

Sommerbild

Ich sah des Sommers letzte Rose stehn;
Sie war als ob sie bluten könne, rot.
Da sprach ich schauernd im Vorübergehn:
So weit im Leben ist zu nah am Tod.

Es regte sich kein Hauch am heißen Tag,
Nur leise strich ein weißer Schmetterling,
Doch, ob auch kaum die Luft sein Flügelschlag
Bewegte, sie empfand es und verging.

Comment: There are lots of different versions out there on the Internet! I had one with 'am heißen Sommertag' in line 5, and only a comma after line 3 until I had done Draft Four.

I have now chosen the version printed in the Freiburger Antologie:

[http://freiburger-anthologie.ub.uni-](http://freiburger-anthologie.ub.uni-freiburg.de/fa/fa.pl?cmd=gedichte&sub=show&noheader=1&add=&id=169)

[freiburg.de/fa/fa.pl?cmd=gedichte&sub=show&noheader=1&add=&id=169](http://freiburger-anthologie.ub.uni-freiburg.de/fa/fa.pl?cmd=gedichte&sub=show&noheader=1&add=&id=169)

DRAFT ONE

Summer Picture

I saw the summer's final rose in flower;
It looked as if it well could bleed, deep red.
I shuddered, passing, thinking at that hour,
So far in life's too close to being dead.

No breath of air stirred in the summer heat,
A cabbage white was all that fluttered by,
Yet though the air scarce quivered at this beat
of wings, the rose could sense it and did die.

COMMENTS

I did a translation of 'Herbsttag' a few years back and could never manage to get the 'I' into the opening line: 'Dies ist ein Herbsttag wie ich keinen sah', which was a bad omission, since this was the only place where a first person was indicated. So I have made sure to get one in here. As usual, I tend to start by looking for rhyme words and bits of lines. And to make sure the stress pattern fits. At first glance, 'white butterfly' and 'last rose' are the only impossible combinations. And I must decide whether to let 'red' rhyme with 'death', or change to 'dead' without changing the sense. The other 'must' is an enjambement between lines 7–8, made difficult by the fact that I can't put the verb in that position in English, nor can I reverse subject and object as German can, since 'sein' can only be nominative, so I will have to solve that problem too. And, in general, the verbs are tricky to translate in this poem.

Line 1

'The last rose of summer' is so well-known a phrase in English that it is at the back of most English readers' minds. Rhythmically, though, it just won't fit. I can choose to end the line with 'rose', but since the poem is in the past tense, this makes a rhyme word in line 3 difficult to find. I have decided to change 'stehn' into 'in flower'. I tried 'in bloom', too, but couldn't find a rhyme, except 'tomb'. But that caused more problems than it solved.

Line 2

Came just like that. 'Was' has to become 'looked' in English. I had to add 'deep' to get the stress pattern, but crimson, deep red, would seem to match the mood of the poem. Blood is often called both in English.

Line 3

Having trouble with this line. 'I shuddered as I passed by...' were the words I first thought of. But 'sprach'? Presumably he only says it to himself, so 'thought' is more likely in English. I don't like the 'at that hour' solution – it's padding, and I hope to find something better in the next draft. And I refuse to use 'bower' or some similar word. I have to get three ideas across: shudder, pass, said/thought. That's a lot in ten syllables.

Line 4

Originally I had 'So far in life is far too close to death', which flows nicely, but the lack of a complete rhyme niggled me, so I changed it. Also because it is typically me to 'beautify', and the repetition of 'far' is nowhere in the original.

Line 5

The verbs of the whole stanza are tricky. At first I had 'disturbed the summer heat', but that is too much an interpretation. 'Sich regen' is slightly poetical – 'to stir, bestir oneself' the dictionary says – so here I choose to deviate from the pattern and take 'stirred in the summer heat'. The line still works. The 'hot summer day' is a rhythmic disaster, so I have dropped 'day' and taken 'heat', also because it rhymes with 'beat', which I can possibly use in line 7.

Line 6

I tried a 'white-winged butterfly' first, but that means I have too little left. I tried 'whitish', but it doesn't say that. So I have ended up with the rather unpoetic 'cabbage white', which in German is 'Kohlweißling'. Strangely enough, I don't think of cabbage. The main stress is on 'white' in English. I decided that 'strich' was best expressed by 'fluttered'. 'Flitted' was another possibility, but it includes the idea of 'darted' according to my dictionaries, and this is absolutely not right for the drowsiness of the second stanza.

Lines 7–8

'Doch, ob auch kaum die Luft sein Flügelschlag/Bewegte, sie empfand es und verging.' [Yet, even though its wingbeat scarcely moved the air, it felt (sensed) it and withered (died away, ceased to be)]

I have to find a solution that includes both lines. I have to keep 'the air' in its present position, I think, which means either turning to a passive construction, or implying it. This I do by 'quivered at' + noun. 'Its beat of wings' sounds bad. I want something to express 'the beating of its wings'. I have settled for 'this beat/of wings' for the moment. The next problem is that

the 'sie' of the German original can only refer back to the rose. But the rose is so far away in the text that I need to repeat it in the translation. This leaves me with only three syllables, as in the German, for 'und verging'. But I have no real answer to 'vergehen'. I don't like 'it did die'. It's there for the rhyme, for the time being. This is something else that has to be sorted out.

REACTION TO FIRST DRAFT

The 'sprach' of line three is important – he speaks not only to the rose but also to the reader. It is almost a sermon, a variation on the well-known *media vita in morte sumus* – and the rose is further than that.

The 'cabbage white' is too free in line six. The enjambement and the 'beat of wings' is not good and the 'did die' too emphatic and unnatural English.

DRAFT TWO

Summer Picture

I saw still blooming summer's final rose;
It looked as if it well could bleed, deep red.
I shuddered as I spoke when passing close,
So far in life's too near to being dead.

No breath of wind stirred in the day's heat, where
A pale-white butterfly was all that gyred,
Yet though its wingbeat scarcely caused the air
To quiver, it could sense it and expired.

DRAFT TWO

The 'flower' rhyme proved impossible to find, so I have taken 'rose' instead. Two can stay as it is. I still have to shudder, speak and pass by in line three, and cannot find any other word of one syllable to convey the horror of shudder. The rose/close is as close as I can get to a full rhyme – this doesn't disturb me as the spelling rhyme strengthens the feeling of a rule having been observed. Line four can stay as it is, except for 'close', which now has to be changed to 'near'. I wondered about this, but you can have a close/near shave, and 'near to death' and 'near to being dead' prove to be extremely frequent combinations.

The rhyme words are still the big problem in stanza two. Lines seven and eight now have a more natural feel to them. The words I am dissatisfied with are 'day's hot lair' in line five (which I have just changed to 'day's heat, where' – introducing an enjambement, but anything is preferable), 'pale-white' (though full-white, pure-white, whitish and even creamy have been tried and rejected), 'gyred' (= to whirl in a circular or spiral motion), an obvious rhyme word which is both unusual and probably inaccurate, and maybe 'expired', for 'vergehen' is not the same as 'starb', it implies a withering, a loss of the ability to live on.

REACTION TO SECOND DRAFT

The 'still blooming' of line 1 sounds odd and laboured. Otherwise the stanza is OK.

Line 6: 'pale-white' and 'gyred' must go.

Line 7: 'wing-beat' sounds laboured.

Line 8: 'quivered' is too much. The second 'it' refers to what?

In general: think more in terms of a 'Volkslied', a threateningly calm counterpart to 'Sah ein Knab' ein Röslein stehn'. Don't prettify and overdo things.

Sommerbild

Ich sah des Sommers letzte Rose stehn;
Sie war als ob sie bluten könne, rot.
Da sprach ich schauernd im Vorübergehn,
So weit im Leben ist zu nah am Tod.

Es regte sich kein Hauch am heißen Sommertag,
Nur leise strich ein weißer Schmetterling,
Doch, ob auch kaum die Luft sein Flügelschlag
Bewegte, sie empfand es und verging.

DRAFT THREE

Summer Picture

I saw in flower summer's final rose;
It looked as if it well could bleed, deep red.
I shuddered as I spoke when passing close,
So far in life's too near to being dead.

No breath of wind disturbed the day's heat, where
There only roamed a lone white butterfly,
Yet though its beating wing scarce caused the air
To stir, the rose detected it and died.

DRAFT THREE

Tried 'in bloom still' in line one, but the juxtaposition of 'still summer' disturbed me, and the use of commas broke up the line, so I have tried 'in flower'.

The reaction to second draft also suggested accepting a 'butterfly'/'died' rhyme, so I have tried to find a line 6 that naturally ends on what I thought was impossible in terms of stress, i.e. 'white butterfly'. This meant taking over the verb 'stirred' from line 5. Or so I thought, for later it transpired I needed the verb for the last line. 'Streichen', my dictionary says, means 'to roam'.

I think that 'wing' is right, rather than 'wings' in line 7, but am unsure why. Maybe because it is 'on the wing'. Certainly 'beating wing' is better than 'wingbeat' in English.

If 'quiver' is too much in line 8, my only suggestion for something less is 'tremble'. I finally took over 'stir', as I needed for syllables for the rest of the line. And to avoid three 'it's in line 8, I have decided to re-introduce the rose. And I have replaced 'sensed' by 'detected' to avoid all the repetitions of 'it'.

COMMENTS

Another pair of eyes have looked at the three drafts, and finds each draft weaker than the previous one! The claim is also that the wingbeat is something that 'befalls' the rose, rather than the rose actively perceiving it. I am not convinced about either.

But the first commentator points out that line 5 in the German has 12 syllables. Now that cannot be denied!

(It is, though, an incorrect version I have been using.)

DRAFT FOUR (revised, using the correct original)

Summer Picture

I saw in flower summer's final rose;
It looked as if it well could bleed, deep red.
I shuddered as I spoke when passing close:
So far in life's too near to being dead.

No breath of wind stirred on that fiery day,
There only skimmed a lone white butterfly,
Yet though its beating wing scarce caused a sway
Of air, the rose still sensed this and it died.

DRAFT FOUR

I have left the first stanza for the time being.

I need to get a more natural line 5 that also has 12 syllables. The enjambement doesn't really work, so I will try and follow the German more closely. I rather like 'There was no breath of wind on that hot summer('s) day', but I don't know how to avoid repeating 'there' in line 6. I have tried to combine 'leise + strich' by using a new verb that has both ideas, to skim. 'Stirred' I have moved back to line 5, for I need a rhyme word for 'day' now. I have tried 'a sway of air' and am still trying to work out if this is possible – does air sway, or only cause things to sway? To sway = in schwingende Bewegung setzen.

I have returned to 'sensed' in line 10. And used 'this' to avoid two 'its' that refer to different things.

And I have replaced 'No breath of wind that stirred on that hot summer's day'. But it gave me a new problem: 'hot' needs two syllables now that I have removed 'that'. 'blazing, torried, scorching, searing' – they are all over the top. I have tried 'fiery' to start with.

COMMENTS

The commentator who felt the later drafts were weaker than the first one, is still unhappy with line 2, where he feels I stress the bleeding too much and the colour too little. He dislikes 'deep red'.

While admitting that 'red' is the ideal solution, I have dealt with this objection earlier on. I feel that already here the rose is likened to a human being, having the capacity to bleed (to death). This 'life-blood' is part of the 'animation' process of emblematic poetry. So I don't feel the need to change the line.

He still feels that 'empfinden' in the last line means 'to undergo the consequences of' something, and is 'completely passive'. And he doesn't like 'died' for 'verging' (nor do I).

I have now consulted a seasoned native speaker on 'empfinden', which I still claim must have a subjective or conscious element in it, i.e. is active.

The native speaker supports my interpretation, so I will leave 'sensed', but also makes an interesting point about the rhythm of the last line and has a suggestion for 'verging'.

Wenn ich eine Kritik anbringen soll: In der allerletzten Zeile wechselt auf Deutsch das Versmaß: nicht mehr – ^ – ^ – ^ – ^ – ^ sondern – ^ – – – ^ – – – ^ . Der Lebensrhythmus beginnt zu „stottern“ . Das müsste auf Englisch auch gehen.

„verging“ : Kann du irgendwas mit „fade away“ oder so machen? Das passt auch gut zur Farbe, die verbleicht.

I can't use 'away', because of rhyme difficulties, but can try two verbs. This brings me to the fifth draft:

DRAFT FIVE

Summer Picture

I saw in flower summer's final rose;
It looked as if it well could bleed, deep red.
I shuddered as I spoke when passing close:
So far in life's too near to being dead.

No breath of wind stirred on that fiery day,
There only skimmed a lone white butterfly,
Yet though its beating wing scarce caused a sway
Of air, it sensed this and did fade and die.

COMMENTS

No justification for the 'fade' – in all probability the petals simply dropped off. The 'verging' issue has yet to be resolved. Furthermore, the 'it' of line 12, as I mentioned back in draft one, is potentially ambiguous in English and could refer to the butterfly – although from the context I'm not sure how real this confusion is.

The 'deep' red has been replaced by 'bright', which is possibly less loaded. I think I was influenced by the idea (nowhere in the poem!) of blood darkening as the rose got older (so far in life).

Although the last line is still unsatisfactory, this earlier version does have the 'stottern' rhythm suggested by the native speaker.

DRAFT SIX

Summer Picture

I saw in flower summer's final rose;
It looked as if it well could bleed, bright red.
I shuddered as I spoke when passing close:
So far in life's too near to being dead.

No breath of wind stirred on that fiery day,
There only skimmed a lone white butterfly,
Yet though its beating wing scarce caused a sway
Of air, the rose still sensed this and it died.