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SQUARE ANGELS

SELECTED POEMS

BOHDAN ANTONYCH



Bohdan Antonych

SQUARE OF ANGELS

Selected Poems

translated by

Mark Rudman and Paul Nemser

with **Bohdan Boychuk**

introduction by

Bohdan Rubchak

Ardis / Ann Arbor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some of the translations in this collection were previously published in the following magazines: *Granite, The Seneca Review, Pequod, The Antioch Review, Cottonwood Review, Mundus Artium, The Seneca Review*. The translators and Ardis gratefully acknowledge their permission to reprint them.

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*Published by Ardis, 2901 Heatherway, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104
ISBN 0-88233-254-6*

Ardis World Poets in Translation Series, No. 3

CONTENTS

Introduction (Bohdan Rubchak) ix

—Bohdan Boychuk collaborated on all of the following translations:

Invitation

Spring (Paul Nemser)	5	
Green Bible (Mark Rudman)	6	
Meeting (Paul Nemser)	7	
On the Road (Paul Nemser)	8	
The Cups (Mark Rudman)	9	
The Poplars (Paul Nemser)	10	
A Village (Mark Rudman)	11	
Christmas (Paul Nemser)	12	
A Forest (Mark Rudman)	13	
Storm (Mark Rudman)	14	
Wonder (Paul Nemser & Mark Rudman)	15	

First Chapter

Sign of the Lion (Mark Rudman)	19	
St. George Square (Mark Rudman)	20	
Square of Angels (Paul Nemser & Mark Rudman)		21
Spring (Mark Rudman)	22	
Ballad of an Alley (Mark Rudman)	23	
Ritual Dance (Paul Nemser)	25	
Monumental Landscape (Paul Nemser)	26	
A Lullaby (Paul Nemser)	27	
To Those Who Have Been Executed (Paul Nemser)		28

First Lyrical Intermezzo

Violets (Mark Rudman)	31	
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Three Stanzas from a Notebook (Mark Rudman)	32
Houses (Mark Rudman)	33
A Grain of Barley (Mark Rudman)	34

Second Chapter

The House Beyond the Star (Mark Rudman)	37
Song on the Indestructibility of Matter (Mark Rudman)	38
Six Stanzas of Mysticism (Paul Nemser)	39
Duet (Mark Rudman)	40
Epic Evening (Mark Rudman)	41
To the Beings from a Green Star (Mark Rudman)	42
Bulls and Beech Trees (Mark Rudman)	43
Polaria (Paul Nemser)	44
Prayer for the Souls of Drowned Girls (Mark Rudman)	45

Second Lyrical Intermezzo

To the Bottom (Paul Nemser)	49
Sunset (Mark Rudman)	50
Marriage Rite (Paul Nemser & Mark Rudman)	51
Horseshoes (Mark Rudman)	52
Carp (Mark Rudman)	53
A Birdcherry Poem (Mark Rudman)	54
The Marketplace (Paul Nemser & Mark Rudman)	55
Winter (Mark Rudman)	56

Third Chapter

Forever (Mark Rudman)	59
The End of the World (Mark Rudman)	60
Concert from Mercury (Paul Nemser & Mark Rudman)	61
Graveyard of Cars (Mark Rudman)	62
The Trumpets of the Last Judgment (Paul Nemser & Mark Rudman)	63

Third Lyrical Intermezzo

A Teapot (Mark Rudman)	67	
Morning in the City (Mark Rudman)		68
Bitter Night (Mark Rudman)	69	

INTRODUCTION

Antonych Grows. The Grass Grows.

When Orpheus played his lyre, the earth heard him and knew itself. The chords of his music, those absolute and universal metaphors, taught trees to walk and stones to speak. The floor of the sea and the roof of the sky arranged themselves anew according to his harmonies. Finally, love led Orpheus on a journey to survey the very center of the earth, the very center of life, which is death.

There is a strain of poets, persisting through the ages, who are attuned to the song of Orpheus. No matter how different they may be from each other, they seem to hear it and reverberate it in their poems. Novalis, Nerval, Hölderlin, Slowacki, Yeats, Rilke, Khlebnikov, Guillen, Stevens are only a few of the many names that come to mind. In Ukrainian poetry this Orphic strain is represented by Taras Shevchenko, Pavlo Tychyna, Volodymyr Svidzinsky and Bohdan Ihor Antonych.

No matter where a son of Orpheus is born, his true birthplace is a budding copse or a green hill. The actual birthplace of Bohdan Ihor Antonych was a small village surrounded by hills, groves and ancient echoes of forgotten forest gods. He was born on the fifth of October, 1909, in Novycja, a village in the beautiful Lemko region at the extreme western border of Ukraine. It is one of those villages, Antonych says in a poem, where "flower-formed suns sleep on the mossy bottoms of wells" and where at night "the village tavern burns with its candles like a bush giving birth to stars." The son of a Ukrainian Catholic priest (Ukrainian priests are allowed to marry), the boy spent his childhood in a peaceful,

comfortable home.

A quiet, withdrawn, and sickly boy, Antonych received his early education at home; his father hired a sensitive young woman to tutor him, and throughout his life the poet remembered her with great fondness. Later his father sent him to the provincial city of Sanok for his high school education. The Polish environment of the school influenced the boy for a time: his first poetic exercises were written in the Polish language. But in high school his interest in poetry was sporadic, far outweighed by his other loves—music and painting. Young Antonych was a passable violinist and something of a composer. His life's ambition, however, was to be a painter. Although later he became discouraged with his own painting and gave it up, his theoretical interests in the art continued until his death.

At the age of nineteen Antonych matriculated at the University of Lviv, in the faculty of Slavic Studies. In the late twenties and early thirties Lviv was humming with cultural activity. The Ukrainian writers of the city avidly absorbed all the excitement of experimentation and the new national spirit that blew in from Kharkiv and Kyiv. When Stalinism put an end to the growth of modern culture in the Soviet Ukraine, Lviv was ready to take over the leadership of Ukrainian intellectual life. Lviv intellectuals had the advantage of free access to West European and West Slavic culture, made frequent journeys to Western capitals and studied in Western universities. In the ten years before the outbreak of the Second World War, West Ukrainian literature and art began fruitful experiments in the cross-cutting of purely Ukrainian cultural strains with such Western ventures as expressionism and surrealism.

Once in Lviv, Antonych gravitated toward Ukrainian student organizations which were powerhouses of the Ukrainian national spirit in the city. As a result of these contacts, he abandoned his flirtations with Polish poetry and devoted himself wholly to Ukrainian culture. The main disadvantage he had was his lack of knowledge of literary Ukrainian. The Lemko dialect in which Antonych had been brought up is

quite different from the normative Ukrainian language. Together with ancient Ukrainian words and flexions, preserved from erosion in that mountainous region, it contains massive Slovak, Polish and even some German lexical influences. But the main difference is that of stress, so important in prosody. The Lemko dialect is the only Ukrainian dialect in which words are stressed penultimately, as opposed to normal Ukrainian where stress-incidence is irregular. Although friends remember that Antonych often mis-stressed words in conversation, no such errors occur in his mature poetry. Antonych's second task was to learn as much about Ukrainian literature as possible, since until then his knowledge of his own culture had been sketchy. What he did know thoroughly, however, was the mythology, demonology and folklore of his own region, preserved through the centuries by the relative isolation of the Lemko people. And this knowledge became the cornerstone of his poetry.

After obtaining his Master's degree in 1933, Antonych launched into feverish creative activity, almost as if he knew that he was running out of time. Unmarried, sharing a flat with an old aunt who doted on him, Antonych became even more of a recluse than he had been before. Shy and humble, he was inwardly both sure of his ability and firm in his convictions. The more naively romantic readers of his poetry were often disappointed upon meeting him: was this undistinguished person, of soft and hesitant body and of soft and hesitant speech, the same as the elemental, all-encompassing *persona* they got used to meeting in his stanzas?

Antonych's systematic working habits drove his bohemian friends to distraction. He wrote poetry every other day, devoting the rest of his time to critical prose, scholarship and reading. He rose early in the morning and hurriedly outlined a new poem in order to catch and fix the subtle intimations of his night dreams. In the afternoon he usually walked or read, trying not to think about the poem on his table. In the early evening he returned to it, rewriting and polishing it late into the night. But in spite of this methodical approach to writing, he firmly believed in inspiration. When his friends worried that he was overworking himself, he told them that he must

keep up with the dictation. He once told Olha Olijnyk, the woman he hoped to marry: "You know, sometimes it seems that someone whispers the lines into my ear. *Literally* whispers them."

In 1937 Antonych was hospitalized for routine appendectomy. In the hospital he caught severe pneumonia which was all but cured when his heart, damaged by prolonged high fever, stopped beating. He died on the sixth of July, in his twenty-eighth year. Antonych left behind approximately four hundred poems, a number of essays and reviews, an opera libretto and two singularly unexciting attempts at imaginative prose. At his death more than half of his works remained unpublished.

The early writings of Bohdan Ihor Antonych are a negative indication of his astonishingly rapid growth. Most of his mature work was done in the last four or five years of his life. His numerous early poems, on the other hand, reveal a modestly gifted young beginner. They are marred by his struggle with literary Ukrainian and with the syllabotonic metrical system. Antonych published some of these early efforts in various youth and religious journals but the bulk of them remained in manuscript at his death.

The poems that Antonych included in his first collection, published in 1931 and entitled *Pryvitannja zhyttja* (*Life's Greeting*), are of a much higher caliber. Nevertheless, they are still a far cry from his later mature work. Their main flaw is their literariness, their faithful devotion both to traditional and modern poetic models. Antonych, like Rilke, Stevens, Yeats and many others of such stature, proves the claim of contemporary theoreticians that most good poets begin in "literature" and not in "life." They find their own voice not by listening to the song of nightingales or the speech of the local grocer but by immersing themselves in poetry and then laboriously weaning themselves from it. What astonishes in Antonych's early work is the extraordinarily wide spectrum of his influences: from free verse to mannered games with the sonnet form, from startlingly direct visual imagery to involved verbal metaphors, bordering on conceits. In his youthful enthusiasm Antonych often abandons discrimination, so that

very good poems are followed by near failures. And yet this youthful enthusiasm is evident everywhere, and in the end it saves the book. The reader is carried away by the poet's tremendous energy and love of life. This energy and love of life will never abandon Antonych.

In this first collection the voice of the "true Antonych" resounds when the poet turns to memories of his native village to the sad beauty of the Lemko countryside, to the mysterious lore of that land. His style becomes direct, his prosody uncomplicated and his imagery immediately arresting. This is especially evident in the longer poem "Zelena elehija" ("A Green Elegy"): "I know now," the poem ends, "that each of us knows only a single truth, the truth of his green moments."

The truth of one's green moments is the motif underlying Antonych's next collection which was published in 1934. Its title, *Try persteni (Three Rings)*, recalls to a Ukrainian not so much S. George's mystical *Der Siebente Ring* as magical ring images in the folk poetry of Ukraine. The book is composed of longer poems, which Antonych calls "elegies" and of short two-three-stanza miniatures. In his two subsequent collections, Antonych will formalize this division, grouping the longer poems into "Chapters" and the shorter works into "Intermezzos" and then alternating these groups. Although in *The Three Rings* the groupings are still more or less intuitive, the thematic nature of each of the two groups is already sharply defined. The "elegies" develop the motif of childhood memories. In the especially beautiful "Elehija pro spivuchi dveri" ("The Elegy of a Singing Door") there is no telling where the memory of childhood ends and pure imagination begins:

I still remember: on the water
The morning scatters trembling sparks.
I still remember a white building
whose walls are made of wood and dream.

.....

A singing hallway, a white maple,

**A threshold ringing underfoot:
Thus my imagination figures
The scenes of boyish joys and dreams.**

While in the “elegies” nature is mediated by memories of childhood, in the miniatures the voice of the earth speaks directly. Constructed on a powerful single image or a cluster of images fused by a single phenomenal field, these poems demonstrate a deliberate simplicity of prosody and diction, an uncomplicated alternate rhyme scheme and subdued alliteration, as if the poet were deliberately struggling to push back the tempting autonomy of language in order to let the physical presence of the world speak for itself.

Historical time does not exist in this realm. Neither does death. Time here is the cyclical, regenerative time of nature and myth, where past and future are contained in the eternal present. Antonych proposes to “praise the beauty of our temporality,” on which the poet must always be drunk. In order to feel this truly human time with every cell of his body, the poet must enter into a state of Dionysian ecstasy:

**Having sold my days to the sun
For a hundred ducats of madness,
I shall stay an enchanted pagan,
A singer of heady Mays.**

One has to become a pagan in order to receive the word from a deity which has nothing in common with the Judaeo-Christian God. This deity bestows language upon the poet like a part of his body:

**He who gave lightness to a doe,
Who gave the bees their golden flowers,
Who gave the pard his steely claw—
Gave me my words, my singing powers.**

The words of poetry are *in* the poet because they are in na-

ture. Antonych urges: "Learn the forest language / From the Bible of foxes and deer."

The motif of the earth language is intensified in Antonych's subsequent collections. Occasionally referring to himself in his poetry by his last name, Antonych thus advances the depersonalization of his lyrical self in order to liberate the prepersonal energies of his being which come out of nature and therefore unite him with all living things: "I hear the noise of comets and the growth of grass. / Antonych is a curly and sad animal too." It is indeed only thus, without the interference of personality, that the poet will open himself sufficiently to listen to the magical speech of the earth. The lyrical "I" of consciousness must stand aside and observe "Antonych" who is a part of nature. For Antonych, as for Heidegger, the poet is not he who speaks but he who listens:

Antonych grows. The grass grows.

The curly poplars are greening.

O bend, bend a little:

Magical words have a meaning.

A different semantics is obviously involved here, a semantics of participation rather than of difference. And to hear these Orphic meanings, both the poet and the reader must lean toward the earth, putting their heads close to the ground, since the human posture seems too haughty for such listening. Antonych grows. But this growth is not upward, not directed toward the blank blue of the sky where there is nothing to grow *into*: "And above is the desert of the sky, human fear, a dead light." The sun Antonych worships is the sun that tills the earth, that makes things grow.

In a complete reversal of the literariness of the first collection, literature and its history must now go through the prepersonal existence of the self. The poet writes: "Antonych was a may bug and lived on cherry trees, / The very trees of which Shevchenko sang." Here Antonych establishes a continuity between the great Ukrainian Romantic and his own poetry. But how? In a literary-natural reincarnation Antonych becomes an insect, living on an object of poetry-na-

ture which was created by another poet of nature almost a century before.

The basic impulse underlying his next two collections, *The Book of the Lion* and *The Green Evangelium*, is the search for total Orphic unification. We see this in the short poem "Podvijnyj koncert" ("A Double Concert") where sound and color fulfill each other to the point of creating a new intangible phenomenon. Characteristically for Antonych, this high blending begins at the level of the mundane—a prosaic still life—effected by the counterpositioning of a drab black radio set and multi-colored bouquet of flowers in the unpredicated first line:

**A radio set and a posy of flowers.
From the black cabinet music flows.
And the souls of the blooms are aglow with a light
That, because of the sounds, is blindingly bright.**

In the longer poems of the two books such fusion is brought about on much deeper levels. Under shells of asphalt and brick, blind, viscous forces of nature move slowly but relentlessly against the paltry structures that man has built. These silent stresses destroy the marble horses of monuments, erode civilizations, confound historical time. But they do not harm those impulses in man which ultimately derive from them. The simple people of the city, the girls who work the oil presses and the young men at the brick kilns, the tired seamstresses and the apprentices of locksmiths—those who know nature because they live below history—join in the slow gyrations of her own time. The poem "Epichnyj ve-chir" ("The Epic Evening"), is an excellent illustration of a fairly large group of poems in this thematic vein.

Keats, like many other Romantics, was shocked by the prodigal extravagance of nature, by its careless cruelty and wanton violence. Such excesses do not shock Antonych. Quite the contrary, it is here that he sees yet another synthesis: the brief progress of man from birth to death is linked with the eternal presence of nature's time. "Again you find

meaning in this changing cycle, / So as to believe in its unchanging essence." The energies of the poet's prepersonal self are linked through the body to the world's past and future. Beyond Shevchenko and his cherry trees, the poet rehearses his earthly existence by taking part in a ritual dance where "Tattooed girls dance on the square of memory." As for the future, Antonych sees it in the very transubstantiation of matter:

**Millenia roll past like walls of lava.
Where we lived nameless trees will grow,
And the coal of my body will bloom like a black flower
As the picks ring out upon my heart.**

The present of the poet extends into two infinities. At the center of this line is his song. How does he know that he exists? In a significant paraphrase of Descartes (significant because it eliminates the *cogito*) Antonych writes: "While I am here / I sing therefore I am."

Antonych's final unity is the marriage of the celestial with the subterranean. Creating symbolic underground vistas, imagining strange underwater and arctic dominions, Antonych seems to probe the very heart of nature where object and dream blend into each other, where things lose their hard outlines and imperceptibly dissolve into elements, into substances, into the deep and mysterious song of matter. For this reason water is the element which most fascinates him. Here is an example of a totally symbolic landscape in which the reflection of the sky *becomes* the bottom of the sea:

**The underwater sun beguiles the eye
With its cold green light in valleys of coral,
Where dead pearls bloom in the curls of drowned
 maidens
And where heavy lions sleep on beds of stars.**

Antonych hears the music of the spheres underground: "The gnarled knots of roots, like musical keys, under the

earth, / Weave themselves into a melody that sounds through stumps of trees.” This music expresses itself in human love and love, in turn, changes blood “into green music.” Addressing his beloved, the poet says: “Green and thirsty like the earth you burn. You are music.” Antonych wants to reach “to the bottom, to the essence, to the root of things, to the womb, / To the center of the word and to the center of the sun!” We grow by leaning. By leaning toward the earth and by going backward in time to the origin of all memory, we learn the true nature of poetic language: “The earth in its orbit turns backward / Into its own youth, into the dream of arch-language.” It is this arch-language, which is earth music, that *forces* the poet to reach upward. In a passage reminiscent of Rilke’s *Duineser Elegien* Antonych writes:

**This low earth music takes into itself each movement
Of ether, grows and slims itself, and rings with light,
And rings the shrouded bell of night until it reaches
The meeting point of the Eternal and of Nothing**

It is thus that Antonych becomes an Orphic poet. The magnificent poem “Dim za zoreju” (“The Home Beyond a Star”) ends with the poet’s lyre—the heritage of Orpheus—proclaiming the unity of transcendence and descent.

As opposed to *The Green Evangelium* the slim volume *Rotaciji (Rotations)* was far from complete when Antonych’s friends brought it out in 1938. It is a random collection of poems on which Antonych was working at the time of his death. This book shows that Antonych was attempting to break away from most of his established patterns and find new fields.

The poems continue the motif of the city-nature relationship. This time, however, the poet refuses to unify these opposites. Notes of bitter irony and even sarcasm, previously absent from Antonych’s world view, prevail here. Such poems as “Balada blakytnoji smerty” (“The Ballad of the Blue Death”) where the orgasms and the death cramps of two suicidal lovers parody the Orphic unity of love and death would be unheard of in the earlier Antonych. In such eerily

beautiful works as “Nazavzhdy” (“Forever”) or “Koncert z Merkurija” (“A Concert from Mercury”) the lyrical element has now become an item in a drab catalogue: “A star in the wallet, a redhead in bed, wet roses” or in the following image: “The grey overcoats dig into their pockets for stars / To pay the girls for five minutes of love.” Such seemingly slight shifts in image construction imply nothing short of a radical change in Antonych’s whole philosophy.

A new Antonych? An examination of Antonych’s earliest manuscripts quickly shows that there is no real break between the earliest and the latest point in this line of his development. Depressing stanzas on the boredom of city workers, desperate stanzas dealing with the metaphysical dread of Nothingness, grotesque stanzas of nightmarish imagery abound in the manuscripts and grow from year to year. Here is an example from a poem entitled “Kaminni strofy” (“Stony stanzas”):

**And my lips will be silent when blue dusk falls,
lifeless and cold, like the stone of statues,
for the void is all there is, death is all there is,
and nothing else is worth giving voice to.**

And here is an example of the poet’s impatience with the helplessness of poetry in the face of evil:

**Never will he grasp the essence of things,
nor uproot evil with his words.**

Although some of these poems are technically perfect, only a few found their way into literary journals. None is included in the collections over which Antonych had control. Whether Antonych was saving them for a future volume, where he intended to perform a dramatic *volte face* for his readers, or whether he was writing them only because they demanded to be written will remain a mystery.

We are certain of one thing. From his second book onward, Antonych was carefully orchestrating every collection by excluding much more material than he included. His selec-

tions were not motivated by quality alone, since some of the poems that were left out are obviously better than many of those which made it into the books. They were motivated by the *persona* that Antonych was carefully constructing—the *persona* of the poet as Orpheus. The haunting poem “The Home Beyond a Star” is its crowning chord. This poem proclaims the unity of earth and horizon, of immediacy and distance, of transcendence and immanence. But above all it proclaims the unity of poetry and the world. While the poet lived on this earth, he lived in his poetry. It is in his poetry that he continues living, far beyond the charming streets of provincial Lviv. “Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch,” Hölderlin said. Poetically man dwells.

Bohdan Rubchak
University of Illinois at Chicago Circle
November 1975

SQUARE OF ANGELS

INVITATION

SPRING

Antonych grows, the grass grows.
The curly poplars are greening.
O bend, bend a little:
Magical words have a meaning.

Spring don't shake us with April rain.
The sky's a broken tureen.
Who pours the transparent leaves?
Can you catch the rain in a sieve?

Strangest mutters riddle the forest.
Stars shoot, the night's gun glows.
Cuckoos on alders peck apart the moon.
Antonych grows, the grass grows.

GREEN BIBLE

Springtime is a carousel
driven by white stallions.
The moon is a mountain tulip.
An orchard hides the town.

Ashtree table. A Slavic jar
fills with delicious sun.
You bow to the earth, that green star,
from which this dream has grown.

MEETING

A boy grows like a raspberry bush.
Horseshoes ring on the road.
Swallows register the dawn
in birds' ledger code.

I hitch the sun to my cart,
and ride to meet the spring.
Song of the April days—
X's of snow on the wing.

ON THE ROAD

Threads of wind braid the morning
which leaps out of the creek
like a gypsy boy, sunburned,
shaking with laughter.

Snake creek with its singing bed,
wind splashing up in waves.
The day deposits the moon in a ravine,
like a coin for safe keeping.

Robin songs peck the hazel.
The copper road rings out.
Barefoot and laughing, the boy
carries the sun on his back.

THE CUPS

Green ashtree, sickle, horses.
A boy glued to a windowpane.
Spring pours into silver cups,
some crimson, some transparent.

And the boy wants very badly
the key to the gates of spring.
Suddenly the sun jumps off the grass
like a scared pony.

THE POPLARS

Two lonely poplars bend down
reading the ABC of spring.
Green myself, I pray to the green earth,
and feel the grassblade's sting.

Mossy-backed, the learned fox croons
poetics through his bristles.
The day draws back a poplar bow.
An arrow of sun whistles.

A VILLAGE

Cows are praying to the sun,
red as a newborn poppy.
A thin poplar dwindles in mist,
lifts upward like a heron.

The moon is unharnessed from the cart.
Wide hempen sky.
Windy and endless distances.
Forest braided by blue smoke.

Maple leaves drift down the mountain.
Rooster, cradle, and loom.
The day pours down the canyon
like fresh milk into a bowl.

CHRISTMAS

God is born on a sleigh
in Dukla, Lemko town.
The Lemkos come in hats,
bring him a full moon.

Night in drifting snow
whirls about the huts.
On the palm of Mary,
moon—a golden nut.

A FOREST

Learn the forest language
from the book of foxes and deer.
The moon rises over the forest
to write elegies on stumps.

Streams rinse the silvered silence,
the grass is sheathed in dew.
Let the night write plain words
in the book of the forest.

STORM

The storm is coming. Gray alders
huddle, subdue their fear.
Gasping for breath,
the red sky begs for mercy.

The wind shoots up like a pillar.
Stampeding lightnings glare,
forcing the poppies to squint
and kneel in fear.

The wind sobs like a clarinet.
The fox, astronomer of night,
howls as thunder tears
the horsecloth sky to shreds.

Beyond the storm the distances
dig tunnels through the clouds.
Like whetted swords, my words
clash with lightning bolts.

WONDER

Dawn. Daylight strips the stars
like brass buttons off the fog's
overcoat, scattering them like seeds
into groves for nightingales.

The valley sleeps in sheets of silence,
where the moss of darkness grows
till a melon, trailing seeds of light,
rolls over a burdock leaf of dawn.

FIRST CHAPTER

SIGN OF THE LION

Kingdom of dead flowers, the desert sleeps
in a red-gold shirt of sands.

The sow-thistle, thorny predator,
sun's ecstasy and racing of lightnings.

Live candles breathe over earth's tomb,
rough weeds flare into a burning bush.
Like branches parted by the hands
the depths of faith will open.

You see eternity—opal skies—
the roar of molten red rivers.
The Lion rules from beyond the hills of time,
sign of monarchs, warriors, and prophets.

The sun darkens behind a cloud of birds
crowned by cerulean laurels,
and thunder's golden signature
will remain in the desert's pages.

The thunder's autograph in the Book of Lion
is written by the winds of Sinai,
from high peaks which wear
the garland of god's lightning.

Wind from Sinai, smash the open tablets!
Without you I am no more than an empty jar.
The day stands watch over the prophetic springs,
and night's like the black spine of a Bible.

ST. GEORGE SQUARE*

Coal-black midnight.
A shadow walks on St. George Square.
Streaks twirl like hoops
over walls of glittering stone.
The moon is a magic ring
set in night's black headband.
Shivering in silver light
beneath the sky's icy ceiling
you can no longer tell
if it's apparitional or real.
It is a tower of music and glass.
It is a fire that warms nothing.
It is the treacherous architecture of dream.
It is the last outpost of the world.
Coal-black midnight
shakes sleep's ashes over your eyes,
then, with silver streaks, carves
the sky glued to the earth.

Midnight chimes on St. George Square.
The cross over the cupola
is an enormous key.
The unknown future rises
like a dejected shadow.

*St. George is an 18th century cathedral in Lviv, a symbol of spiritual/cultural life and freedom for the Western Ukraine.

SQUARE OF ANGELS

For two hundred years on the theatre square,
the marble tenor has sung for the stars.

When night shuts down the spindles,
smoke weaves around the tired girls

on their way home from a workbench
lost in headspinning reveries
of dashing tenors who caress them
and rinse their throat with arias.

The city's host, the lion who guards the arsenal,
stretches and pads through the desert of squares.
The heroes sleep. Songs swell in whorehouses.
and the rain rings out freedom on the prison roof.

On the square of copper angels,
when the twilight spills red ink,
the historian, anchored to a pedestal,
dips his quill into the inkwell.

SPRING

Spring erupts, and joyful chimneysweeps
perch on the roofs like goldfinches.
Infatuated with a traffic cop, a girl sings
on the square where he stole her heart.
The conductor of wavy cars
holds a baton of sun in his white glove.

Spring erupts: green balloons,
like a bouquet of childhood dreams,
jump out of the hands of a boy
who gulps down his tears in silence.

Frightened of the blackened chimneysweeps,
the children hold on tight to their buttons.
The day shakes out green shadows,
and the red patches of peonies
bow down.

Not the shaggy rays, not flowers
spilled out of bed by feet,
but the dust of butterflies
floating into puddles of sun
where they wash their wings
until a golden soot covers them.

A ten-cent russet balloon
wants to elope with the goldfinches
and go to the sun,
and praise the wisdom of the wind.

Clutching an armful of wet roses, the girl's song
takes on the sadness of the cuckoo bird,
and the carousel of squares reels
to the rhythm of the cop's baton.

BALLAD OF AN ALLEY

Where the night wrings its blue hands
and calls for help without hope,
the drunkards and shadows reel
by the lame lantern.

Bending like a blue flower
the lantern withers—the world's unreal—
only mice are left to lead
drunken shoemakers to the moon.

In a bar with stars and bells
skimmers and chimneysweeps
sing hymns over their glasses
in praise of the voluptuary night.

The lame asthma, lady of sadness,
leans her spongy face over
the unstitchers of safes, and crumbles
the false card in her fingers.

Leaning dreamily on elbows
the lovers of shady business
float on blankets of smoke and noise
as stars flutter in the violin's box.

In lairs of chimeras, loose talk and crime,
to the tears of candles—trembling birds—
parakeets read fortunes to skimmers,
words sink into the tables like nails.

Tears pour down the cheeks of cutthroats
who confess their sins to whiskey,
and the forgotten songs crawl
into their hoarse throats like spiders

Glasses migrate like birds
over the tables, under the ceiling,
beating their glassy wings,
ringing over the bush of smoke
that chokes the bar.

The last star withers,
the moon follows and vanishes,
but in the broken skull of the bar
the choir of chimneysweeps and skimmers
clucks and flutters till dawn.

RITUAL DANCE

Tattooed girls dance on the square of memory.
The hot sand melts like red tar under their feet.
Drawn centuries back, I carve rhythms on the sun's drum,
Two sticks, bird's wings, drunken tailspin.
Burst into farewell song, I burn out in an incense cloud.
The bracken covers the girls's steps like palms of earth.
The girls, their copper faces pressed by the sun,
reappear on windless hills.
Beyond riverbanks where green night sleeps,
beyond the seven hills, the seven seas, within the ritual land,
red buffalo crop the underground pastures,
where, like a disk of ebony, a dead sun glows.

MONUMENTAL LANDSCAPE

Red cubic houses, round marketplaces, squares.
Homo Sapiens, lay out our cities with a compass!
Block on block, window over window.
The sun, like a statue, mounts the brass stairs.

Static pools are mirrors framed by red dust.
The sky drowns in quicksilver.
Marble horses graze on blades of fire.
Stone angels blow their trumpets.

Heroes step off pedestals, trombones blare.
The sun rides a cannon.
Lions, flags on fire, parade through town,
as a marble commander spurs his stallion.

A LULLABY

Knots of roads close around villages' necks.
Again we dream the dreams of history.
Days perch on huts, spread wings of wind.
And cradles creak: Sleep, my son,
I'll blanket you with myrtle leaves; sleep
and stay clear of the wolf, my boy; sleep...
On the march, the infantry chants:
"Periwinkle, don't creep in my path!"
The lieutenant's berserk: Your damned
tongue should be tied in knots!
Sun beats on the road's yellow drumskin.
Rays drum on the patchy red pools.
The singing patrol swells the evening,
arms a-glitter in spilled-over light.
Then it's dark. Planes, like hair ribbons,
clasp the strands of the galaxy.
Nothing disturbs the flowering sleep
of the baby, nobody notices: a star
hovers over the cradle of the New Man.

TO THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN EXECUTED

It's true:

the rain can wash the blood off a stone.
The moon's red kerchief can wipe it off,
but your names, darker than roses,
burn, unweathered, on gravestones in our memory.

You fought stubbornly, dreamt, endured,
loved serenity as we made love,
and your eyes burned into eternity
when a star-white bullet lodged in your heart.

FIRST LYRICAL INTERMEZZO

VIOLETS

Violets and the ears of telephone
enclose you in radiant space.
The reddening moon sponges
the day off your cheeks.

The ebony snail is a dark shell.
The ear of night is a black funnel.
Its thick smells choke you
like fingers on a clarinet's throat.

Dawn scatters tears
into the eyes of violets.

Blessed palms of silence extend
over our eternal perishing.

THREE STANZAS FROM A NOTEBOOK

The telephone receiver sings like a bird,
like a blackbird in the copper branches.
Deserted at once by your lover and friend
which will you choose, suffering or revenge?

O flower of sound glowing in black silk!
The music hits your face like a vulture.
Time drains our capacity for joy.
I'm a miser, jealous of my goods.

Now you can change stars into words,
now you can release your inner fire.
Experience touches you in the end:
it's a hard life; art is not instructive.

HOUSES

The houses grow like mushrooms
under the rootless wind.
Rain beats on the rooftiles.
My village, are you still serene?

After old battles have passed
in rusty forests foxes howl.
Wars smolder in our memory.
Overhead, a comet threatens.

Girls wash the sun in a stream.
A row of alder trees approaches.
Year after year they plow and sow,
but rulers still squash the rebels.

A GRAIN OF BARLEY

I was a fool to sell my soul
for a tiny grain of barley.
Fish have streams, birds have nests.
I am homeless. I have no star.

Fish in the streams, stars in heaven,
and I'm in my room with the flies.
The silver eyes of fish—transparent glass.
Night—a motionless kettle.

You who feed the fish and insect,
and give the comet its light,
guard from fear and eternity
the fish, the insect, the poet.

SECOND CHAPTER

THE HOUSE BEYOND THE STAR

The anthem of vegetation streams through my veins,
and my heart rests easy, as after the seventh drink.
I'm a guest on earth, soon I'll be going
to pray to other galaxies, to wait for other dawns.

Sword buds swell to a yeasty foam
and lavish sticky kisses on the plants.
Night filters spring through the funnels of violets,
and ladles smells into the cups of flowers.

The spent night throbs in the heat.
Bushes, roots, leaves—all cramped in splendor—
seeds exploding—the moon goring the earth—
till daylight swallows it like a dragon.

Knotty, sap-swelled, the roots bore through the skulls
of the dead, life drills through lairs of death,
and two great oaks, like angry gods,
collide and falter into a stubborn embrace.

Annunciation of dawn. The sun grinds the grain of night.
Circles of light whirl like spindles.
It's time to break the seventh glass of joy,
it's time to drink the wisdom of green springs.

I'm running out of life, not much is left to me,
so I've become a student of the rushing sap.
This is not my house. Perhaps it stands beyond the star.
But as long as I'm here: I sing therefore I am.

Streams gargle under earth's crust.
The violet horizon hides behind the dawn.
I'll depart with my palms on the lyre of the rising sun,
singing the praise of vegetative storms.

SONG ON THE INDESTRUCTIBILITY OF MATTER

Lassoed by wind, blanketed by sky,
I drag myself into the bushes and curl up
under the bracken flower like a wise fox,
where I cool and harden into white stone.

The flood of green rivers rises,
an infinity of leaves, days, and comets.
The flood will drown me. The white sun will crush me.
My body will turn into coal, my song into ash.

Millenia unroll like walls of lava.
Where we lived nameless trees will grow,
and the coal of my body will bloom like a black flower
as the picks ring out upon my heart.

SIX STANZAS OF MYSTICISM

Night falls like a cloak from Christ's shoulders.
Light pours from heaven's pierced side.
Above, the wounds of thorny stars are burning.
Below, fog washes the feet of the dawn.

As if born for the first time, the earth
rolls out from the foggy mountains.
I christen the smallest flowers;
heedless, I kill them with new names.

Every petal is reborn ten times,
shines nameless under the dew.
Diamond of music, banquet of light, the sun
doubles the world, and for seeing eyes,

redoubles it, multiplies by hundreds
till I learn:—it's not for me to catch
in a cage of words. I lie on a green bed,
hungry for earth's apple. Light fills me.

Dew flows over the hyssop, golden foam,
and sacred streams pour into the body.
At the unmoving bottom, light
peers up through silver, carrying a sound:

Only a sudden joy uncages essence
and joins my soul with the ecstatic world.
Hammered to the cross of earth, heaven sighs;
stigmata of light shine on my palms.

DUET

Slowly we turn to earth as to a cradle,
tied by the green knots of herbs—two captive chords.
The sun's ax cuts into an oakstump,
moss music, kind wind, proud oak.

Day ferries warm bodies that meld
like two dreams, two flowers.
Warmed by the furry moss you'll exchange stars
for whispers, blood for green music. The sky chimes.

The wind sleeps beyond horizons, and our faithful stars,
our fates, wait in the sea's suburbs,
wait for the earth to make them real. We'll shuck
the superfluous and carry ecstasy to the stars.

Blood's inspiration hurts. Eyebrows cross like arrows,
and the wall of melody above is like an echo,
like winged wind. The stars guard our destiny.
Green and thirsty like earth, you burn. You are music.

EPIC EVENING

Under the banner of copper-leafed beech trees,
where the sun rolls down like a plate of fire,
sunburned boys buzz like bees in meadows,
dust flies out of rusty brick kilns.

On the surf of grass in green smoke,
cows bob like swollen logs,
stars clang on stars overhead,
and the living stream bellows underfoot.

The stream that pipes blue smoke through flowers
make's fruit thirst for its future ripeness,
germinates seeds in the fertile damp.
The evil eye of the hairy men burns
the tanned, wide-hipped, big-breasted girls,
lured by the hunchbacked angel of the forest...

The zodiacs, wrapped in sky's parchment,
orbit nightly like runes,
and our superstitions burn like poppies.

In the blizzard of splendor,
extinguished stars cover the eyes with light,
red roosters call out the blue moon.

Thus religion and social rule is born.
Gods and creatures. Cities and towns.
The epic evening has woven its spell.
The blue banner of infinity flutters.

TO THE BEINGS FROM A GREEN STAR

The laws of Bios are the same for all:

birth, struggle, death.

What will remain of me—the ashes of my words.

What will remain of us—the grass growing from our bones.

Foxes, lions, swallows, humans,

the worms and leaves of a green star

are as subject to the laws of matter

as the sky above is blue.

I understand you, plants and animals,

I hear the noise of comets and the growth of grass.

Antonych is a curly sad animal too.

BULLS AND BEECH TREES

The river of vegetation echoes over the earth,
over phalanxes of trees
like walls of fog. Green springs erupt over the stumps,
the yellow flame of honey in barrels of rotten tree trunks,
the bark's rusty fire, the thick strawberry patches.

Again the wind wheels the night down the bald hills
into a deep well of light where the shadows of fields whiten,
the empty stream calls back the memory of waters
and the earth threatens bad stars with the
fists of beech trees.

Stumps jut out like rotten teeth.
Day rises. A star begs her sister the holly tree
for a drop of blood, turns pale, and falls like an empty word
as dawn lifts up the bushes of fog.

Stumps of bodies sleep in a thicket of stars and cravings,
their souls sleep like a burnt-out fire, and a beech tree
jumps at a beech tree like bulls in cave paintings
when the sun's red cape makes their blood boil.

POLARIA

Sea froze in a chalice carved of ice.
The golden-lipped moon—a mystic in blues.
Polar angels rock God's waters.
Beasts howl from desire and thirst.

Men, rusty worms, have not yet crawled there.
Foxes lift the russet sky on their backs.
Whales' flukes wash the stars; like arrows
in a bow, white birds hang suspended.

When Virgo of the Zodiac combs her black braids
and the hunchbacked Aquarius calls shadows out of chasms,
the eggshell of earth buckles and wails:
the souls of mammoths trudge the red snow.

PRAYER FOR THE SOULS OF DROWNED GIRLS

We are the pariahs who use women.
We change lovers like seashells.
Now let us pray for the souls of our victims,
who made us drunk on love potions.

The sleazy moon is their wedding ring.
It scuttles in the shallows where the sun grows cold,
like an extinguished stone.
Our underwater dancers, our onetime sisters,
embrace the dolphins with their dead arms.

O you who cover the seabed with stars and moss,
don't pluck the girls off their seashells and lock
them into heaven; rather, bless them with forgetfulness:
change the souls of drowned girls into coral.

SECOND LYRICAL INTERMEZZO

TO THE BOTTOM

I hewed a poem from silver,
a poem like a pine tree.
Spring stopped and paled,
astonished, like a girl.

Sing, ax, carpenter's madness,
hew me songs, more songs!
To the bottom, the word's root,
I drive the singing blade.

SUNSET

Shaggy clouds graze the forest
like sheep shepherded by the moon.
Tended by boys and idlers,
the girls grow up like grass.

Oxen gore the sun.
It drips rusty blood.
Hayfields redden in the distance.
The wound of sunset burns.

MARRIAGE RITE

The rolling of the marriage drum,
the poplars bowing like peacocks,
the moon's tendrils clinging
to the braid of my lovely bride.

Why are the violins silent?
Why is your hand trembling?
The sparks kicked up by the horses
cling like moss to their hooves.

HORSESHOES

Spring comes in on a hundred carts,
the violin bows bend like bows.
Rain is sifted out of the clouds,
and the deacon lights the candles.

But we are not yet ready to ride,
though the contrabass keeps urging us on.
Let the blacksmiths forge
our horseshoes from the moon.

CARP

Carp chant and cut the mirror of water,
wind lifts up the roofs like eyelids.
A silver birch preaches to a sunfish.
It's all unreal, inconceivable.
Don't believe it!

The real is what I spied in the morning mist
where the river washes the feet of the forest,
where the wind, shy as a young boy,
undresses the girls for bathing.

A BIRDCHERY POEM

The night, warmed by flowers,
burns in birdcherry fog.
In the opened book on my desk
the letters shine like stars.

Wild leaves grow over the desk.
My chair and I become a bush.
In birdcherry books I read
the green wisdom of the woods.

THE MARKETPLACE

My brother, tailor of children's dreams,
stitched the earth up to the sky.
Kerchiefs—many colored combs—
burn on peddlers' heads.

Carpenters' songs, rumbling drums!
I'll tell you a secret:
In the marketplace in Horlycya
they're selling red suns.

WINTER

Tailors are cutting furs for foxes,
winds are howling for storms.
Lord, when snowdrifts arrive, guard
the lairs of animals and men.

Winter lodges in windmills,
grinding wheat into crystal snow.
The glittering night combats the storm,
piling clear skies on the towns.

THIRD CHAPTER

FOREVER

Gray overcoats sink into wine-colored streets.
The girls, as in faded paintings, are blurred by shadows.
Golden tea in a glass. The urge to lean
out a window and gulp blue coolness,
and witness the sad star
throwing a parting kiss to her falling sister,
who will never shine

in a constellation.

Then night
washes the city poppies of melancholy.

His humped back wrapped in the sky's blue fur,
the chauffeur rocks in a drowsy limousine.

The lame streetlight—a flower in ashes of snow—
pours green suet into the jar of night.

Dark and winding stairs, slashed overcoat, the
last drop of laughter,
and the moon—demonic white bird of prey—
and the silky bullet of cutthroats sleepwalking
through deep shadows
will strike your heart like a chord,
will strike it, kiss it, and shut
your eyelids like the last sister.

Gray overcoats dig into their pockets for stars
to pay the girls for five minutes of love.

His humped back wrapped in the sky's blue fur,
the chauffeur rocks in a drowsy limousine.

THE END OF THE WORLD

Like a moth-eaten blanket,
a flock of ravens
settles on the cubes of roofs.
The moon raises her blue hands

like a prophet
to curse the city
for the treachery, cupidity, and crime,
that fester in its lairs.

Reprobates and harpagons
sing psalms of atonement.
Cannibals pull the bellropes.
Hetaeras neigh like mares.

Drawing back loamy sheets
lusesas rise from the dead,
and the victims of proud Sardanapalus
sharpen their red tongues.

Heaven yawns. Twelve winds
rain down, twelve arrows.
Ravines pry at earth's jaws,
and the sun's wheel splinters.

The underground river roars.
A hail of bells batters the walls.
The earth cracks open and the city sinks
to the beating of megaphones and wings.

CONCERT FROM MERCURY

Night drops the lid of a box over the anthill city.
In the valleys with no memory, bitter almonds
of sleep blossom.
Stars fall on the heads of burghers like leaves.
Doubled over with bellyaches, the gluttoned mob
drifts off to sleep.

A weedpatch of roofs with singing herbs, copper
bush of antennae.
The lovers are twining their limbs like hopvines.
Lamps like red crabs creep over the furniture and walls.
The body turns cold, the soul goes bad, silvered with mold.

A star in his wallet, a redhead in bed, wet roses,
dusty feather quilt, silverfish grinding at the books.
And at the radio station the inspired broadcaster
plays a cold disk of moon on the gramophone of night.

GRAVEYARD OF CARS

In a graveyard of machines, dead cars sleep like hunks
of fractured stars,
red flowers of mold mark time rusted into metal,
only the sun's unknown nucleus still rocks like
an eternal truth
we can't grasp, like the blue essence of benzine.

Like jackals, human scavengers rend the metal corpses,
merchandising their poverty and greed in the marketplace,
and in gas-colored nights the metal corpses are beds of love
for cripples and whores, funnels for the fumes
of the spiked stars.

As we dig the bones of pangolins out from beneath
the scored rock,
so men will unearth the metal bones of our cities.
Girls wearing nameless flowers, palmtrees growing
bread, green rue,
rising cities with sky-blue squares where fire-lions cavort,
and the edgy shadows, shaky phantoms,
get up from under the earth, squares, grass.

Metropolis,
drop the palms of your brick walls over the eyes of
these cars forever.

THE TRUMPETS OF THE LAST JUDGMENT

Tall buildings hibernate like tired beasts.
Cartographers etch chalk stars on the map of heaven.
Raindrops fly through violet lamplight like winged sand,
and the crescent moon curls up on my couch.

Fish rust in pools, coal wilts, roses blacken.
Merchants hoard live pin-ups, poets and convicts lock hands.
The police band moans through melancholy tubas
as city-gods ring up stars, souls, and dimes.

Whales and tritons swarm under the pavement.
In the scummy deeps of basements there are
brackish sand dunes,
jutting reefs, sunken comets, and bell-clappers.
But when will the new flood drown this stone jungle?

THIRD LYRICAL INTERMEZZO

A TEAPOT

Opened book, lamp, a lost moth—
I am bitten by the rust of thoughts.
The shadows on a wall
knot like a dense thicket.

The big-bellied teapot purrs,
the clock hums like a bee.
How sweet is this lure of the strange,
but the word stays heavy as stone.

Tin-plate sky, leaden moon,
the remaining ashes of night.
If this is all that is the world,
where can I seek the unknown?

MORNING IN THE CITY

Don't drink water after eating fat. Brush your
teeth before bed.

Hereditary wisdom never withers!
The brightly painted lairs of the best families:
birdy, doggy, today's standard for lovemaking.

Married couples sleep like stumps in the velvet night.
That coffin of love—the bed. The sour intoxication—gout.
These are the beings that swing on the scales
of boredom, as the city unfurls its flags of dawn.

They gorge themselves, they practice intercourse,
pour paraffin oil into their wasted stomach,
and sleep furs their fleshy bodies
till morning strikes the windowpanes.

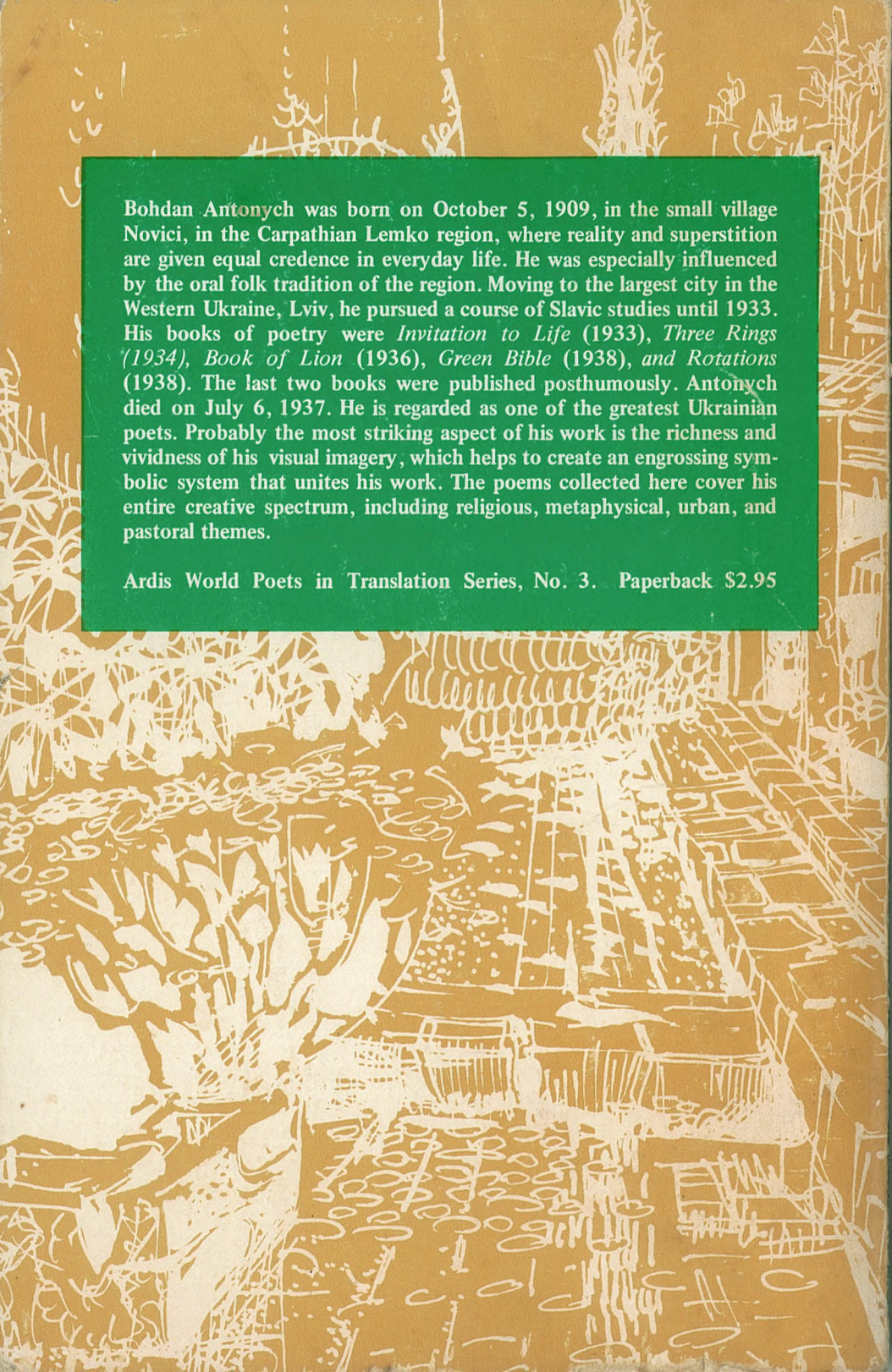
Throwing off its blanket of shadows,
the day unscrews the sun's faucet
and rivers of light flood the city
as they flow between the banks of streets.

BITTER NIGHT

People fall asleep in the black city.
They grow their dreams under quilts.
But this endless, crowded world,
is blind to your visions.

Hoarse voices falter, subside.
Silent wings span the darkness.
The midnight scatters poppy-seeds.
The turmoil is all inside.

And here this slender dark-eyed boy
buries his head in his hands.
Never will he grasp the essence of things,
nor uproot evil with his words.



Bohdan Antonych was born on October 5, 1909, in the small village Novici, in the Carpathian Lemko region, where reality and superstition are given equal credence in everyday life. He was especially influenced by the oral folk tradition of the region. Moving to the largest city in the Western Ukraine, Lviv, he pursued a course of Slavic studies until 1933. His books of poetry were *Invitation to Life* (1933), *Three Rings* (1934), *Book of Lion* (1936), *Green Bible* (1938), and *Rotations* (1938). The last two books were published posthumously. Antonych died on July 6, 1937. He is regarded as one of the greatest Ukrainian poets. Probably the most striking aspect of his work is the richness and vividness of his visual imagery, which helps to create an engrossing symbolic system that unites his work. The poems collected here cover his entire creative spectrum, including religious, metaphysical, urban, and pastoral themes.

Ardis World Poets in Translation Series, No. 3. Paperback \$2.95