

## *Three Poems*

Franz Werfel

Translated from German by James Reidel

### **The Comfort of Poisons**

When their growers harvest grapes, hops, and barley,  
Not only do they reap the sun's power,  
The moon and night act upon these plants too,  
And each one's sap calls for an anti-sap.  
Poison sleeps in wine, fermentation in every fruit,  
Death listens in grain, tobacco, poppies.  
Nevertheless, without this death, our diet  
Would disgust, discontent, be monotonous.  
The poison only masters life's emptiness,  
Food from sunlight requires its opposite.  
God himself places this evil in our way  
As a baser need of the soul's well-being.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *soul's well-being* (*Heils*): the German word for *salvation* is actually a cognate of *health* and understood to be the soul's.

## Small Requiem

No one knows how poor he is,  
As he, inside the tight corners,  
Is carried down the stairs feet-first  
Through the flower-reeking hall.  
Many, with painfully long black strides  
Ushering him on to the grave,  
Take furtive looks at the clock.  
No one knows how poor he is.

No one knows how rich he is.  
Who flew from one day to the next  
Has without knowing it gathered,  
Has sucked the hours' thick syrup.  
And now he bears a dear burden,  
The gathering's wax and honey,  
Homeward back to the beehives.  
No one knows how rich he is.

## **The Death of the Priest**

Collected and composed, he lies steady,  
So not one drop of dying escapes him.  
With his hands pressed together on his chest,  
He wants his death to serve as a clean measure.

The black nun, who at no point will leave him,  
Kneels far back. His passing suffers no nearness.  
She ministers to him as a rattling vestige  
Of breath sings a psalm, concise and tenacious.

His eyes sag with an unrelenting firmness,  
In which a fine, self-assured smile lets go,  
Toward the corner, where the spider spins the thread.

He awaits the angel there in his straits  
To pierce through the thin wall of hereofness,  
To beckon him with his measured gesture.

