

JAMES LARSON
LEOARD NATHAN

Songs of Something Else

Selected Poems of Gunnar Ekelof



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Songs of Something Else

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SONGS • OF

SOMETHING • ELSE

Selected Poems of

GUNNAR • EKELOF

Translated by

LEONARD NATHAN
and
JAMES LARSON

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>A Guide to Pronunciation</i>	xiii
Introduction	3
<i>1938</i>	
Elegi	24
Elegy	25
Minnas	26
1 På bron	26
2 (Med mast av en gårdsgårdsstör)	28
To Remember	27
1 On the bridge	27
2 (With a stake for a mast)	29
Station	30
Station	31
Stäppskiss	30
Sketch from the steppes	31
Coda	32
Coda	33
<i>1941-1951</i>	
Tag och skriv 1-5	36
Write It Down 1-5	37
1 Om livet	36
1 Of life	37
3 Du säger "jag"	36
3 You say "I"	37
4 Den skönhet	38
4 The beauty	39
5 Jungfruns ängslan	42
5 The virgin's fear	43

En värld är varje människa	44
Everyone is a world	45
Elegi	46
Elegy	47
Den som inte hoppas	48
He who does not hope	49
Elegi	50
Elegy	51
Absentia animi	52
Absentia animi	53
Ni krymplingar	58
You cripples	59
Anm. till Dedikation	60
A remark on "Dedication"	61
Till Dedikation	62
To "Dedication"	63
Enquête	64
Interview	65
Non Serviam	66
Non Serviam	67
Marsch	68
March	69
Det är trappstegen	70
There are the steps	71
Gymnosofisten	70
The gymnosophist	71
Eufori	74
Euphoria	75
Melancholia	76
Melancholia	77
En dröm (<i>verklig</i>)	78
A dream (<i>real</i>)	79
En verklighet (<i>drömd</i>)	82
A reality (<i>dreamed</i>)	83
En ros från Allmag (<i>ballad</i>)	86
A rose from Allmag (<i>ballad</i>)	87

Gobeläng	94
Gobelins	95
Dordogne	94
Dordogne	95
Råga Mälkos	96
Råga Mälkos	97
Diana	100
Diana	101
Vandrare	100
Wanderer	101
Jag hörde vildgäss	102
I heard wild geese	103
Rondel	104
Rondel	105
Målat på näverbiter	106
Painted on birchbark	107
Ordspråksbonad	106
Sampler	107
Våren	106
Spring	107
Doftminne	108
Memory of a scent	109
Envoi	108
Envoi	109

1955-1959

Som ankelringar	112
Like ankle-rings	113
Ensam i natten	112
Alone at night	113
Sommarens önsknigar	114
The summer's wishes	115
Ensamhet	114
Solitude	115
Tala med gudar	116
To speak with gods	117

Jag skriver till dig	116
I write to you	117
För vem som helst	120
For anyone at all	121
Jag talar till dig	120
I'm talking to you	121
När jag ser dessa ansikten	122
When I see these faces	123
Jag går in i ditt landskap	124
I go into your landscape	125
Att ligga på natten	126
To lie by night	127
Varför sjunger du min fågel	126
Why do you sing my bird	127
När man kommit så långt	128
When you have come as far	129
Telefontrådarna	128
Telephone lines	129
Vem kommer	130
Who is coming	131
Frågar du	130
If you ask	131
Katter	132
Cats	133
Ex Ponto	132
Ex Ponto	133
Så främmande	138
So alien	139
Ingenstädes	138
Nowhere	139
Här på stranden	140
Here on the shore	141
Dessa blanka vatten	140
These shining waters	141
Arsinoë	142
Arsinoë	143

Men på en annan ort	142
But in another place	143
Kinesiskt broderi	144
Chinese embroidery	145
Vinrankan	144
The grapevine	145
Julafton 1954	146
Christmas Eve 1954	147
Sedan länge vilar	150
From long ago	151
Sirenernas kust	150
The sirens' coast	151
Torna Zeffiro	152
Torna Zeffiro	153
Grekland	156
Greece	157
Jag ser mig om	158
I look around	159
<i>Notes to Poems</i>	161

Preface

All serious translators of poetry work in the knowledge that they can bring over, at best, only a portion of the quality of the original. They are devoutly grateful when that portion has kept faith with the primary text and yet reads like poetry in the receiving language. Wallace Stevens wrote that the “moon follows the sun like a French / Translation of a Russian poem.” The translators of this work hope that they have been such a moon to such a sun.

Their light was no little strengthened by the aid and attention of Christina McKnight, John Lindow, and Robert Goldman. To them go our warm thanks and the confession that any miscues in the following belong solely to the translators themselves, who also must thank Albert Bonniers Förlag for their kind permission to let us use the work of the poet.

The translators owe a special debt of gratitude to Mrs. Gunnar Ekelöf whose meticulous reading of our text and many good suggestions for improving it went far beyond what we had any right to expect. Without her help—and her approval—we would have felt our job still somehow incomplete.

Berkeley, California
March 23, 1981

A Note on Swedish Pronunciation

From the foreigner's point of view, Swedish is most distinguished (and complicated) by its prosody, with relatively free placement of accent, three degrees of stress, and phonemic word tone. Interacting with stress and tone is Swedish intonation, which is as difficult for foreigners to master as it is for Swedes to eliminate from their English. Further, the vowel system is complex; the consonant system contains much that is foreign not just to English but to other European languages; and vowel and consonant lengths are strictly measured.

It is not easy to give information on the prosody and phonology of a language by means of the printed word. The best one can hope is that a reader who applies the following will be closer to an approximation of Swedish pronunciation than one who does not.

To approach Swedish intonation and stress patterns, try to stress syllables more equally than in North American English, placing some sort of tonal emphasis on unstressed syllables (in Swedish the primary stress usually falls on the first syllable). Compare the pronunciation of *mailman* and *male man* or *codex* and *code X*; the intonational pattern of the second member of each pair is closer to Swedish than the first.

Roughly speaking, the vowels *a*, *e*, and *i* have "European" pronunciation. The *o* is ordinarily pronounced like *oo* in food; *u* is similar, but the lips are pursed. The *y* is pronounced farther forward in the mouth, with the lips pursed almost to a point. These sounds are difficult for foreigners. The three additional vowels are *å* (pronounced *oh*), *ä* (as in rat), and *ö* (as in French *peu* or German *öl*).

Most consonants are similar to their counterparts in North American English. However, *l* is more "liquid" and *r* is trilled. *c* and *z* are pronounced as *s*, and *w* as *v*; all three are limited to names. *j* is pronounced like English *y*, and so are initial *dj*, *hj*, *lj*, and *gj* before *e*, *i*, *y*, *ä*, *ö*. After *l* and *r*, *g* is like a weak *y* (and Swedish *berg* sounds rather like the name *Barry*). Before *e*, *i*, *y*, *ä*, and *ö*, *k* sounds some-

thing like English *ch*; the same sound is also spelled with *tj* and *kj*. A particularly difficult sound, rather like English *sh*, is represented by *sj*, *skj*, *stj*, and by *sk* before *e*, *i*, *y*, *ä*, *ö*.

In syllables where two (or more) consonants or a double consonant follow the vowel, the vowel is short. Other vowels are generally long. Although one risks being misunderstood if one ignores this distinction, it is not crucial to reading aloud.

Songs of Something Else

Introduction

Gunnar Ekelöf published his first book of poetry in 1933, a second in 1934, and from then until his death in 1968, a new collection appeared regularly every two or three years. The writing of lyric poetry occupied every day of his adult life. In time Ekelöf became a kind of lyrical animal, continuously at work piecing sounds and meanings into lines and lines into poems. Toward the end he often spoke of abandoning poetry and complained of nervous exhaustion, but during the months of his final illness he continued to note and rework his thoughts and dreams. Finally, it was not poems he was making—he was creating himself; his poems, he said, were his way to himself.

1. Barbarus hic ego sum.

Among fellow poets in Stockholm and Uppsala Ekelöf established himself as a leader of literary opinion in the early thirties, a position he never forfeited. His reputation with the greater public was troubled and for a long time lagged far behind his achievement. He was considered an enigmatic and learned poet, although it proved rather difficult to specify the nature of his learning; at different times during his career he was called a surrealist, a mystic, an eclectic, and a visionary. It was only with Bonniers' publication of the collected *Dikter* in 1965 that Ekelöf was generally recognized as a poet *sui generis* who belonged to the first rank of Scandinavian lyricists in this century.

The story of Ekelöf's career properly begins with his stay in Paris in 1930. There, in the general artistic renewal and rebirth going on around him, he found a social parallel to his personal feelings of revolt. At that time he had written only a few poems, and he decided to begin at the beginning with words. "It was clear to me," he wrote, "that I knew nothing. I took words one by one and tried to determine their values. I placed word beside word and succeeded after a

great deal of trouble in piecing together a complete sentence—naturally, with no meaning in it—but composed of word values. It was the meaning underneath I was looking for—a kind of *Alchimie du Verbe*.” When he passed around the results of these experiments a couple of years later, a friend told him he was a surrealist. Glad on the whole to be anything at all, Ekelöf read a great many surrealists, translated some of them, and borrowed a few of their feathers. Later, he regarded the surrealist element in his early books as no more than a tribute exacted by the period, and he rejected surrealist methods as monotonous and dogmatic. He had in general no use for the academic concept of influence, but he believed very profoundly in what he called identification, finding himself in the works of others, and it is clear that in these early books he was identifying with the members of his personal canon, some surrealists, certainly, but also Hölderlin and Rimbaud, Stagnelius and Södergran. The surrealist label stuck, though; as late as 1940 Ekelöf was still being treated as a purveyor of Parisian fashion.

The same story was repeated at every turning-point in Ekelöf's career. In the late thirties Ekelöf was at work on a radical and highly abstract approach to human subjectivity. His friend Erik Lindegren immediately related the project to Eliot's work-in-progress. Ekelöf considered both the problem and the approach entirely his own; at that time he had not read any part of *Four Quartets*. “Doubtless,” he said, “Eliot is going to be set before me all my life. . . . The fact remains that what I have to say is entirely different from what Eliot says in his poems.” Ekelöf later translated “East Coker” and learned to value Eliot as a poet, but the degree of his identification with Eliot was certainly much exaggerated by Swedish critics during the forties and fifties. The two verse styles were, temporarily, somewhat alike; the conclusions of the two poets could not have been more different.

Many of Ekelöf's difficulties with critics and the public were inherent in his conception of poetry. He once compared a good lyric poem to a bit of radioactive matter. The capacity to give off energy, he said, was less a matter of perceived content than of relations among particles making up the content, the nuances and dissonances set up