

# PILVAX

---

Issue Seven Summer 2010

**Annemarie Schwarzenbach** (1908–1942) was a Swiss poet, novelist, photographer, journalist, and travel writer. In her short lifetime she wrote several books, novels, and travel accounts, as well as hundreds of articles for the Swiss and French press. She wrote *Ou est la Terre des Promesses* following an overland journey from Switzerland to Afghanistan, with fellow writer Ella Maillart in 1939.

## **On the Banks of the Congo**

by Annemarie Schwarzenbach  
(translated by Morelle Smith)

Here it is again, this silence,  
as if an angel, without speaking,  
has raised his hand. Was it with this same silence,  
Angel, that you announced yourself before?  
They say that foreign lands  
have many things to teach us,  
but all I feel is fear and this stinging  
in my eyes; all paths lead nowhere  
and it hurts even to breathe.  
I link my hands together, then they drift apart,  
fall lifeless in my lap.  
My distress is so pervasive  
that I don't know where to turn.

The hours slip past, I wanted to protest  
about the way that I've been tossed around  
in all directions for so many years,  
and I only have one life.  
I want to let it go,  
lose it in the space  
of one heart beat; but I have seen  
the fire, and heard such music,  
that has pierced my suffering,  
erased all doubts, and sometimes memories of this  
ripple through the landscape  
like a tidal wave.  
A hundred times my despairing soul  
has fallen in love with death but was refused it.

After such failures, what remorseless flame  
still feeds my will to live? What love  
do I have to give to this glaring sky,  
to this cramped moon and to the ball of fire—  
reminder of our divine connection and the eternal wheel—  
which will rise again, slowly, tomorrow?  
Perhaps I should have lain down  
like the condemned and fettered souls  
who wait for cock crow,  
I should have known perhaps  
that the fiery wanderers on the horizon  
save us, and that a roof over one's head  
is enough for the homeless child, who, long ago  
held in his hands the dove of peace.  
Oh tenderness!

But I know that night's pathways  
are like bridges lowered from the sky  
and it's enough, always, to take just one step forward  
through the fields of poppies.  
Confused I may be but I won't give up  
on my attempts to make things better,  
turning my back on failure,  
keeping my eyes wide open  
despite the stinging dust.  
Here, there is the bright, unbroken light.  
Here, the wide river that nothing can hold back.  
Over there, the stars turn and then come to rest  
high above my valley, where the wild goats roam  
and where the snowline shrinks  
before the still and peaceful lakes,  
where the Son of Man may come again  
in peace, amen.

*Annemarie Schwarzenbach's poetry can be found in ISSUE 7 of PILVAX, locally available in Budapest.*