

HIGHLANDER'S SONG

MIGJENI

Migjeni (pronounced mijeni), an acronym of Millosh Gjergj Nikolla, was born in Shkodër, Albania in 1911. Now considered one of the most important Albanian-language poets of the twentieth century, he did not publish a single book during his lifetime. Throughout his life, his poetry is said to have transitioned from revolutionary romanticism into critical realism that propelled him to publication after World War II. The publication of Migjeni's posthumous (and immediately banned) poetry collection, Free Verse (Vargjet e Lira), also marked the establishment of the People's Republic of Albania, which interdicted the development of the modernist literature kindled by Migjeni due to heavy censors and the instrumentalization of literature as propaganda. Migjeni died in 1938 at twenty-six years old.

Translated from the Albanian by AMI XHERRO

H I G H L A N D E R ' S S O N G

O if I had a strong enough fist
to strike the mountain in the heart,
so he could also know what it means to be weak,
writhing in agony like a defeated giant.

I—vampire with a trembling shadow,
inheritor of patient suffering,
wander over the mountain's belly
with the unfinished sighs of instinct.

The mountain is silent. Every day
on his skin, in a burial game,
I look for a better bite.
I'm kidding myself, it's false hope.

R E C I T A L ' M A L S O R I T

O, si nuk kam një grusht të fortë
 t'i bij mu në zemër malit që s'bëzanë,
 ta dij dhe ai se ç'domethanë i dobët—
 n'agoni të përdihet si vigan i vramë.

Unë—lugat si hij' e trazueme,
 trashigimtar i vuejtjes dhe i durimit,
 endem mbi bark të malit me ujën e zgjueme
 dhe me klithma të pakënaqura t'instinktit.

Mali hesht. Edhe pse përditë
 mbi lëkurë të tij, në lojë varrimtare,
 kërkuj me gjetë një kafshatë ma të mirë . . .
 Por më rren shaka, shpresa gënjeshtare.

The mountain is silent—in his silence, he laughs.
I suffer—in my suffering, I die.
What about me? When will I laugh?
Or will I have to die first?

O if I had a stronger fist! Laughing,
I'd strike into the mountain's heart!
To watch him shake from that hit,
to delight in his torture, to laugh in his twist.

Mali hesht—dhe në heshtje qesh.
E unë vuej—dhe në vuejtje vdes.
Po unë, kur? heu! kur kam për t'u qesh?
Apo ndoshta duhet ma parë të vdes?

O, si nuk kam një grusht të fuqishëm!
Malit, që hesht, mu në zemër me ia njesh!
Ta shof si dridhet nga grusht' i paligjshëm . . .
E unë të kënaqem, të kënaqem tu' u qesh.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Migjeni (1911-1938) is one of the giants of contemporary Albanian poetry, though his Albanian-ness is itinerant. Born in the northern highlands of Shkodër to a family of Slavic origin, speaking Serbo-Croatian at home and Russian at the seminary, he spent his formative years in Southern Macedonia, which no doubt inflected his writing with strange syntaxes and elucidated the shared social conditions of many Balkan countries at the time.

After losing out on a scholarship to the West to continue his studies as a priest, Migjeni returned to Shkodër, where he started teaching instead. This is when he began writing, mainly short prose sketches, under his pen name Migjeni, a composite acronym of his actual name, Millosh Gjergj Nikolla.

"Highlander's Song" is from Migjeni's only volume of verse, *Vargjet e lira (Free Verses)*, published posthumously in 1944, composed over a three-year period from 1933

to 1935. Though first printed in 1936, the book was immediately banned by authorities and never circulated. The second edition, published in 1944 by Migjeni's sister Ollga, was more successful.

The desperate struggle for dignity, the futility of hope manifested in hunger, smoke, steel, and silence resound throughout the poems. This was a stark turn from the Albanian lyric tradition which sang of the beauty of mountains and its heroes. Where mountains were once keepers of collective memory and holy sites of worship, with each mountaintop said to have its own nymph (*zanë*), Migjeni mocked the mountains for their arrogant statures and unbudging strength. He does not totally turn his back on folklore however, as demonstrated by his insertion of *lugat*, which I translate (with a somewhat reluctant hand) into "vampire." In Albanian mythology, *lugat* is a creature who lives at night and feeds off living souls. They exist in shadows and places that

never see sunlight, such as caves, wells, and ruins. They are excessively displeasing to look at, due to misery and misfortune, so they attack their victims in their sleep or lure them while concealed in darkness. Sometimes they can also fly. The substitution of *lugat* for *zanë* reveals much about Migjeni's poetic determination, specifically, his desire to overturn flattening conceptions of beauty, love, and nationhood into troubling meditations on human will and will-not.

It is disputable whether Migjeni was a precursor to the socialist verse that was to come or if he was a defeatist with an occasional raised fist. Either way, a lack of optimism is always political.

He was, after all, a product of the 1930s, a time when many Albanian intellectuals grew fascinated with the West and when, in Western Europe itself, communism and fascism were colliding for the first time in the Spanish Civil War. While Migjeni's lifework paved the way for

a new Albanian literature, the year *Free Verses* was published saw the victory of Stalinism in Albania and the proclamation of the People's Republic which instituted half a century of strict authoritarianism and extreme censorship, with the only books freely available being confirmed propaganda, as decreed by the censors of the Party of Labour.

In a letter to a Trotskyite friend who had warned him that this new government would punish him for his poems that spoke of poverty and hardship—something which the Party, in their mind, had transformed into prosperity—Migjeni wrote:

My work has a combative character, but for practical reasons, and taking into account our particular conditions, I must maneuver in disguise. I cannot explain these things to the [communist] groups, they must understand them for themselves. The publication of my works is dictated by the necessities of the social situation through which we are passing. As for myself, I consider my work to be a contribution to the union of the groups. André,

my work will be achieved if I
manage to live a little longer.¹

Had Migjeni not died at twenty-six from tuberculosis, his fate would probably have been, like many Albanian writers of his generation, prison or death.

To this day, Migjeni captures something of both the national and diasporic imaginations in the generosity of his sadness. His sadness is romantic, existential, abstract, serious. The last line of "Highlander's Song," where the narrator delimits in the mountain's pain, *E unë të kënaqem, të kënaqem tu' u qesh*, I debated translating "to laugh and exist" rather than "to laugh at his twist." While the latter deepens the metaphor of futility, the former exalts the punch as a ritual of hope. As if punching a mountain does something to the puncher as a prayer to God falls to His ears, as writing a Poem changes Things. And this change is so infinitesimal that it goes unnoticed for centuries, until

the groove deepens, and the inscription reveals itself as the first breath of an ancient laughter.

I decided on "to laugh at his twist" because it is relational. It reaches for communion with the knowledge of existing within a larger system. It knows the importance of closeness and kinship, of grief, humiliation, and compassion. I have conviction in futility, which, like laughter, is ancient and fruitful. To laugh at a mountain is to know what one is, and for whom one lives.

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¹ Arshi Pipa, *Albanian Literature: Social Perspectives* (München: R. Trofenik, 1978), 150.