



The Cemetery / El Cementiri, The Hours / Les Hores, & Mrs. Death, by Salvador Espriu (translated from the Catalan by Andrew Kaufman and Antonio Cortijo Ocaña). New York City: Rain Mountain Press, 2026

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Salvador Espriu (1913-1985), the Catalan poet, has long remained something of a hidden treasure outside his native country. Writing exclusively in Catalan, he has been virtually absent from English editions. Yet in Catalonia, even four decades after his passing, he is celebrated as a national figure, his lyric poetry holding a deeply revered place.

Several critics writing in or translated into English have sung his praises. Harold Bloom (1930-2019), the prominent American scholar, once argued that Espriu merited a Nobel, placing him alongside giants like Lorca (1898-1936), Rilke (1875-1926), and T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). For Bloom, Espriu embodied Catalonia itself, a testament to its rich literary heritage. Across Europe, similar accolades followed: French author Claude Roy (1915-1997) ranked him among the continent's finest modern poets, drawing parallels to Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) and Pasternak (1890-1960). Gareth Walters, a British critic, highlighted Espriu's deep, sensitive probing of *patria* (homeland) in contemporary verse.

Bloom described Espriu's voice as elegiac and eerily subdued, a harsh and severe lyricism infused with the wary insights of *Job* and *Ecclesiastes*. Espriu called his own work a "meditation upon death," but one that extends beyond the grave to encompass spiritual voids, inner turmoil, and cultural wounds. As Walters notes, memory fuels

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much of his pathos: the ache of a lost childhood idyll and a homeland crushed. Sinera — his playful reversal of Arenys de Mar, the seaside town of his youth — thus emerges as a profound literary evocation of place. Espriu stuck to Catalan out of cultural loyalty, knowing that choice would inevitably restrict his international readership.

The poet weaves in strands from Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Hebraic, and broader Hispanic traditions, bringing together his vast learning with his unique, personal experience. He draws from historical, biblical, and classical elements to shape metaphors and symbols that deliver insight and emotion. What remains unspoken heightens that hushed quality Bloom admired.

Espriu refrained from adhering to neoclassicism's tidy harmonies as much as from surrealism's flights or unadorned realism. His fluidity favored shifts between modes: fragments of narrative realism blend into symbolism and embrace biblical or classical motifs. This creates a rhythm that uncovers archetypal ties, trading immediate clarity for hidden unities.

Despite the nostalgia and pain present in his work, Espriu scatters glimmers of hope — visions of silver groves, rebuilt cities, or boundless fields — suggesting poetry can reclaim what has been ravaged. In the end, Espriu stands as a visionary whose creative spirit transcended his own era's trends and circumstances, affirming the imagination's power to transform and redeem.

In this landmark translation of Salvador Espriu's early masterpieces — *El Cementiri*, *Les Hores*, and *Mrs. Death* — rendered as *The Cemetery*, *The Hours*, and *Mrs. Death* in a single volume, Andrew Kaufman and Antonio Cortijo Ocaña have achieved a remarkable feat. Kaufman, a distinguished poet with a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, brings his award-winning sensibility to capture Espriu's hushed, elegiac lyricism. As a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts grant and multiple Pushcart Prize nominations, Kaufman applies his skillful verse in the nuanced handling of Espriu's themes of loss and redemption. His prior translations of Espriu's poems,



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published in outlets like World Literature Today, demonstrate a profound empathy for the Catalan poet's intensity.

Complementing this is Antonio Cortijo Ocaña, Distinguished Professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and founding director of its Center for Catalan Studies. A scholar with over 60 books to his name, including award-winning translations like Ramon Llull's *A Contemporary Life* (2017 Francesco Saverio Nitti Prize), Cortijo Ocaña's expertise in medieval and Iberian literatures ensures fidelity to Espriu's cultural and linguistic depths. Honored as an honorary member of the University of Alicante 2025, and recipient of accolades like the 2011 Scripta Humanistica Award, he bridges scholarly rigor with poetic accessibility.

This collection presents bilingual versions of three early, compact volumes: *Sinera Cemetery*, *The Hours*, and *Mrs. Death* — the last titled by Espriu himself in English. They are part of a five-book cycle, bound by shared themes, forms, and symbolic threads.

The Cemetery (El Cementiri) is an elegiac collection evoking the mythic coastal village of Sinera as a symbol of lost homeland and post-war ruin. Through minimalist, symbolic lyrics infused with mysticism, it meditates on death, memory, and existential despair, blending personal nostalgia with biblical and classical echoes.

The Hours (Les Hores) explores time's passage, seasons, and human fragility in three sections of introspective poems. Its style features fluid juxtapositions of realism and symbolism, delving into themes of waiting, journeys, and spiritual longing, while seeking redemption amid transience.

Mrs. Death personifies mortality as a dramatic, chaotic force that evolves toward harmony and peace. With theatrical flair, including character-driven pieces and ironic tones, it confronts violence, healing, and life's absurdities, dedicated to those battling death's grip.



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Many excerpts could be taken from this collection as examples of Espriu's poetic mastery. From *Les Hores*, an example can be found in the sheer but tragic beauty of "Cherubim". The poet's aspiration toward angelic transcendence encapsulates the tensions that define his work: a yearning for spiritual elevation amid the experience of human fragility.

Like the beings who suffer your glory,
 which is so slow, eternal, and scorching,
 more than the light of all the stars,
 I want to be like you.
 If in my flight I could blend
 with the army of sacred voices
 above the stars that praise
 the high beauty!
 Soaring through air, I would become ashes
 outside of time -- serene song, victory
 of blind ash, so restless and anguished
 among the stars.

The phrase "beings who suffer your glory" — *éssers sofridors de glòria teva* — poignantly contrasts the bliss of contemplating angelic splendor with the awe-inspiring effect that same scorching luminosity would entail if ignited exactly as such on a frail human nature.

As befits more the poet than the theologian, Espriu depicts heavenly glory as fused with overwhelming and consuming force. With a tragic touch typical of his own painful experiences, victory is attained by his "ashes outside of time".

A deep beauty is conveyed in Espriu's vivid acknowledgment of human limits, at least in relation to human nature itself; in the face of such intensity, a metaphor for physical dissolution paradoxically amplifies his reverence for the divine. Far from despair, this vision heightens appreciation for the glory of a celestial choir that, although serene, can



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almost unwittingly incinerate its surroundings. It echoes Espriu's broader meditations on death not as an end but as a gateway, harnessing biblical echoes in his depictions.

In this collection, the reader will certainly find stanzas which will speak more directly to his own preference. Surely, however, all English-speaking readers must count themselves as profoundly fortunate for now having access to this literary treasure, long confined to Catalan circles. Kaufman and Cortijo Ocaña's collaboration unveils Espriu's visionary meditations on death, memory, and homeland, and invites new generations to experience his powerful writing.