In his “Petition to be buried on the beach at Sète,” Georges Brassens, another native of that windy little port town south of Montpellier, asks the “good master” Paul Valéry to pardon his proposal for an even more seaside burial than his own.

By 1966, when Brassens’ song was recorded, Valéry had been interred some twenty-one years in the cemetery evoked in his best-known poem. Even during his lifetime he had been touched by “immortality/ Grotesquely laureled, bound in black in gold,” enshrined as France’s greatest poet, the stuffed-and-fêted figure of Poetry itself. *The Cemetery by the Sea*, his one personal piece in an œuvre of abstract, impressionistic, or purely musical works, was read in salons and schools, dissected by scholars, dismissed by young hotheads, gently ribbed by the likes of Brassens.

"My inner greatness, echoing in my soul / Its ever-future emptiness!"

This most personal poem, though, had a most impersonal beginning: the decasyllable line. Let’s back up. After a promising debut as a young Symbolist in the 1890s, Valéry was silent for almost two decades. Then, in 1912, André Gide and Gaston Gallimard presented him with a manuscript of his earlier poems, which they intended to publish. He set to writing a forty-line “farewell to verse” that grew into the magnum opus *The Young Fate*; more poems followed, the poems that would make up *Charms* and others that would be appended to the *Album of Early Verse* when it, too, finally appeared.

*The Young Fate* and most of the *Album* are composed in twelve-syllable alexandrines, the essential meter of classical French verse. The poems of *Charms* contain plenty of alexandrines of course, but also hexasyllables, octosyllables, pentasyllables, and heptasyllables. *The Cemetery by the Sea* alone uses the ten-syllable line, a rare bird in French after the sixteenth century. Valéry recounts how the poem was born from a musical impulse, “an empty rhythmic figure . . . that came to obsess me.” The compositional constraints he set for himself, he says, the desire “to try raising that Ten to the
"power of Twelve," imposed on this poem the form of a monologue on the "simplest and most constant themes of my emotional and intellectual life," themes "associated with the sea and the light of a certain place on the shores of the Mediterranean."

Ten syllables in French makes for a rhythmically unstable meter, with neither the heavy finality of the alexandrine nor the square completeness of octosyllables. I approximate this lightness of foot with a mix of tetrameter and pentameter lines—one of just two cases where I opt for such irregularity in my translations of Valéry’s poetry. I try to catch the musical tension that makes this poem, tinged “with a color of philosophy,” tending towards “the idea of death and pure thought,” at once so personal and so abstract. As Brassens implies, the powers-that-be were perhaps heavy-handed in their canonization of Paul Valéry’s seaward gaze. Translation gives us the chance to approach it with fresh eyes and fresh ears.

—Nathaniel Rudavsky-Brody

The cemetery by the sea
by Paul Valéry
translated by Nathaniel Rudavsky-Brody

Μὴ, φίλα ψυχά, βίον ἀθάνατον
σπεῦδε, τὰν δ’ ἔμπρακτον ἄντλει μαχανάν.

Do not, O my soul, aspire to immortal life, but exhaust what is possible.

—Pindar, Pythian Ode 3

This peaceful roof of milling doves
Shimmers between the pines, between the tombs;
Judicious noon composes there, with fire,
The sea, the ever-recommencing sea . . .
O what reward, after a thought,
Is a long look across the calm of the gods!

What subtle flashes, finely wrought, consume
So many fleeting diamonds of foam,
And what a perfect peace is taking form!
Under a sun that pauses at the brink,
Pure workmanship of an eternal cause,
Time glitters, Dreams are knowledge.

Stable treasure, Minerva’s simple shrine,
Great mass of calm and manifest reserve,
Disdaining water, Eye that holds
Within you, veiled by flame, such depths of sleep,
O my silence . . . Roof, both edifice in the soul
And golden summit of a thousand tiles!

Temple to Time contained in a single sigh,
To this pure point I climb and find my breath,
Surrounded by my seaward gaze;
And as my greatest offering to the gods,
The calm and glittering brightness sows
Across the heights a masterful disdain.

As fruit dissolves in consummation,
As it transforms its absence to delight
When in a mouth its form is lost and dies,
I breathe the smoke I will become
And the sky sings, of shores transformed
To rumor, to the soul that is consumed.

Brilliant sky, true sky, it is I
Who change! After such pride, after such strange
Indolence, and yet suffused with power,
I surrender to this shining air,
My shadow sweeps the houses of the dead
And with its fragile motion leads me on.

My soul left open to the solstice fires,
I hold your lancing, your unsparing gaze,
O striking justice of the light!
Pure, I return you to your rightful place:
Look at yourself . . . But to return the light
Is to leave the other half in lifeless shadow.

For me alone, in me, and mine alone,
Close to the heart, the wellsprings of the poem,
Between the chasm and the pure event,
I wait to hear that dark and bitter well,
My inner greatness, echoing in my soul
Its ever-future emptiness!

Do you know, feigned captive of the branches, gulf
That eats away these slender iron grates,
Bedazzling secrets on my eyes, even closed,
What body drags me to its idle end,
What forehead draws me to this earth of bones?
A spark there thinks of my departed ones.

Closed and sacred, filled with a weightless fire,
Fragment of earth offered up to the light,
This place is pleasing, overspread by flames,
Composed of gold, dark trees and stone, where so
Much marble trembles on so many shadows,
The faithful sea asleep across my tombs!

Splendid dog, drive off the idolater!
When with a shepherd’s smile, slow and alone,
I put to pasture this mysterious herd
Of white-fleeced sheep, my peaceful tombs,
Keep far from them the prudent doves,
The empty dreams, the curious angels!

The future, seen from here, is idleness.
The keening insect scratches at the dryness;
Everything’s burned, undone, and taken up
To some unsparing essence in the air . . .
Drunk on absence, life is vast,
Bitterness sweet, and the mind clear.

The dead are well here, hidden in this earth
That keeps them warm, dries out their mystery.
High Noon above, unstirring Noon
Conceives itself, and satisfies itself . . .
Whole head and perfect circling crown,
I am the secret change in you.

There’s no one else but me to hold your fears!
My doubt, my limits, my remorse,
Are your great diamond’s fatal flaw . . .
But in their marble-heavy night
A formless people at the roots of the trees
Has slowly taken up your cause.

They dissipated in a heavy absence,
The red clay drank the whiteness of their kind,
Their gift for life flowed out into the flowers!
Where are the kindly phrases of the dead,
The individual art, the singular souls?
Now larvae spin where tears once formed.

The piercing cries of tickled girls,
The lashes, the teeth, the moistened eyes,
The charming breast that plays with fire,
The yielding lips suffused with blood,
The final gifts, the hands withholding them
All go into the earth, and back in play!

And you, great soul, are you waiting for a dream
That will be truer than these lying colors
Created by surf and gold for eyes of flesh?
So will you sing, when you are light as air?
All flies! Life washes through my presence,
Saintly impatience also dies!

Lean consolation, immortality
Grotesquely laureled, bound in black and gold,
That changes death into a mother’s breast,
The pious ruse and the fine lie:
Who does not know, and who does not refuse
That empty skull, and that eternal laughter?

Deep fathers, uninhabited heads,
Who are the earth and mingle all our steps
Under the weight of so much shoveled dirt,
What truly gnaws, the irrefutable worm,
Is not for you asleep beneath the slab:
It lives on life, and will not let me be!

Could it be love, or hatred for myself?
It comes so near me with its secret tooth
That any other name would do as well!
What difference! it sees, it wants, it dreams, it touches!
It loves my flesh, and even in my bed
I only live to feed that living being . . .

Zeno, cruel Zeno, Zeno of Elea,
So did you pierce me with your feathered arrow
That quivers, flies and does not fly?
The sound engenders me, the arrow kills!
Ah, sun . . . A tortoise shadow for the soul,
Achilles striding motionless along.

No! . . . On your feet, return to passing time!
My body, break this pensive form!
My breast, drink in the birth of the wind!
A breath of freshness coming off the sea
Gives me my soul back . . . O great salt power,
Let’s run to the waves, to reemerge alive!

Yes, great sea, gifted with feverish dreams,
Panther skin and antique chlamys pierced
By a thousand flashing idols of the sun,
Pure Hydra drunk upon your own blue flesh
Who in a roar that is at one with silence
Over and over catch your glittering tail,

The wind is rising . . . We must try to live!
The vast air opens then shuts again my book,
The waves dare surge in spray above the rocks!
Scatter, pages dazzled by the light,
Break, waves! Exulting waters, break
This peaceful roof where sailboats dipped like doves!


and

Paul Valéry (1871–1945) was a French poet, essayist, and philosopher

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