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A Glimpse into Modern Danish Poetry

by Athena Kildegaard

"It is difficult to *get the news from poems* yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there," wrote the American poet William Carlos Williams. In America, getting the news from Danish poets is even more difficult. That's true in part because there are few translators working, but also because there are few publishers interested in translation. Perhaps, if more of us read and bought poetry in translation, this situation might change. And fewer of us will die "for lack of what is found there."

My purpose in this paper is to briefly introduce four Danish poets, all of whom have been translated into English and all of whose work—or some of it—is available to us today.

Inger Christensen

The oldest of the four poets, and the only one no longer living, Inger Christensen was born in Jutland in 1935 and went to Copenhagen to study medicine. Instead, she became a schoolteacher and began writing poetry. She married Poul Borum, who was the editor of a magazine in which Christensen first published work, and who has been a mentor to many poets. Christensen is described by the Poetry Foundation as "one of Europe's leading contemporary experimentalists." Since her death, her reputation has grown markedly. In a brief eulogy, the novelist Siri Hustvedt praised Christensen's poetry: "its rhythms and repetitions were of my own body, my heartbeat, my breath, the motion of my legs and the swing of my arms as I walked. As I read it, I moved with its music. But inseparable from that corporeal music, embedded in the cadences themselves,



Inger Christensen was a one of Europe's leading poetic innovators in the mid-twentieth century.

Image by Johannes Jansson of norden.org.

was a mind as rigorous, as tough, as steely as any philosopher's." Indeed, Christensen's poetry captivates because of its music, but challenges because of the idea expressed.

One of Christensen's most well-known books is *alphabet*, a book-length poem that uses the fibonacci sequence to give it a formal shape. It is divided into fourteen sections, and the numbers of lines in each section correspond to the sequence, a number sequence in which each number is the sum of the previous two. In other words: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 and so on. The first section, of one line, reads: "apricot trees exist, apricot trees exist," and the second: "bracken exists; and blackberries, blackberries; / bromine exists, and hydrogen, hydrogen." In addition to the number sequence, Christensen uses the alphabet. By the end of the poem, we feel as if she has swept up in her verse the entire world and what this world is made of. *It*, the book that Hustvedt first read and was swept away by, was published in 1969, and its first English translation, by Susana Nied, who also translated *alphabet*, appeared in 2005. Nied wrote about the reception of *it (det)*: "*det* took Denmark by storm. It won critical praise and became at the same time a huge popular favorite. It was quoted by political protesters and politicians alike; lines from it appeared as graffiti around Copenhagen; some parts were set to rock music."

Christensen received many awards and honors, including the Nordic Author's Prize. She was even suggested as a candidate for the Nobel prize for literature. Here are two poems from *det*, poems that appear in the last third of the book:

ACTION / integrities / 1

Inside the first factory there is a second, inside the second there is a third, inside the third a fourth factory etc.

Inside factory no. 3517 a man stands by a machine

In factory no 1423 a man stands by a machine

Man no. 8611 has been spinning fables all this time about freedom

At the end of all the united factories stands a man making money

ACTION / integrities / 6

Inside the first bank there is a second, inside the second
there is a third, inside the third a fourth bank etc.

Inside bank no. 3517 a man calculates war expenditures

Inside bank no. 1425 a man calculates war profits

Man no 8611 has been spinning fables all this time about
fair distribution

At the end of all the united banks sits a smart speculator

* * *

Inge Pedersen

Inge Pedersen was born in 1936 and continues to live and write
in Jutland. Her first book, *Leve med kulden* (Living with the Cold), a



*Inge Pedersen captures the culture
and landscape of Jutland in her
poetry.*

Image courtesy of Gyldendal.dk.

book of poetry, was published in
1982. Since then she has written three
collections of poems, two volumes
of short stories, and four novels.
She has won many Danish and
Scandinavian fellowships and prizes,
but she has received little attention
outside Scandinavia. Fortunately, the
American poet Marilyn Nelson, a
Chancellor of the American Academy
of Poets, translated Pedersen's fourth
book of poems, *The Thirteenth Month*
(FIELD Translation Series, 2005). Poet
William Jay Smith says this about the
book: "Reading these poems in their
beautiful translations is like inhaling
a breath of the cold clear air of Jutland
that the poet knows so well." The

book won the American Scandinavian Translation Prize.

Here are two poems from *The Thirteenth Month*. The first shows a
little influence from H. C. Andersen:

Guardian Angels

They jump on broomsticks

bicycles and trains
to straddle by night
with pain and punishment
the bodies of the ambitious
in their beds

Then they magic
the trees green again
give little children
licorice
and three wishes

This poem calls up the pastoral countryside of Jutland and rings with the voice of Walt Whitman, "I want to be placid as the animals:"

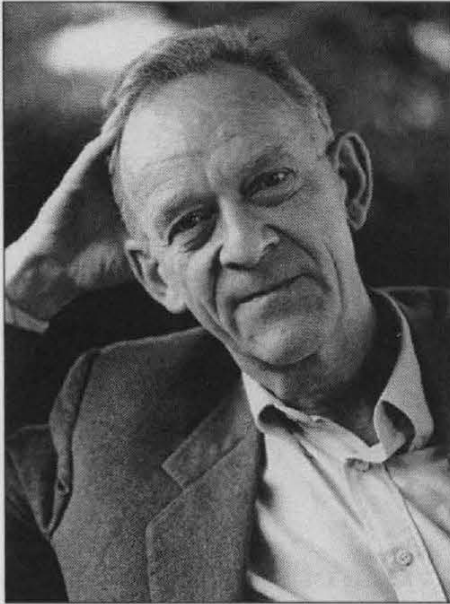
Salt

Foam-sprayed black and white waves
of cows come rushing
down over the hill.
Until they stop at a hedge.
Abruptly. Suddenly. With their hooves
deep in a puddle and consider the owned.
Us who shudder
at the sight of dirt and the thick blue tongues
that shine like death.
And at the thought of lost chances the wolves pace
through our eyes: Has someone faxed
called or e-mailed? Would we miss something
if we threw ourselves plop in a ditch
and only breathed the air?
The cows stand
and lick salt
and stare until they are called in
by the drifting sky.

* * *

Henrik Nordbrandt

Perhaps the best-known living Danish poet—in Denmark and in the rest of the world—is Henrik Nordbrandt, though, oddly



Henrik Nordbrandt was a student of Inger Christensen, but has forged his own innovative poetic style.

enough, he does not live in Denmark anymore. Nordbrandt, born in 1945 near Copenhagen, grew up sickly and came to learning slowly. He studied foreign languages at the University of Copenhagen, and was a student of Inger Christensen's, though his poetry has little in common with hers. He published his first book of poems when he was 21, and has succeeded in living on the earnings of his writing. In addition to 23 books of poetry, he has written a novel, a children's book, and a Turkish cookbook. Nordbrandt is a reclusive writer who prefers to avoid readings and interviews and lives in the Mediterranean region. The American

poet Rosanna Warren writes that Nordbrandt's poems "pour out as cold, clear, and mineral-tanged as spring water. Their enigmas astonish in their purity." Nordbrandt shares the wry, ironic stance of some other Scandinavian poets such as Olav Hauge and Tomas Tranströmer.

Here are two poems from *When We Leave Each Other*, the most recent English translation, from 2013, by Patrick Phillips. It is a selection of poems from Nordbrandt's career. This edition, by the way, is bi-lingual – something not common in translations, but greatly to be appreciated:

An Appeal to Plumbers

I used to use the word suffering
the way you might talk about
a stopped-up kitchen sink.
And now the autumn light makes the grease
on the plates look so much like old make-up
it's hard to even remember what to call them:
those guys who fix kitchen sinks,
and when finally the word plumber
comes to you,
he says he can't make it for two hours,
then shows up two hours late.

And then evening comes
like it always does
and you go to the movies
alone, and see a film you'll have long since forgotten
by the time the kitchen sink
breaks down again,
leaving you nothing to do but go home
and lie awake in the dark
and think about all the other words
you've misused and everything
that went wrong, and all those who are gone now
because they didn't want to be with you
--so maybe this really is, after all,
that thing we call suffering.

Baklava

I always feel uneasy in Athens and Istanbul,
and the same way in Beirut, where people
seem to know something about me
I never quite understood myself--
something intriguing and dangerous,
like that submerged graveyard
where we dove for amphorae last summer,
a secret—half guessed
when the street vendors' glances
make me suddenly aware
of my own skeleton. As if the gold coins
the children shove at me
were stolen last night from my grave.
As if they'd crushed
every bone in my skull
to get at them. As if
the cake I just ate
was sweetened with my own blood.

Pia Tafdrup

Pia Tafdrup, born in 1952, has been called Denmark's premier living poet. She has written eighteen books of poetry, two novels, several plays, and she has translated works from German, Swedish,



The recipient of many literature prizes, Pia Tafdrup is considered one of the leading poets in Denmark today.

Image by Johannes Jansson of norden.org.

and English. She has traveled around the world reading her work, and her poems have been translated into over thirty languages. Tafdrup has won the Nordic Council Literature Prize and the Swedish Academy Nordic Prize, among many other awards. In April 2015, *Salamander Sun*, a book that was published in Denmark in 2012, appeared in a translation by David McDuff, from the British publishing house Bloodaxe Books. Bloodaxe has also published McDuff translations of her books *Queen's Gate* and of *Tarkovsky's Horses*, which combines two of her books. In a 2013 interview with the British poet Ruth O'Callaghan, Tafdrup spoke about her work: "Even today, my poems aim for beauty, well aware that beauty does not exist in isolation, beauty only

manifests itself in brief glimpses or enters into a relationship with the chaotic, the fragmented, the disharmonious etc., which of course are all part of everyday life."

Here is a poem from her book *The Thousandborn*, a book of four-line poems:

Don't look for poetry's black box,
it hasn't recorded any answers,
is merely full of the dream's counter-questions
or a silence to feel one's way into.

Tafdrup's book *Tarkovsky's Horses* deals with her father's dementia and eventual death. Before he died, her father asked Tafdrup to give a speech at his memorial service, which she did, and that speech grew into the book. According to Tafdrup, "It's certainly not a dream book to write about your dying father, not when your father has been so incredible. But the book wanted to be written. You can say that this book depicts loss in two ways. On one hand the poems portray my father's increasing forgetfulness, his loss of everyday skills; in part, they portray the loss of a father." Here is one of the poems:

Cold Morning

What for me is the present
is a future
 my father will not know.
Behind ear-splitting silence
his body has
 grown cold.
In my muscles
the cold feels
literally translated. Blue-black.
The morning rises
between the houses –
I move around
in a shadow realm
 of *no* father.
A dog's sudden barking
cleanses the heart.
Perhaps one day something
will knock
 and let itself in?

It is exciting to see such variety in these four poets—from the radical experimentation of Inger Christensen to the passionate honesty of Pia Tafdrup, all of them bring us news that is worth hearing—and now it is also accessible to non-Danish speakers.

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