

Yvan Goll's

Dreamweed

Traumkraut

translated by Nan Watkins



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for Peter

Inhalt

11	Introduction
18	Sprengung der Dotterblume
20	Bluthund
22	Salz und Phosphor
24	Irrsal
26	Greise
28	Alasam
30	Straße durchs Land
32	Die Kastanienhand
34	Die inneren Bäume
36	Stunden
38	Der heilige Leib
40	Feuerharfe
42	Die Hochöfen des Schmerzes
44	Morgue
46	Das Kohlejahr
48	Rosentum
50	Erde
52	Hiob
58	Süd
60	Ozeanlied
62	Schnee-Masken
64	In den Äckern des Kampfers
66	Die Sonnen-Kantate
70	Drei Oden an Claire
76	An Claire-Liliane
76	Geliebte du mein Strom
78	Dein Kopf aus Knochen
80	Deine linke Hand
82	Belauscher deines Schlafs
84	Du mit den Zeisigaugen
86	Liebender zu sein
88	Wieviele Morgensonnen
90	Mit Atem besiegte ich dich
92	Ich höre steigen aus dir
94	Die Himmelfahrt

Contents

11	Introduction
19	Explosion of the Marsh Marigold
21	Bloodhound
23	Salt and Phosphorous
25	Maze
27	Old Men
29	Alasam
31	Country Road
33	The Chestnut Hand
35	The Inner Trees
37	Hours
39	This Holy Body
41	Fire Harp
43	The Blast Furnaces of Pain
45	Morgue
47	Year of Coal
49	Rosedom
51	Earth
53	Job
59	South
61	Ocean Song
63	Snow Masks
65	In Fields of Camphor
67	The Sun Cantata
71	Three Odes to Claire
77	To Claire-Liliane
77	Beloved, you are my river
79	Your head of bones
81	Your left hand
83	Eavesdropping
85	You with the siskin eyes
87	To be a lover
89	How many morning suns
91	With my breath
93	I hear the freezing bird of morning
95	The Ascension

96	An Claire
96	Hab ich dich gepflückt
98	Es spricht sich die Sage herum
100	Aus meinen Knochen
102	In deinem Haupte
104	Aus Gräbern steigt
106	Deine Trauerampel Geliebte
108	Wer immer dir begegnet
110	Ich war der Fragende
112	Fremd ist mir
114	Die Angst-Tänzerin
116	Der Regenpalast
120	Das Wüstenhaupt
124	Tochter der Tiefe
126	Die Aschenhütte
128	Der Salzsee
130	Der Staubbaum

Acknowledgments
About the Author
About the Translator

97	To Claire
97	Did I pluck you
99	The rumor is spreading
101	Drink the marrow of my jawbone
103	In your head I caress the fire
105	Out of the shadow-nest of graves
107	Beloved, your hanging lamp of mourning
109	Whoever crosses your path
111	I was the seeker
113	Foreign is the rusty wool
115	The Fear Dancer
117	The Rain Palace
121	The Desert Head
125	Daughter of the Deep
127	The Ash Hut
129	The Salt Lake
131	The Tree of Dust

Acknowledgments

About the Author

About the Translator

Introduction

In the poems of his late work, *Dreamweed (Traumkraut)*, Yvan Goll expresses his keenest suffering, endured and transformed through the power of love. Having avoided the ranks of the German Reich Army during The Great War by relocating in Switzerland, having written in French when his German verse was banned by the rising German Fascists, having taken a late ship from France to his Second World War exile in New York, Yvan Goll, in July 1945, set his sights upon returning to his home in Paris, only to have his lingering illness diagnosed as incurable leukemia. A month later, documents came through declaring him an American citizen.

Upon his return to Europe in 1947, Goll lay in the hospital of the University of Strasbourg—where he had once been a student—and began to record his visions of the mythic flower “alassam,” the dreamweed that was to haunt him and beckon him to his death some two years later. In those early days of his illness, Yvan Goll began writing vivid descriptions of his own pain, a pain that he had long perceived in the body politic of the European civilization he inhabited, but that now coursed through his own blood and flesh: “This holy body! / Sacrificial animals roar deep within me / And beef loins exhale their stench every Saturday.” His sleepless midnights produced hallucinatory imagery of “The death-drunken trees of my years.”

When reading Goll’s lyrics, one imagines that he should have inhabited a stellar role within the artistic firmament of early twentieth-century Europe. His talent, his curiosity, and his need to survive the grave upheavals of his time drove him to produce a large creative oeuvre of poetry, drama, fiction, translation, and essays. He moved easily among the French, German, and later the American cultures, describing himself as having “a French heart, a German spirit, a Jewish blood, and an American passport.” Yet perhaps his very ability to join in the discussion with so many diverse groups was a limitation in a world moving increasingly toward specialization. No one group has claimed him exclusively, and as a result of such rigid compartmentaliza-

tion much of his work has slipped into obscurity. A selection of Goll's work is readily available today to the French- and German-reading public, yet he is almost unknown to English-speaking audiences.

Yvan Goll began life on 29 March 1891, as Isaac Lang, in the town of Saint-Dié des Vosges in the contested border region of Alsace-Lorraine. From his earliest days this national rivalry fostered his expression in both French and German. Upon the death of his father, he moved with his French-speaking mother, who called her son Mignon, to the provincial capital of Metz, where he attended the local German Lyceum. His university studies took him to Strasbourg, Freiburg, and Munich, until in 1914, with the outbreak of The Great War, Goll moved to Switzerland. There he studied at Lausanne and connected with the Dadaists in Zurich (German) and the pacifist circles in both Zurich and Geneva (French). Some of his earliest poems were anti-war laments, including his collection, *Requiem für die Gefallenen von Europa*. During the tumultuous war years, the young Isaac Lang began signing his publications with various pseudonyms until he settled upon the name Yvan Goll. It was during his time in Switzerland that he met the gifted poet, Claire Studer, just before she would show her work to Rainer Maria Rilke. The mutual attraction between Yvan and Claire was immediate, and the two became life partners; in 1919 they moved to Paris and married there in 1921.

Goll's natural place in the avant-garde took him to Berlin, where he found Expressionism to be an outlet for his post-war thinking. The premier performance of his satirical play, *Methusalem, oder der ewige Bürger*, with set design by George Grosz, took place in the Dramatic Theater of Berlin and was a precursor to Ionesco and the Theatre of the Absurd. Returning to Paris, he became immersed in Surrealism, first championing Apollinaire, then opposing Breton in his own Surrealist Manifesto, published simultaneously with Breton's first Manifesto in October 1924. Goll wrote essays on film and theater and Cubism; he translated Walt Whitman, Franz Werfel, Stefan Zweig and Emil Ludwig; he published in French and German journals and worked with the

Rhein Verlag in Switzerland to publish the new work of other writers, including James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* was being translated into German by Georg Goyert. He joined Samuel Beckett and a few others to translate a section of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* into French. In his own publishing efforts he enlisted artists of the first rank, including Chagall, Dali, Grosz, Tanguy, Delaunay, Léger, and Picasso to illustrate his books and journals. During the 1920s his many novels, including *Sodome et Berlin*, decried the lack of order in the modern world.

In 1931 Goll met the Austrian poet and painter Paula Ludwig, who was to become his second muse. The 1930s, then, became an increasingly tense time, not only on the world stage, but also in Goll's personal and professional life. In 1933 his work was blacklisted by the German government, making it impossible for him to be published in German. His solution was to translate his works into French so that they could be published in France. In 1935 he attended the first large Author Congress in Paris to protest the rising tide of Fascism. Troubled by the state of the world, in 1936 Goll began to write a series of poems using a modern Everyman character, Jean sans Terre (Landless John), to depict the homeless, wandering Jew. He continued to add poems to *Jean Sans Terre* throughout the rest of his life. After his death, a group of American poets, including W.S. Merwin, Kenneth Rexroth, Galway Kinnell, William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Patchen, and Louise Bogen translated a selection of these poems, which appeared in English in 1958.

Goll's allegiance to his wife Claire and his confidante Paula, both of whom were living in Paris under the threat of the German invasion, finally produced a tension so great that Yvan and Claire left Paris and entered a life of exile in late August 1939. On the 6th of September they arrived in New York where they made their home until 1947.

The Golls settled in a townhouse in Brooklyn Heights, overlooking the East River. According to Miriam Patchen, widow of poet Kenneth Patchen and friend of the Golls, Yvan Goll was at the center of the artistic community in Greenwich Village; their

home at 134 Columbia Heights was a gathering place for poets and writers. It is heartening to see how a man with a keen European sensibility immersed himself in the uniqueness of American life, delving into the culture of the Native Americans who had once lived on the spot where he was living. Goll wrote poems in French called “Mannahatta” and “Balcons suspendus sur Lackawanna,” all of which were collected into a volume called *Élégie de Lackawanna* and later movingly translated as *Lackawanna Elegy* by Galway Kinnell. Goll was active in the French-American community of New York, where his friends Marc and Bella Chagall were also in exile. He founded his journal *Hemispheres*, where he published his old rival André Breton, Saint-John Perse, William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Patchen, Henry Miller, the young Philip Lamantia, et al. He wrote his “Elegy for James Joyce” for *The Nation*. At the end of the Second World War, Goll wrote, in English, a powerful collection of verse that appeared as *Fruit From Saturn*; it opens with an apocalyptic poem defining the atomic age, “Atom Elegy,” which he dedicated to the young American composer and conductor Lukas Foss. “Thus the promethean spark returns / To its dismantled fount...” In his constant search for meaning he explored the worlds of alchemy and mysticism, the symbolism of the Kabbalah and tarot.

When not in New York, the Golls spent summers at the writers’ retreats at Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony. Early in their American exile they visited Cuba, yielding Yvan’s essay, “Cuba, corbeille de fruits,” and poem, “Vénus Cubaine.” Later they traveled to the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec Province, Canada, where Goll was struck by the power of a pierced rock, which he honored in *Le Mythe de la Roche Percée*.

Among the masterpieces in Yvan Goll’s large oeuvre are his volumes of love poetry. It was the two women in his life who received his full expression of love in a world torn asunder by the devastation of war. Already in the 1920s, he and Claire had begun to write lyrics to each other, love lyrics that celebrated their life together. Early volumes carried the titles *Poèmes d’amour*, *Poèmes de jalousie*, *Poèmes de la vie et de la mort*. In Goll’s extensive correspondence with Paula Ludwig, he included love poems written in

German, which were later collected as *Malaiische Liebeslieder*. The volume that spans the arc of Yvan and Claire's 30 years together is *10,000 Dawns*, originally published in both French and German and translated into English by Thomas Rain Crowe and Nan Watkins. The title poem was written by Yvan to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the day they met. On 10 February 1947, Yvan slipped the poem under Claire's door in New York, celebrating their life together: "10,000 dawns, my angel, 10,000 dawns."

After seeking medical help in New York for his leukemia, in 1947 Yvan Goll decided to return to France. His mind became haunted by a "dreamweed," and he began conceiving poems in German. Within a year, he submitted five poems for publication, with the explanation to the editor: "After a twenty-year departure, I have returned to the German language with devotion and desire for renewal, and a throbbing heart. Surrealism has passed through me and deposited its salt. Yet for me it is as though this dreamweed plant is a new birth. I have returned late to Europe and find many gates black and in ruins...." The poems were accepted for publication, and Yvan continued to write, whether he was in a hospital bed, or in his apartment in Paris, or traveling to read his work. Some poems described his pain, his anguish at being ensnared by disease, thus having to face death. Others were love poems to Claire as she stayed by him in his final months, weeks, and days. In the Fall of 1949, Yvan traveled to the PEN Club meeting in Venice, and on the way home he stopped in Zurich to record a reading at Radio Beromünster. He introduced his poems by saying, "Now I will read the poems from my last, still unpublished volume, *Das Traumkraut*."

Throughout Goll's life, he worked tirelessly to promote the work of other poets, so it was not unusual that in his last months he would welcome into his home the young Rumanian poet who had recently moved to Paris, known as Paul Celan. The two rapidly developed a rapport, Celan offering to translate some of Goll's poems and Goll asking Celan to be one of his literary executors. Not long after their meeting, Goll entered the Hôpital Americaine in Neuilly, near Paris, on 13 December 1949, never to return home.

In the last weeks of his life, Yvan Goll was consumed with completing his poems inspired by “das Traumkraut” or the dreamweed. The poems appeared on every scrap of paper he could find--envelopes, prescriptions, newspaper margins--all written “with the tiny birds of his beautiful handwriting.” Poets of many nationalities, including the young Paul Celan, lined up to donate blood so that Yvan could finish his work. But after great suffering and a prolonged battle for his life, Yvan Goll succumbed to death on 27 February 1950. His body was finally laid to rest in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, opposite the grave of Chopin.

In these *Dreamweed* poems, death becomes Yvan Goll’s familiar, and love is his salvation in a winter world of pain. The snow creates a death mask for him. His body is no longer his body but a hostel for his ancestors’ bones; his heart is plundered for iron; his kidneys are meat for a bloodhound; his flesh is consumed by eternal fire. Yet wandering down the road to death and tumbling down the steps into the ocean of time, Yvan Goll, in the guise of Jean sans Terre, continues to seek and question. Ultimately it is love that sustains him as his earthly body crumbles to dust and his spirit rises from the confines of his hospital bed to soar freely among the stars in the vastness of eternal night.

April 2012
Nan Watkins
Tuckasegee, North Carolina

Sprengung der Dotterblume

Gewittergelb

Wie Blick von Amazonen

Voll Lüsterheit des Chroms

Entsteigt die schwangere Dotterblume

Dem Ahnenteich

Sprengt

Der Götter Einsamkeit

Der Lerchen Lachen macht mich schauern

Explosion of the Marsh Marigold

Storm yellow

Like the leer of Amazons

Filled with the lust of chrome

The pregnant marsh marigold rises

From the ancestral pond

Exploding

The solitude of the gods

The laughter of the larks makes me shudder

Bluthund

Bluthund vor meinem Herzen

Wachend über mein Feuer

Der du dich nährst von bitteren Nieren

In der Vorstadt meines Elends

Leck mit der nassen Flamme deiner Zunge

Das Salz meines Schweißes

Den Zucker meines Todes

Bluthund in meinem Fleisch

Fang die Träume die mir entfliegen

Bell die weißen Geister an

Bring zurück zu ihrem Pferch

Alle meine Gazellen

Und zerbei die Knöchel meines flüchtigen Engels

Bloodhound

Bloodhound at my heart

Who guards my fire

Who feeds on bitter kidneys

In the suburb of my misery

With the wet flame of your tongue

Lick the salt of my sweat

The sugar of my death

Bloodhound in my flesh

Retrieve the dreams that flee from me

Bark at the white ghosts

Bring all my gazelles

Back to their fold

And bite the ankles of my runaway angel