

ROBERT HASS
Poem Not
an Elegy
in a Season
of Elegies

They built shallow ponds in the wetlands
All along the Mediterranean shore to rot fish in
And make a condiment. It has a name
Which escapes me. Two thousand years after,
There was a trail through the checkerboard
Of levees made by the dikes, star thistle
And artichoke thistle edging them.
In southern Portugal one summer,
I jogged early, before the onset of the God's anvil
Of the heat of mid-July. Beach in the distance.
Where the Romans must have hauled their triremes up.
There was a slight breeze off the sea
And down the shore a flock of flamingos
Browsing the marsh, and in a pine
Above the golf course, a nesting stork.
Galway was alive then, and I think
Oakley was alive then, Jimmie Hillman
Was alive then and the occasion
For my being there saying to myself
And to Tomaž Šalamun, who was alive
Then, and probably in Ljubljana (but there
were occasions
When I spoke to him despite his absence
And our only casual acquaintance,
And this was one of them). Tomaž owned a boat once
In Dubrovnik, was partners in a boat, which,
I had the impression, they leased to smugglers
Who brought in costume jewelry
From department stores in Italy to avoid customs,
Which they peddled in the morning market
In the square in Ljubljana or sold to the women's
accessories buyer
For the department stores, who got a piece of
the markup.
This to be taken with a grain of salt or a dollop
Of fermented fish sauce—garum! was the name—
Since I didn't hear this story from Tomaž and was
More or less drunk when I heard it from someone else,
Part of the Šalamunian legend. Tomaž, I said,
Weaving my way among the salt ponds,
I am weaving my way among salt ponds outside Faro,
Ancient Roman salt ponds still almost intact.
There are guys harvesting clams just down the shore
And a flock of blush-colored intertidal birds

Not even a Technicolor Giacometti could have invented
And there is a *stork* nesting in a tree on the golf course.
I have no idea what storks mean to Europeans.
In some of the picture books of my childhood,
They built nests in chimneys, which gave the villages
A sleepy, peaceful feeling. Since we're the same age,
You must also have sucked your thumb
And studied pictures of storks dozing in twiggy nests
In a Europe where not much of anything happened
As your mother turned the pages. That's what I would say.
Sitting nests, these creatures, for fifty million years.
Tomaž, I remember your saying that, in your opinion,
All bakers should be taught to sing. "It stands to reason,"
I think you said, and I was impressed that you
had mastered
That English idiom. Of course, we stand to reason
And lie down to dream. It would have made dough rise.
Tomaž, they should have lit fires in little paper boats
In the harbor at Dubrovnik when you died. When
Galway died,
The earth should have groaned, it should have loosed
Lions in the civil streets. When Mark Strand died,
The stars should have traded small ironic witticisms
In a language wholly unintelligible to us but glittering.
For Oakley we should have decommissioned every dam
On the Colorado and floated a sleek white kayak
Through all its turnings from above Glen Canyon
To the Gulf, trailing after it the long self-erasing
Sentence of a silver wake. And thrown a party
Somewhere on the Baja shore. No metaphors yet
For my father-in-law. He, still in my head, belongs
to being,
A vigorous, generous man, hungry for life at ninety-three,
That summer in Faro he was showing his children
A world he'd come to love. He was a farm boy
From the pine woods of southeast Mississippi
And came to be a man who loved the world.
He loved speaking the Portuguese he'd acquired
To court his wife, loved walking his sons
And daughter through the ramparts of the old fortresses
And mosques of the Algarve. He was a little amused
By our interest in cuisines, having grown up
On grits and redeye gravy because that was what
there was

On a Depression farm in Mississippi in 1933,
And because one of his earliest memories was the odor
Of his father and brother rinsing excrement from
the guts
Of a slaughtered pig. He was, as an old man, mad
about writing
And he'd written about that smell and the squealing and
the blood.
But he knew the restaurant in Faro where branzino
Was roasted whole and stuffed with rice and raisins.
And something they did with lemon, cinnamon,
and garlic.
He's dead now three weeks. By the time we left the table,
He knew the names of the four children of the waitress
And their ages. This was after he had ordered coffee
for us
And the beautiful green pears the Arabs fourteen
hundred years ago
Had brought from Damascus to plant in al-Andalus.

Robert Hass's most recent book of poems is *Summer Snow* (Ecco, 2020). He teaches at the University of California, Berkeley.