

With the Breath the Earth Exhales: Poems by Antonio Machado

Translated from Spanish by Richard Greene



National Translation Month continues today with a selection of **poems by Antonio Machado translated from Spanish by Richard Greene**. Antonio Machado, who ranks among Spain's greatest 20th-century poets, is unfortunately not very well known to U.S. readers. In these poems, he invites us into the landscape of Spain where he shares his world of old griefs and spiritual symbols—always leaving us wanting more.

We'd love to hear from you! Follow us on Twitter [@TranslateMonth](#), tag us [@TranslateMonth](#) and share using [#TranslationMonth](#), join our mailing list, submit a translation month event, or like our [Facebook](#) page. We hope you'll join us and celebrate your favorite translations of writers from all over the world throughout September.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

Poems by Antonio Machado
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An Old and Distinguished Gentleman

I've seen you, in the ashen park
the poets love
for weeping, like a noble shadow
stray, enveloped in your long frock coat.

The courteous manner,
formed so many years ago
one holy day in the antechamber
—how well your poor ceremonious
bones do their duty!—
Today, tepid afternoon in which the humid wind
tears loose the withered leaves,

I've seen you inhaling distracted,
with the breath the earth exhales,
from the green eucalyptus
the freshness of the perfumed leaves.
I've seen you lift your dry hand
to the pearl that shines on your cravat.

November 1913

One year more,
the sower again casting seed
over the earth's furrows.
Two slow teams of oxen plow
while overhead pass ashen clouds
casting shadows on the countryside,
the freshly plowed fields
the grey olive groves. At the valley bottom
a turbid river rises.
Cazorla has snow.
and Mágina, a storm,
Aznaitín its cap. Toward Granada,
mountains with sun, mountains of sun and stone.

Autumn Dawn

A long highway
between rocky grey hills,
and a modest meadow
where black bulls graze.
Thorn bushes, weeds, brambles.

The earth is wet
with dewdrops,
and the poplar grove gilded,
toward the curve of the river.
Beyond the violet mountains
bursts the first light of day:
his shotgun over his shoulder,
between his lean greyhounds,
a hunter wends his way.

To a Dry Elm

From the old elm, split by lightning
and half rotten,
with the April rains and May sun
a few green leaves have sprouted.

The century old elm on the hill
lapped by the Duero! Yellowish moss
spots its whitish bark,
its trunk worm-eaten and dusty.

It will not be, like the singing poplars
that guard the road and river bank,
inhabited by dark nightingales.

An army of ants files up its bole,
and in its entrails
spiders weave their gray cloth.

Before the woodcutter chops you down
elm of the Duero, and the carpenter
converts you into bell mounting,
cart axle or yoke;
before, you burn tomorrow
red in the fireplace of some miserable hut
at the side of the road;
before a tornado uproots you
and the wind from the white sierra
mutilates you;
before the river carries you to the sea
through valleys and ravines,
elm, I want to get down in my notebook
the grace of your greening branch.

My heart hopes
also toward light and life,
another miracle of spring.

To the Deserted Square

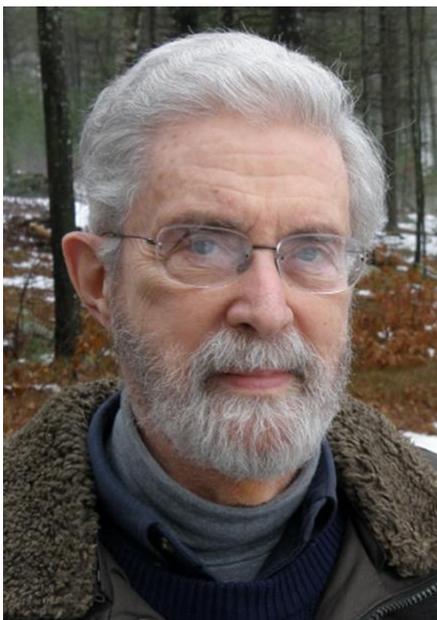
To the deserted square
leads a labyrinth of narrow streets.
On one side, the dark old wall
of a church in poor repair;
on the other, the whitish mud wall
of a grove of cypresses and palms,
and, before me, the house
and in the house the wrought iron grate
in front of the window that lightly envelops
her small figure calm and laughing.
I'll turn away. I don't want
to call at your window... Spring
comes—its white gown
floats in the air of the lifeless square—;
comes to ignite the red roses
of your rosebushes... I want to behold it...

About the author



Antonio Machado, 1875-1939, was a Spanish poet and one of the leading figures of the Spanish literary movement known as the Generation of '98. His work, initially modernist, evolved towards an intimate form of symbolism with romantic traits. He gradually developed a style characterized by both an engagement with humanity on one side and an almost Taoist contemplation of existence on the other, a synthesis that according to Machado echoed the most ancient popular wisdom.

In 1899, he traveled to Paris to work as translator for a French publisher. During these months in Paris, he came into contact with the great French Symbolist poets Jean Moréas, Paul Fort and Paul Verlaine, and also with other contemporary literary figures, including Rubén Darío and Oscar Wilde. These encounters cemented Machado's decision to dedicate himself to poetry. His first published poems appeared in 1901 in the literary journal *Electra*, and his first book of poetry was published in 1903.



About the translator

Richard Greene began writing poetry in eighth grade and continued through college under the mentorship of Henry Rago, later editor of *Poetry* magazine. After graduate school, he entered a career in international development during which he served close to 7 years in Spanish-speaking countries. He was introduced to Machado's poetry by a college friend, Ulu Grosbard, a distinguished director of stage and screen, who lived in Cuba for several years after fleeing Belgium with his family during WWII.