ye.

Farewell to Brother Joachim

(Upon his departure from Gothenburg one evening)

Translated by Caroline Schleef

Brother Joachim, you are going where wild apple-trees are glowing,
And where wormwood withers slowly near the hundred-year old farm —
You shall greet now all the old folk, young folk, all the dead and living,
You shall greet the crane and sparrow, fox and marten you shall hail!

Brother Joachim, we were sitting over dark brown ale and dreaming
Of those silver-shining well-springs close to Smoke-hill's boggy swamp,
And we forgot the dust of cities in fancies that we visioned,
Fancy built a charcoal cabin out of Tullen's ale-house black!

Brother Joachim, you are going to the heavy-drooping rowan —
Take my greeting to Luossa's golden straw and scattered corn!
Listen, Haga's aged elm trees in farewell are softly singing,
And from Masthugg's temple towers, vesper bells are ringing joy!

You shall greet for me all Paise's golden marsh and cooling rivers,
You shall greet, too, all the hayracks, all the bogs and thickets wild,
All the hens and starving magpies, you shall greet as from a brother
Who with memory-laden soul, far into alien lands will go!

But, O brother, when you're sitting under trees that sing forever,
When you're building there a cabin deep in Mattnas forest dark,
Pray for those whom cities stifle, that their hearts be ever youthful,
Pray they dream of troll and highlands there in Tullen's ale-house black!

A Musician's Last Journey

Translated by C. D. Locock

Ere the rosy morning brightens over Himmelmora's crest,
See a dead man faring forth from Berga By:
And silent o'er the hillside they bear him to his rest,
Beneath the dawning grey, the chilly sky.
And their boots go heavy-heeled through the rose-bespattered field,
And heavy heads are bowed as tho' in prayer.
From the desert spaces' Need comes a Dreamer who is dead,
Through dewy meads that shine with flowers fair.

"He was strange and he was lonely," say the four dark bearing men,
"And often lacked he resting place and bread."
"Lo, a King!" say the roses and are trodden down again.
"Lo, a King, and a Dreamer that is dead!"
"We are slow," say the bearers, "and mile on mile it seems,
Ever sultrier grows the day this morning tide."
"Walk ye warily, speak softly," sigh the willows by the streams,
"Maybe it is some flow'ret that has died."

But when thro' green Spring woodlands the pitch-black coffin swings,
Runs a silence through the morn-awakened fields,
And the West Wind stays to listen who it is such escort brings,
Mid the roses, with such footsteps heavy-heeled.
"T'is but Olle, the musician," sigh the whispering forest trees,
"For ended is his homeless day." —
"Oh, would I were a hurricane," replies the gentle breeze,
"I would pipe him on his journey all the way!"

Over ling and yellow marshes sway the dead man's stiffening bones,
Sway wearily the sun's pale rays beneath:
But when evening's lovely coolness falls on bilberries and stones
Sounds the tramp again on Himmelmora Heath:
Tramp of four tired men, who in grief march home again,
With their heads bowed low as if in prayer.
But deep upon their track see the roses trampled back,
Through the dewy meads that shine with flowers fair.

"He is gone," say the bearers, "and his mother bides forlorn
In Torberga behind the poorhouse bars."
"We are trampled 'neath your footsteps, with your heavy shoes are torn,"
Cry the rose-buds, pointing to their scars.
"It is Death that has gone dancing over Himmelmora Heath,"
Each thistle by the clover pasture moans:
"He has ground you all to garbage his clumsy boots beneath,
While he danced with the Dreamer's bones."

O'er the grass and the grey roof-tops like a whisper comes the night,
With her few pale stars' wretched fire:
And East across the moor land to the tarn goes down a light,
Goes a song through the lily-sprinkled mire.
Far and wide the black storm thunders, and round the islet there
Chant the waves of the desert spaces' Need:
O'er the dark and angry waters, lo, the night sounds call to prayer,
For a Dreamer, a Musician, lies dead.

The Poacher

Translated by Caroline Schleef

Heavy-hearted, old and trembling,
he was now, the hunter, William,
sat beside me on the wayside,
smoked his pipe and ruminated,
quietly he told his stories:

"Rich men came and took our forests,
took our fields, our meager meadows,
even took our wives and children.
Into slaves they wished to turn us,
they forbade to us our hunting,
crime to slay our elk when hungry.
But I thought: — I'll have vengeance,
I will kill the deer you've stolen,
rob you of the spoils you've taken,
feed myself and hungry children.

Far and wide I have now wandered,
high in fjells and deep in valleys;
far from house and miles from highroad
has my ancient gun gone singing
songs of death to three-year monarchs.
Seen by no one, I have skinned them,
severed, cut and cooked at campfires,
ate my meat and drank my braennvin,
glad to smell the red blood flowing,
streaming on the ground before me.
Meat I also hid in caches
under wind-felled trees and bushes,
rested there a while to gather
strength to take the long way homeward
with my load of haunch and shoulder.

In the hide, all warm and bloody,
have I rolled myself securely,
so in hidden, pitch-black passes
I could sleep in dreamless sleeping,
hunger stayed and tired from killing.

Laddy, I have carried elk-meat
sack-wise over murky valleys,
waded deep in boggy marshes
back and forth to where I slaughtered;
most at nightfall without moonlight,
most in pitch-black starless darkness,
led by wind and seen by no one;
carried salt from store to cabin,
pits I dug for storing barrels,
salted meat and thanked my Maker
for a good and well-earned ration,
food for wife, myself and children.

Now the day is slowly dying,
sun is sinking, twilight's falling
over old familiar places.
Old am I, with hunting ended,
but I gladden and I glory
over ways that I have wandered,
over dangers I have breasted,
most though over elks I've hunted,
skinned and cut in nights of darkness,
while the new-made forest masters
slept upon their downy couches."

Sailor Jansson

Translated by Helen Asbury

Hey, yeo-ho, sailor Jansson,
Now the morning wind is blowing,
Now last night is past forever,
And the Constancy must go.
If you've kissed your mother's cheek
And mingled tears with Stina's, flowing
— If you've had your swig of brandy,
Then sing hey, yeo-ho!

Hey, yeo-ho, sailor Jansson,
Do you fear your little lady
Will betray you, yes, betray you
For another sailor beau?
Though your heart is beating fast
— As twinkle stars in dawnlight shady,
Turn your nose out to the tempest
And sing hey, yeo-ho!

Hey, yeo-ho, sailor Jansson,
Maybe Fate will have you falling
Not among the lovely ladies,
But where sharks swim to and fro;
And among the ragged coral
Maybe death awaits your calling
— He is hard, but he is honest,
So sing hey, yeo-ho.

Maybe some day you will have
A little farm in Alabama,
While your hair is growing greyer,
And the years are sifting slow.
Maybe you'll forget your Stina
For a girl in Yokohama —
That is careless, but it's human
— So sing hey, yeo-ho!

Saturday Night in the Log Cabin

Translated by Martin S. Allwood

Hence, yearning and weakness from soot-blackened breasts,
No more cares in our snow-covered home.
We have fire, we have meat, we have liquor for guests,
There is peace in the deep forest gloam.
Sing, Björnberg's Jon, with your full-throated calls
Of love and of roses and springs!
String your fiddle, Brogren, and play us a waltz
To eerie blue moon-lighted things.

It is miles upon miles to the houses in snow,
The frost lingers sullenly there.
Here is fun in the log fire's yellow glow
That trembles in midnight air.
You are fair, O Brogren, in fire and flame
As you play on your black violin.
For food and for liquor, forgotten the shame —
And your forehead is free from its sin.

When the stars of the morning grow feeble and die
And the vapors are turning to freeze,
And the dawn is on moor and water and sky
We'll slumber in freedom and ease.
We are sleeping on branches of soft fir and pine
And dreaming of pale maidens' eyes.
Then we turn, and our snoring is manly and fine
While the log fire is crumbling, and dies.

To Huck Finn's Memory

Translated by Caroline Schleef

I've lighted a fire and made a bed
On leafy loam and yellow sand.
The heavenly stars I am counting
And lights on Illinois' strand.

I've been thinking of old Judge Thatcher
Who had care of my yellow gold.
I've smiled over Tom's Aunt Polly
And dreamed as the moon grew old.

Like a breath of heaven, the breezes
O'er Missouri's enchanted land,
Round timber and drift-logs murmur
The wavelets on beech-lined strand.

'Tis night along gold Mississippi
Where blossoming beeches smile,
Spraying pollen on surging waters —
There are roses on Jackson's isle!

To Love

Translated by Caroline Schleef

'Tis said that a prophet who speaks with all faith;
whose voice sounds afar like a cymbal, a bell,
yet knows naught of love nor its mystery,
will speak as all fools do — as well.

For prophecies, psalms will all fade away
as a fleck, as a smoke when our doomsday is come,
But all that is flowing with love will endure
to be one with God and live on.

With love there is beauty in thistles that sting.
And May rain sprinkles the thirstening land,
while a rose has fragrance, a meadow grows green
deep in burning wilderness sand.

Wild Geese

Translated by Caroline Schleef

When those old, old wounds are hotly tearing
And from loneliness your cheeks are wet with tears;
When your life is just a stone to carry
And your song is grief, like crying cranes astray,
Go and drink a whiff of windy autumn,
Watch with me the fading, pale blue sky!
Come, we'll lean against the pasture gate-bars
While those wild, wild geese are flying by!

Dan Andersson

No writer is more intimately associated with lyric portrayals of Swedish wilderness life than Dan Andersson. His short lifetime coincided with an early period of industrialization in Sweden, and Dan's awareness of the interdependence of man and nature grew after a period of factory work, city living and a brief, unnerving visit with relatives in the USA. He longed to return to his roots, to the lumberjacks, charcoal makers and fiddlers — many of Finnish ancestry — and their storytelling and music.

Andersson's parents were humble, hard-working, self-educated, religious and highly respected, providing Dan with broad intellectual horizons for a boy from the backwoods. We find substantial doses of Oriental mysticism in his poems, which are also permeated with love of his home territory and neighbors, simple folks who led extremely hard lives. For them, teamwork and solidarity were necessary for survival, and "Wild Geese" tells how a caring neighbor tries to encourage a friend hit by hard times.

Dan Andersson published six books before his life was cut all too short by a tragic accident on a visit to Stockholm in 1920. He could never have dreamed how beloved his verses would become, nor that they would attract more composers than any other 20th century Swedish poet.

— Roger Hinchliffe

Magazine pieces 1953-1964

by Caroline Schleef

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ARTICLE

Dan Anderson: Charcoal-Burner and Poet

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