

## Volume 10 number 2

*Translation seen as conversation—for conversation assumes equality among the speakers—is clearly the language of languages, that language that all languages should speak.*

~~Ngugi wa Thiong'o

*Ezra*, as a permanent style but also part of its year-long tenth birthday celebration, looks to cherish this “conversation.” And right away, with these words of Ngugi (cited by Edith Grossman), we’re in the weeds. Far be it from us to dissect this thought in a way that leaves only the smell of formaldehyde and not the organic marvel. But really: there is more to say about this “should speak” than even Venuti and Benjamin and Barnstone have said. The word “equality,” for Ngugi (who is a proponent of Gikuyu), is charged with debatable socio-linguistics. And “conversation” clearly means conversation between the original version and the translated one (the version that’s aimed at, along with the process itself). We should expand on this last element.

There are two aspects to underline. First, the “language of languages” carries a whiff of Walter Benjamin; we think of his “pure language,” and what it is, or what it could be. Ngugi, who writes in both English and Gikuyu, clearly has some sense of each language’s struggling—of what it fails, perhaps, to express. By this terminology *Ezra* doesn’t intend “language” as a national or tribal institution, but as the language of the moment—the language of the text. This language is always striving and always, to some degree, missing the mark. The conversation that the text has with a second (“target”) language creates, at least for a time, a third language; this is one way of seeing Ngugi’s “language of languages.” The functional value of this, however, is simply that it reopens the case. This conversation (the act of translating) re-starts the attempt to say what the original language aimed at.

The second kind of conversation is the one we translators have as a group. This includes theoretical reflections, books like Edith Grossman’s, and the book reviews in *Ezra*. But what *Ezra* really shoots for—in the body of each issue—is the buzz of verbal life that arises from our juxtaposition of translations. Because we have no editorial bias or preferences, translations from every era, style and genre jostle each other on your screen. We think there’s a special conversation here: translators reaching into every corner and era of literary art in a shared recognition that we all hear the same thing—a slight and beguiling *strain* in the original voices. This is the straining to find the pure language, the language of languages, the consummating act of coinciding with what is meant.

Our featured writer, Marian Schwartz, has been managing this conversation for decades, and we all grew up with her translations from Russian. The selection is from Slavnikova’s “train stories.” Ms. Schwartz is a former ALTA president and holds a greeting session for all the first-timers at the convention. If you haven’t had a first time, make it happen!

## FEATURED WRITER

**Marian Schwartz** is a prize-winning translator of Russian fiction, biography and criticism. She has translated the best-known works of Bulgakov, Lermontov, and many others. Especially popular is Edvard Radzinsky's *The Last Czar*. A must-read is her recent version of Andrei Gelasimov's *The Thickening Fog* (Amazon Crossing). Winner of many grants and fellowships, the perfect "good citizen" translator, she is also past president of the American Literary Translators Association.

Olga Slavnikova

### The Recluse

The window was so smudged with dried rain spots it looked like someone had been cleaning fish on it. Kira Matveyeva, a fashion-forward Moscow reporter who stood out dramatically among the local train's lumpy, sullen passengers, was gazing greedily at the landscape spread out past that scabrous smudge. The landscape was flat and low, striped, like a handwoven floor cloth: damp green grass interspersed with strips of pale yellow grain, and an occasional long strip of vitriolic blue water in which half-drowned huts wallowed like capsized boats that had abandoned their oars. Much more interesting than the land was the sky, from which Kira was expecting nothing less than the decision of her own fate. Never in memory had there been such hot, steep-sided July clouds. Here and there, below their feathery silver, hung dark clusters, and inside them there was movement, like ink dripping into water. Kira's heart ached for a violent white twister, as sharp as a rat's tail, to drop down from one of those troubled clusters.

Everything had changed in the last few years. Moscow hadn't seen a frosty, ruddy winter in a long time. A damp, sunless fog had taken its place, and Kira couldn't remember the last time she'd worn her designer mink coat, three years new. The ice was melting at the poles, and the

world's ocean was swelling with fresh water. In Siberia, the permafrost was quietly melting away, like fat from a steak, and in the taiga, "drunken" spots were forming where centuries-old cedars stood twisted, awry, like pencils in a cup; in Norilsk, Magadan, and Vorkuta the frame-and-panel houses on stilts were sinking and bursting, like sodden cardboard boxes. And a once rare disaster had come to the Russian North: tornados. Those foreign firebrakes now roamed Yaroslavl, Kostroma, and Vologda provinces as if they'd made themselves quite at home. If previously there had been two or three tornados a summer in all Russia, the most famous being the Moscow twister of 1904, which sucked the Yauza and the Lyublin Ponds dry, now not a week passed without the news showing a wooden shed blown apart like a flower and the blurry shadows of flying cows. Now the Kostroma-Belozersk corridor rivaled America's famous Tornado Alley, which crossed four states, from Texas to Missouri.

Russia's northern twisters differed from the North American ones, which had also become much more frequent, in their special, whetted fury. Rapacious and narrow, their speed of rotation was many times higher, and they scraped their black signatures no more than fifty meters wide, across gardens and fields. Far from every "rat's tail" that dropped from a turbulent mother cloud shot through with threads of electricity reached the ground, but when one did, it went off like a drill, in a whirlwind of debris and darkness, and itself became impregnated with that darkness as it turned from white to brown. The mother cloud, sucked to the ground by the twister, seemed to take sustenance, put on weight, and thicken. The end result looked like a mushroom—an enormous lacy toadstool on a narrow stem, so much so that the mushroom resemblance led local residents at first to take the twister for a nuclear explosion.

Soon enough, though, the matter was clarified and the locals got used to them amazingly quickly. In both capitals, discussions seethed, assistance funds were set up for victims of the

cataclysms, swelled with money, and burst, and the office plankton, when they reached their computers in the morning, fell on the news first thing. But here, in the vast and monotonous Russian North, where the Earth was just as flat as it had been a thousand years before, there was silence. Nearly every yard had a cellar where they kept the cucumbers and mushrooms they had salted five and ten years ago and that looked exactly snakes preserved in a museum. There, by God's grace, the local inhabitants took shelter from the foreign disaster that danced over their flaxen and straw-yellow heads. In the two hours given it, a twister could cover fifty kilometers or so and then disintegrate in the air and in the memory of those who had not been its victims; those who had been, well, they weren't so lucky. The locals seemed to recognize the twister's rights. They left its black scratchings as they were and only occasionally dragged away debris they could use at home. Not many people got killed, and anyway death was no big deal. More than about the dead, the locals gossiped about the twister's peculiar pranks: the dry blades of grass stuck like arrows into hefty logs; the bell carried off from its tower and twisted like a candy wrapper. A much more painful and general loss was inflicted by the rains, which fell plumb from the clouds, often meeting the monthly precipitation norm at one fell swoop. Large hail thrashed crops, lashed greenhouses, hopped like a cloud of bedbugs across a village's patched asphalt, and melted in chilly piles on sodden gardens. This mass of hostile water from the skies depressed people and saturated the place with a heavy sorrow.

There was one person among all the rest, though, whom the twister seemed to have picked as its friend. Or rather, the other way around: this person had decided to play a game of chance with the twister. That was who Kira was on her way to interview.

Once upon a time, this person had known fame throughout the land. Kirill Smolyakov, a distinguished artist and Hero of Socialist Labor, had been the handsomest of sex symbols (as people would say today) of Soviet cinematography. Amazingly strong and pure of face, with a nose like a new potato and a poet's cap of golden curls that Soviet fashion tucked into a winter cap, Smolyakov appeared the epitome of health—which in the early 1970s was perceived as something entirely non-Russian, Boy Scoutish, imported with jeans and vinyl from beyond the Iron Curtain. Smolyakov's portrait, cut out from *Soviet Screen*, hung over millions of young girls' beds; the idol looked out on his anonymous sweethearts with clear blue eyes—eyes that knew how to smolder and flicker when the artist leaned in to kiss the languid heroine, cradling her entire fluffy nape in his hand, the way one might an infant's head. Smolyakov was a master of the touching gesture. In his youth he played righteous Young Communists and dreamy intellectuals who went to the countryside to labor. Later, when the artist began to harden, the perfect oval of his chin morphed into a heavy rectangle, and only fluff remained of his curls, the idol was given the part of a renowned battlefront commander in an epic marking the anniversary of V-Day. The whole country seemed to join him in his filthy Jeep and travel the broken-down roads at the front, to live with him in his headquarters dugout, where the hero, taking bites from a crust of bread, leaned tensely over a map on which earth kept sprinkling after plump fake explosions.

Then came the changes, and the renowned front commander's reputation faded badly from the buckets of clean and muddy water poured over it; the clear-eyed Young Communists to whom Smolyakov had honestly given a part of himself became businessmen in Versace suits who sat around looking as if all their pockets were stuffed with something. The actor disappeared. Rumor had it, Smolyakov had tried his luck in Hollywood but returned. He

appeared briefly, thin and wrinkled, in minor roles in a few series, and then he dropped out of sight.

Now they'd been showing Smolyakov on screen for a year. The national channels had been running retrospectives of his naïve, faded films, the clamorous talk shows had been showing footage—whether or not there was any point—where Smolyakov stood, his plain cap pulled down and his feet in their kersey boots planted wide apart, on the backdrop of a big Northern wooden house, so big the logs in it looked like matches. The house was oddly knocked about and striated. Old iron-gray logs the color of iron and spider webs were interspersed with fresh, recently dressed ones; the crude wooden ornamentation along the edge of the roof, also new in places, looked like false teeth. This house had become a matter of contention between Smolyakov and the twister.

Here are the story's general outlines. When the artist went out of print and didn't have the money for so much as a shed anywhere near Moscow, he made his way to the boonies and bought a mighty estate for literally kopeks in the ancient village of Vazha, which was older even than Moscow and had once risen like a patterned headdress on a verdant hill overlooking Lake Vad, deep and round, and which was now nearly abandoned. The village was being taken over by wet weeds, and the log houses that had stood there for one and two hundred years looked like mammoth skeletons. However, the twister that had come from the direction of the peaceful birch grove four years before had not touched these gray ruins but had headed straight for Smolyakov's house, swept the roof away, ripped the floors off the second story, and carried off his household goods, scattering them, mangled, through the nettles, which were as upright as spruce trees. After that kind of devastation, it would have been simpler for Smolyakov to occupy

whichever empty house was most intact, especially since the owners of this ancient real estate, let alone their heirs, had evaporated long since. But the artist was stubborn. With the help of local peasants—who recognized the recluse for the celebrity he was and collectively thought that if Kirill Dmitrievich had not commanded at the front then he had definitely fought—Smolyakov restored his house and repaired his drooping fence.

The next twister formed over the lake, quickly running through the moored boats in one great sob. For a while the rotating white column and the cloud of cold water dust made the lake look like a giant fountain. Then the twister, after sucking up some water, went neither left nor right but straight for the Smolyakov's freshly thatched, appetizingly yellow roof. This time, the twister gnawed the house down to its tile stove, leaving a brick stump poking up amid the chaos of broken logs. The peasants, who had lost their boats and gear but had, on the other hand, been rained down upon by maddened, cruelly thrashing fish, tried their hardest to talk Kirill Dmitrievich into abandoning that marked spot for somewhere out of harm's way. But the artist wouldn't listen and somehow worked on the natives such that they shook their shaggy heads, which resembled husked pinecones, and again set about carpentering. They restored the house using its own decimated flesh, only in extreme cases adding fresh bought wood and doing all this with amazing speed and efficiency; they even found a craftsman to paint curling tropical flowers on the trim.

Now it was the twister's turn. Human logic spoke to the extremely improbability that the building would be destroyed a third time. But by inhuman standards—and the inhuman had literally coalesced in the air—a third twister could be expected in the very near future. This was how the former celebrity lived, from one probability to the next, like a bead on a taut thread. Of

course, Smolyakov never could have expected so many people to suddenly try to steal uninvited into his utterly private life, sheltered as it was by distance and bad weather.

First to hear of the stubborn muzhik who had taken his stand and would not move out of nature's way was Vologda reporter Kostya Vozhevatov, a lanky man of great ambition with a face like a smoked fillet of trout, who had always dreamed of unearthing a sensational exclusive. He was the one who had shot the footage that subsequently ran on the central television channel, which had paid Kostya some money. The moment Vozhevatov aimed his camera at the old man as he walked straight toward him over his rutted yard, which looked like a garden where giant root vegetables had been harvested, he still had no idea who he was filming. Imagine Kostya's joy when he was back in Vologda, having got nothing but curses out of the old fart, and suddenly realized that this Smolyakov, fitted out in local fashion in a greasy jacket and a busted cap, and the Smolyakov from the movies, who'd looked like Sergei Esenin and John Kennedy combined, were one and the same. It was thanks to Kostya's energy, which burned and baked him from the inside, that the story found its footing in Moscow, while leaving Kostya himself right where he was, in his small, poorly lit Vologda apartment with the cracked ceiling where defunct spiders dangled like dried chamomile. All Kostya gained for his labors was his long, crudely repainted '85 Chrysler, which got stuck like a board in a sack on the dusty dirt roads over which Kostya's reporter routes nonetheless lay.

Moscow really liked the story. If the country was going to lift its spirits, it needed national heroes, and the politicians were clueless as to how to come up with the necessary personalities absent any special bloodshed—and here they had just such an occasion. Kirill Smolyakov was declared the embodiment of the Russian spirit, a symbol of national



steadfastness and the desire to build the country up right where it had been forever, out of the very ruins it had become. Visitors straggled into Vazha from the capital: reporters, producers, and representatives of Duma factions. Offers flooded in for Smolyakov to be on talk shows, stand for election, and act in movies. Now all the fashionable directors who baked up their war-adventure series with a Red filling, dreamed of getting Smolyakov for themselves. The most grandiose and high-budget of all was the beer ad project. The producer's idea was to have Smolyakov stand on the high porch of his restored house and proclaim, "This is what we stand on and always will!"—and slowly sip Druzhina from a red keg-shaped can. Since every Russian-made product was now positioning itself in a historical-patriotic vein, people dreamed of getting Smolyakov to do ads for Sovereign shoes, Great Siberia nuts, and Prince Monomakh perfume.

The Internet was full of Kirill Smolyakov. The artist's fans created crazy websites where elderly admirers who had supposedly had secret affairs with young Smolyakov posted their revelations, and mediums who had supposedly met Kirill Dmitrievich on board a flying saucer posted their reminiscences. Smolyakov apparently had more illegitimate children than Lieutenant Shmidt. What interested everyone especially, though, was whether a twister would or wouldn't hit Smolyakov's restored house a third time. Bookies took bets at odds of 8.5 to 9.2. This meant that Internet gamblers had more faith in probability theory than in the unknowable power that stirred, like an arm in a sleeve, in every cloud that formed over Vologda. First it was Russian bookies who pounced on the goldmine, but after a while even Gamebookers relented and was now taking bets on Smolyakov as if he were Chelsea. As a result, sacks of money were practically hanging over Smolyakov from a nail. A number of gamblers imagined the key to success lay hidden somewhere at Smolyakov's legendary compound and that if they had a heart-to-heart talk with the artist he would reveal his secret. Filled with hope, they vied with reporters

to reach Vazha, making their way down the muddy brown back road, where cars got stuck like flies on flypaper, or across Lake Vad from the nearest rail station, in wooden boats which they hired at inflated prices and which echoed the seagulls' dreary, piercing cries with the squeal of their oarlocks.

But they all came up empty.

Waves of hikers and drivers smashed up against Smolyakov's high fence, which had been assembled out of wrinkly, mummified beams. The gates, on hinges of time-eaten forged iron, were kept locked. In the briefest of intervals, Smolyakov had ripped building materials out of the thick Vazha ruins, which smelled of damp earth, and transformed his compound into a fortress. Anyone who came close to the fence staggered back instantly when an enormous dog immediately rose up on the other side, like the man's own shadow on the fence. It lunged unseen at the beams and barked loud enough to be heard in the forest. A few daredevils who managed with the help of various additional devices to peek over the fence insisted that these beasts were bare and black, as if swathed in thick rubber, and their snouts looked like ugly black roses. No one who went there ever got Smolyakov to come out and talk. The answer to the shouts and summonses, which went on for hours, was usually a single shot fired in the air, which made something seem to stop all of a sudden at its very zenith. In revenge the conspirators wrote and carved obscene graffiti on the blameless fence and set fire to a few abandoned houses in the village, which burned sourly and raucously, streaming acrid white smoke from their charred logs for a long time.

All these facts notwithstanding, Kira Matveyeva had reason to believe that it was she who would obtain an interview with the artist and in addition prise something from him even more substantive.

Kira Matveyeva loved money above all else. And she knew for a fact that, all the oddities of his current behavior notwithstanding, Kirill Smolyakov loved the exact same thing.

There was a connection between Kira and Smolyakov. Kira had been convinced of this from the moment she laid eyes on that blurry, jerky footage some Vologda dolt had been lucky enough to shoot. There, behind the square shoulder of the advancing Smolyakov, she had seen a tree, a desiccated fir with a carcass that looked like a rusty iron armature and had a peculiar structure to its rough trunk that gave Kira a hot jolt to the chest. In the deep, damp courtyard where she had spent her Moscow childhood, there had also been a very old, sagging, and untidy plane tree that had possessed the same, instantaneously recognizable characteristic: there always seemed to be someone standing behind its trunk, which looked like a clod of dried earth. Little Kira, terrified from her cute little knees to her forehead, often tried to catch sight of whoever was hiding. But the person was always too nimble and deftly stepped back, continuing to hide and watch Kira, no matter where she looked. He was always there, behind the plane tree, sad and attentive, as if he had been wronged. As a child, Kira had thought the man behind the tree was her missing father.

Kira's mama, Ninochka Matveyeva, never spoke of Kira's father. She was a makeup artist who had spent her whole life flitting from set to set—and had worked especially often with Kirill Smolyakov. They had souvenirs at home: snapshots in a velvet album where Smolyakov, always serious, was hugging Ninochka, who was always laughing—on the backdrop of a wet lane in Riga, or a languid sea, or some marble angel with wings to its heels and a raised cross. There was also Kirill Smolyakov's plaster mask, which looked more like an old slipper than anything else. Ninochka Matveyeva had once used it to measure the artist's false noses and latex

chins. Naturally, none of this proved anything. Kira's patronymic was Nikolayevna, the same as her mother's. Kira suspected that this was another equally nonexistent Nikolai, because she didn't remember having a grandfather. On the other hand, her masculine name, rare for the late 1970s, said a great deal. Ninochka had probably wanted a son but had had a daughter instead. A consolation in her old age, damn it all.

Unfortunately, Kira did not discern any outward likeness to Smolyakov. She was a carbon copy of Ninochka: small but bright eyes, like faceted glass beads, calligraphically curved eyebrows, and dimples. Angry at Ninochka for so much—her dreaminess and poverty, her love of sweets, that dark apartment on the first floor with the low ceilings that needed whitewashing and looked like they'd been smeared with clay, and the shower with the rubber hose, as rusty as a pepper pot—Kira pointedly corrected what she had been bequeathed. "Look, Mama, this is how it should have been," she repeated to herself as she straightened her curls with a curling iron and gave her eyes a cold, contemptuous depth with the help of tattooed eyeliner and makeup. In essence, Kira had not forgiven Ninochka a single day of her absurd and carefree life. As she hacked out a career for herself at a business weekly, daringly grabbing pieces of the advertising pie and living on antidepressants, which gave the world a kind of light clockwise spin, on her way to where all worry and sadness ends, Kira saw Ninochka's existence as a fragile feminine heaven with a sweet tucked in her cheek. "There, I can, so why couldn't you?" she would mentally ask her mother and might have received some kind of answer had Ninochka not died eight years before from breast cancer.

Kira loved money, and that was good because it was right. But in love, as in everything else, happiness required mutuality. Kira earned a lot of money through hard work and frayed nerves, but like Danae, she dreamed of a golden rain. The casinos, decked out with garlands like

precious gems lowered on threads, beckoned with the promise of a golden rain. If you squinted, you might think that all this flowing colored electricity was outlining magic tents, not those ordinary buildings that stood, in reality, on the ground. Wherever gambling went on, the crude laws of the material world melted away, and a person stood there before his luck like someone standing in a temple before his god. This is where iron Kira, whom neither her tattered doll of a Ninotchka nor her phantom father had ever concerned themselves with, turned for love and generosity. The spin of the lacquered wheel and the dry syncopated rattle of the ball, which shifted to a drum roll the closer it got to the result, always gave her a thrill; the female croupiers' translucent fingers, which were marked by a crimson manicure, for video surveillance, and which slid the gamblers their stiff new cards, bewitched her. Placing a rough chip on the playing table's alluring checks, which seemed to round off in her eyes, Kira felt hot surges of recognition such as an orphan might experience upon seeing his birth mother. She could not walk calmly past the slot machines, as gaudy as clowns, and she bet over the Internet. The scientific term for it was ludomania, but Kira thought that when a person was gambling some essential truth was revealed, a truth purged of the mundane.

She knew, by the way, that her attraction to games of chance was hereditary. Ninotchka never said so directly, but from her reminiscences it emerged that Smolyakov was an inveterate card player. In that phony dugout, above the army map covered with communication lines and the predatory arrows of military assaults, lay a soiled and caressed deck just waiting for a break in the shooting. In Smolyakov's hands, it came alive and blossomed like a flower, streaming down in a long fall and playing its suits, between his wide-set fingers. With a flick of the wrist that seemed to be depicting a pompous gander's shadow on the wall, Smolyakov could pull the card he'd guessed from behind his subject's ear. However, the actor was luckier at card tricks

than at gambling itself. He squandered his fee for one epic even before shooting was over, but he always paid his gambling debts. Kira was counting on this as her secret weapon.

In truth, Kira's position was nothing to envy. She had lost a lot, a whole lot—frightening to think just how much. It was the acute sense of orphanhood she experienced the moment mama-luck turned away from her, abandoned her, as if she were being punished for something, in the middle of the casino, that had driven stubborn Kira to go see that strange man, Kirill Smolyakov, her phantom father. When she looked in the papers and saw the tree her father had stood behind throughout her ragamuffin childhood, Kira no longer doubted her surmise. Gambling, that pagan intimacy with luck and fate, had taught her to obey daily life's irrational urges. Kira decided to use her father as her own natural resource, to convince him to appear at least in a beer ad in payment of his paternal debt, and even better to accept everything fat and juicy that flowed into his bent old hands of its own accord. In addition, Kira was irresistibly drawn to the actual spot where the mysterious tornado that had something to do with her had been drawn. Kira bet every last ruble she had, all the money she'd borrowed, plus the money she'd made from selling her beloved Ford, on Smolyakov's house being leveled.

Kira had sold her car, so she had only one way to reach the village of Vazha: by rail, then water. The boat she hired for an unconscionable fee reminded her of a sickly roach and smelled just as bad. Brown water sloshed around the edges, like the insect's dead lymph, and there were rinsed rain worms in it, as white as macaroni. Lake Vad lay there bright and heavy, as if it weighed more than everything on its shores; a faint northern sunset played above it like iron slag, and there was a thickening and rumbling over the horizon. The little muzhik, the boat's owner, pulled

at the oars in the water, peering around, and his small, apple-size bald spot filled with red at each stroke.

They hurried but didn't make it in time. Just as they reached the Vazha shore the rain came slanting down, the water started to seethe, and the little muzhik barely managed to get his passenger out of the boat, which had taken on water, and onto the slippery black gangway.

"Mebbe I oughtta wait, reporter lady?" he shouted to her from his canvas hood, which he'd thrown right over his beard. "Kirill Dmitrich won't let ya in! He don't let nobody in!"

"He'll let me in!" Kira shouted and she shot her umbrella's cupola straight at the downpour.

"Do what ya like, spend the night where ya like!" the little muzhik crowed in vexation and grabbed his oars.

He was still shouting something, dipping his oars in the darkened waves, but Kira couldn't hear him; the downpour's crash on her umbrella, crumbly like radio static, deafened her. She clambered up the incline. The path slipped under her sole as if it were coated in vegetable oil, her backpack slipped off her shoulder, and the wind and rain toyed with her silly city umbrella.

The bad weather fell in with Kira's plans, but once she reached the village she was uneasy. The big abandoned houses looked like they'd been doused in tar; the wet ruts of the wide, utterly deserted street, like cast iron. Her flashlight's water-filled beam reminded her of a milk bottle being washed under the faucet and felt heavy and slippery in her stiff hand. Luckily, Kira did not end up going in circles. Smolyakov's estate was the only one whose lights—that teary yellow color you see in the eyes of old dogs—shone in the darkness.

Before very long she found herself at the Smolyakov fence, as long and solid as a freight car. There was a soundless flash of lightning, and Kira saw that the fence had been written over every which way, with fresh inscriptions over others that had worn and washed off. A huge puddle sizzled like a skillet in front of the mighty gates; two cloudy plastic Druzhina beer bottles wobbled under the downpour's blows. Her teeth clattering gummily, Kira knocked on the swollen wood but couldn't even hear it. She smacked her palm, kicked her sodden sneaker, and hurled her whole body at the fence. On the other side of the gate the wet iron bolts jumped and clanked.

"Smol-ya-kov! Open up! Smol-ya-kov!" Kira shouted as hard as she could.

Through the thunder's hollow grumbling, steps were heard on the other side of the fence, like a locomotive wheel splashing through the water. There was the clanking of iron and a round hole opened in the gates, a hole filled with a quivering light, and then it went dark and winked.

"What do you want?" she heard immediately behind the boards.

"Kirill Dmitrich! I'm here to see you! Hello! From Ninochka Matveyeva!" Kira shouted in a tight voice, her teeth chattering.

The man let out an odd gurgling noise, still blinking in the homemade peephole.

"I represent *Business Courier!*" Kira added desperately, and immediately a heavy flap fell over the peephole and the man on the other side of the gate seemed to dissolve in the fresh downpour.

Just when you thought it couldn't rain any harder, the thrust of water falling from the ominously underlit depths grew even stronger and harsher. Her umbrella had soaked through long before and sagged on its broken spokes, and a watery film flowed on the inside, quietly soaking her head. In the flashes' white tremor, Kira felt cold, pale, slippery, and dead, as if she



were her own deceased mother coming to see her lover to ask him for something for her ruined life. This odd thought about her mother gave Kira a sense of invincible, callous righteousness. She rushed at the gates so hard, water splattered from the grooves.

With her peripheral vision she had long since observed a large, solid iron trunk poking out of a downcast bush. Suddenly the trunk turned on its lights, and out of the watery electric murk ran a hump on legs—a man of sorts with his jacket pulled over his head.

“Young lady! Get in my car!” he called to her, dancing as if the rain were firing bullets at his feet. “That bastard is holed up in there and won’t open for anything! He doesn’t care if everyone kicks the bucket! Don’t be afraid of me. I’m your colleague, Konstantin Vozhevatov! Come sit or you’ll be stretched out next to his fence!”

“To hell with you!” Kira yelled in a breaking voice, shielding herself from her unexpected competitor with her umbrella.

All of a sudden someone grabbed her elbow roughly from behind and dragged her through a half-open, previously unnoticed gate. Kira hiccupped in surprise and released the sprung umbrella, which wouldn’t fit through the tight opening. She saw Vozhevatov thunder bow-legged right through the puddle, hurtling forward to get there in time. But it was not to be: the gate, low and fat, like a pressed wooden brick, slammed shut immediately.

The big house revealed to Kira in the light of two bolts of lightning that seemed to drive into each other looked like a great wet stack of firewood, not a human dwelling. The man, who was wearing an army trench coat black from wet and who was more than likely Kirill Smolyakov, dragged her not toward the house, however, but sideways, into the darkness. Suddenly Kira lost her nerve; she thought Smolyakov had gone crazy and wanted to kill her. Nonetheless, with her

tenacious reporter's eye she did notice that the fir tree with the dead side, which looked like a skein of barbed wire filled with water, was right where it was supposed to be and that the fence had been covered in writing just as aggressive inside as out.

In front of her, poking straight out of the ground, was a pipe topped with a scorched iron dome; smoke spewed from the pipe, which she identified more by smell than vision. A glass lantern the size of a small birdcage, a dingy trickle inside, was swinging from Smolyakov's hand; it lit the dirty wooden steps that led underground and the low door.

Inside, a hot stuffiness gusted at Kira. She looked around in amazement. In front of her was that same dugout where the famous movie had been shot. The walls, built of crudely stripped logs, were sugary with resin, an iron stove snuffled and whistled like a toy locomotive, and on a table spread with limp military maps worn at the folds lay a petrified crust of bread, left over from the shooting apparently, if not from the war itself. However, in the corner, where the camera was usually operated and where the viewer never looked, on the logs, hung an expensive, horribly dusty plasma TV, and DVDs and waterlogged books in English and Russian were strewn in total disarray over a glass rack such as you'd see in an office. A little black dog with ragged droopy ears, like pigtails, was fussing at her feet, not sure whether to bark at her or smile.

"This is where I live," Smolyakov said in his thick actor's voice, throwing back his hood.

"That's odd. Why not in the house?" Kira unstuck her soapy lips, wiping her soaking wet face with her wet sleeve.

"Put these on." Smolyakov handed a bundle to a shivering Kira. "Over there." He pointed to a worn pink-posed curtain.

Behind the curtain was an iron cot with nickel-plated knobs worn to the black and made up with a red quilted duvet in an unironed cover that reminded her of a cranberry jam pie; a

plank bed, where a moldering mattress hung, had been built in above the bed. All of Kira's things were soaked through, even her panties, which had turned into a strip of cold glue. Kira couldn't bring herself to hang them up with all the rest of her waterlogged clothing, on the footboard, but just wrung them out quietly on the wooden floor, as tight rubbery gooseflesh slowly covered her all over. In the bundle she found an old checked flannel shirt that looked like it had been overcast with cotton wool and cheap laundered jeans, crushed, like a crude piece of wrapping paper. After putting all this on and pulling the old felt house shoes poking from under the bed, Kira came out, as if to face the camera, in the phony dugout.

Smolyakov was sitting at the table, where a bowl of hot baked potatoes had appeared, thickly sprinkled with sausage, and a smoked tea kettle of an odd, irregular shape, like a mushroom, soiled with grime.

"Eat," the actor said, piercing Kira with the grave, imperious look of a front commander. "Then you can go to bed. You'll leave in the morning. And no interviews."

Kira's stomach gurgled from hunger. She grabbed a blackened potato, burning herself and spoiling her manicure, and broke the sweet fluffy insides out of the burnt brown skin, which was as thick as bark. Smolyakov poured her an aluminum mug of strong tea with shreds of steamed leaves, meanwhile the teakettle dangled precariously on its raised handle, aiming to splash the army map with steaming hot water. The heated mug's rim burned her lips, but Kira downed half of it immediately and tucked into the sausage.

Stuporously full, she finally looked straight at Kirill Smolyakov. His once clear blue eyes were whitening, as if they'd frozen; he had bags under his eyes that looked like they'd been sculpted of the same wrinkled mass that his actor's face had turned into after years of sun and

makeup. He Who creates all human faces now seemed to have created something completely new out of this sagging mass—and to have done so by hand.

“Tell me, do I look like my mama?” Kira asked with a challenge, wiping her sticky, coal-blackened fingers on a rag.

“Not much. Your mother’s a beauty,” Smolyakov answered casually.

Sitting half-turned toward his uninvited guest, Smolyakov was throwing bits of sausage to the little dog wriggling in front of him, whose imagination turned other uninvited guests into black monsters. That infuriated Kira, and her rage cleared her head instantly. Suddenly she realized that there, by the gates, after what she’d said about the *Business Courier*, Smolyakov hadn’t gone anywhere; he’d taken shelter from the downpour in his canvas cowl. Also, she finally saw what she’d been searching for for a long time: a deck of cards.

The cards were laid out on the stool Smolyakov used as a nightstand, and from their tortuous reciprocal layout Kira immediately guessed the nature of the old gambler’s loneliness. You can’t summon luck to a tryst without another person’s participation, nor can you go where the answer to your most unspoken and most important question hovers.

“How about some poker?” Kira suggested offhandedly, taking in with an experience eye exactly what game had been trying to project itself on her psychic screen.

Smolyakov’s glance was immediately hungry, and he grinned, showing his too-even, frankly false teeth, which for some reason made her think of the skull in which they would one day stand out in equally alien fashion.

“Do you have any money on you?” he inquired offhandedly.

“No. Not here, not in Moscow, not some, not any,” Kira honestly admitted. “But we could play for other stakes. For instance, if I win you sit for an interview—and you tell the truth,” she added hastily, noting the malicious light in Smolyakov’s eyes.

“And if you lose?” Smolyakov asked drily.

“Then I don’t write anything about you at all,” Kira declared, feeling the gambler’s tingle in her fingertips. “Not about this dugout, not about the dirty words on the inside of the fence, and not about the cards on your nightstand. Though I could easily make up your answers to my questions, as you well know. I got into your fortress, and there’s a witness over there, standing guard at the gates.”

“Is this blackmail?” Smolyakov suddenly cheered up, tapping his yellow nails, which looked like chipped ivory buttons, on the table top.

“Yes, something like that.” Kira smiled slyly. “Well then, are we playing?”

“Let’s have at it!” Smolyakov pulled a rotting bag out from under some messy sweaters and let a pile of Soviet five-kopek coins that had turned green—probably found in one of the abandoned homes—spill out on the table. “There, playing chips! I can give you a twenty percent handicap.”

“I don’t need a handicap. But seeing as it’s your deck and it’s unsealed, I’ll be dealer.”

“No, I have a sealed deck, too. So we can take turns dealing, my esteemed Kira Nikolayevna!”

“Oh ho! I never did introduce myself,” Kira thought merrily, watching Smolyakov’s brown fingers shuffling the nice new deck, turning it like a Rubik’s cube, tuning it for play like an expensive and fussy instrument.

Smolyakov played cautiously. His hands looked apish when he played.

He held his cards hidden, fanning them just a little, like the wing of a live insect caught in his fist. He blew on them, stretching his long lips into a tube, and from time to time ran his crooked paw from the top of his head to his face, plastering his forehead with what was left of his gray hair. A less experienced opponent would have taken all this for a bluff, but Kira sensed he was acting. There was a muffled, earthy silence in the dugout except in the stove, where pink coals were rustling friably. The game was proceeding unsteadily, tortuously, and luck seemed to hover right under the dark log counter-floor, unable to decide where to land. The only sounds were: "I bet ten"; "I double that"; "I open"; "Pass." The moldy coins rattled as they went back and forth between the opponents. Kira was focusing so hard on the game her temples were throbbing, but stray thoughts distracted her. Tell me, please, how am I to penetrate Smolyakov's tough defense if he perceives his own fence as both belonging to and the boundary with the outside world, as if that world were an enclosed patch to which the recluse wrote obscene messages on the boards to you-knew-where. And what was with the strange-looking utensils in this phony dwelling, as if the distorted teakettle, and the aluminum mug with its wavy rim, and the stove's stocking-wrapped pipe had suddenly tried to sprout wings or a blade to fly through the air? All of a sudden Kira realized that the answer was simple: all these objects had been inside the twister.

"How's Ninochka doing?" Smolyakov asked suddenly, tapping his cards.

"She died," Kira answered without blinking.

Not one wrinkle trembled on Smolyakov's dark face, which had suddenly become impenetrable, a poker face. But suddenly the game started going better. As she took a card to replace her stranded three of diamonds, Kura felt a shudder in the deck, as if a puff of wind had streamed between the individual cards.

“Kira Nikolayevna, you look at your cards the way a coquette looks in a mirror,”

Smolyakov commented good-naturedly. “Your face tells everything.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Kira thought, feigning irritation.

“All in.” Smolyakov neatly let two nonidentical stacks of coins drop through his fingers.

“Here it is!” Kira smiled inwardly, biting her lip.

“Four of a kind,” Smolyakov lovingly laid his four sevens out on the table.

“Straight flush,” Kira smartly fanned out the five cards, headed up by the classic queen of spades.

“Damn it all!” Smolyakov slapped his knees, threw his head back, and roared with laughter.

Kira’s dictaphone was in her backpack, which she’d abandoned by the door, under his sour-smelling clothes, which hung in damp mounds right on the nails. Fortunately, the dictaphone was wrapped in plastic, which had turned to snot but had still protected the delicate machine. Setting the dictaphone on the table beside the heap of potato skins eaten down to the char, Kira put her finger on the record button.

“Well, then, shall we do our interview?” she asked triumphantly.

Smolyakov nodded reluctantly and passed his hand over his face with a rustle, which made it obvious that while they had been playing gray whiskers had popped up like a crust of salt on the retired actor’s chin and cheeks. Kira pushed the button, and the dictaphone let out a little squeal.

“So, what are you going to do if a twister destroys your home again?” Kira asked her long-prepared question.

“I’ll rebuild a third time. And a fourth, and a fifth, and as many as it takes,” Smolyakov said in a muffled voice, leaning closer and closer to the rickety-sounding machine.

“As it takes for what?” Kira picked up on this interesting topic.

“I lost the truth to you,” Smolyakov chuckled harshly. “And you’ll get your truth, no matter how your magazine’s dumb readers take it. When the house was smashed the first time, the likelihood of its destruction dropped drastically. After the second time, its destruction was absolutely incredible. After the third it’s going to be almost impossible. After the fourth . . . Basically, an nth time will come after which I’ll be invulnerable in my own house.”

“Immortal maybe?” Kira asked ironically, feeling her heart miss a beat and hang in the void she was so agitated and felt so close to something mysterious.

“Immortal,” Smolyakov confirmed gravely, and his hard, frozen eyes suddenly blazed blue, like a spirit flame. “Here, on this very spot, the bubble of immortality got started and it’s been growing. Before, I was so naïve I thought I’d live on in my performances and films. But the time comes when any artist outlives his works, and the present commercial exhumation doesn’t fool me in the slightest. I’m really not such an idiot as to quit my proper place. And my determination to survive the nth twister, after which I won’t need any fence at all, has nothing to do with the so-called national idea. Although Russian nature is such that it seems doomed to suffer every conceivable cataclysm, after which it stands intact, out of reach and invincible. But that’s a long ways off, and my capsule of immortality is a singleton. I don’t need anyone here—not politicians and not reporters.”

“So why don’t you live in the house?” Kira asked, only now really feeling the stuffiness of this underground place pressing on her temples and exhausting her into sleep, which made the log wall bob like an untethered raft.



“I’m prudent.” Smolyakov’s low voice reverberated as if he were speaking into an empty pot, the role of which was being performed by Kira’s head. “Do you think you can spot a tornado from far off? That’s if you keep special watch, but if you don’t, before you can look out the window it’s ripping off your roof. From far away you can’t even hear it, it just hisses, like an old needle on a record. I read that turbulent winds generate a high-frequency sound. . . . Hey!” Kira’s whole body shuddered when she discovered Smolyakov standing over her and shaking her by the shoulder. “By the way, your dictaphone isn’t working.”

Indeed the machine on the table was stuck there and sulking. Kira reached her heavy hand toward the dictaphone. When she touched it, the dictaphone hopped, clicking all its buttons, and ejected its cassette with a nest of chewed up tape.

“We can continue tomorrow,” Smolyakov said as a peace offering. “I’m not trying to weasel out of this. A card debt is sacred. Take that bed, it’s made up with clean linens. But before you go to sleep, I’ll answer a question for you that has nothing to do with the interview.” Here he leaned closer, so that Kira could smell the strong, salty sea smell of a healthy male body. “Remember this, Kira Nikolayevna: you’re not my daughter.”

“Prove it! Let’s get some sleep,” Kira suggested rudely, rising on unsteady legs.

“Kira Nikolayevna, dear,” Smolyakov dodged her sleepy hug that fell over him loosely. “Spare an old man.”

Kira woke up long after noon. In tears. She had slept poorly. The awful old featherbed, like a squishy cow carcass, had shifted and crunched underneath her and wadded up into a ball. What did she dream of again? As often happened, Kira never remembered why there were wet spots on her pillow come morning. Smolyakov probably heard her whimpering in the night. To hell with

him, the old fart. The underground stuffiness had given her a terrific headache; her hair felt like it was standing on end from the swelling pain. There was also a strange alarm. As if heavy construction equipment were being operated outside of hearing range. As if someone were running a bristly brush over his teeth.

“No hysterics! Get up!” Kira gave herself the order and she threw herself out of her warm burrow. The floor rocked underfoot, slowly got in synch with the heavy ball in her head, and regained a steady balance. The clothing at the foot of the bed still hadn’t dried and felt like wet sugar. Kira put her host’s jeans back on and took a bulky jacket that smelled of dog from a nail. Neither Smolyakov nor his little dog was in the dugout. She had to shoot the grounds before her abortive papa chucked the reporter stranger the hell out. Her camera lay at the very bottom of her backpack; its packing plastic had also taken on water and turned into a scab of dried yellow glue. But the camera turned on, signaling with its gentle hum, and showed the wooden steps leading to freedom on the screen.

A light wind was cutting through overhead, and the sky was disturbed. Cold sunshine ran up only to be replaced by shadow, like in a fast-forwarded clip—half a day seemed to pass in a minute. She had to watch carefully where she stepped so as not to stumble. Bizarre, jagged holes gaped everywhere, and the yellowed grass manes with root clumps reminded her of scalps. Here and there she saw disheveled nests with clutches of eggs. It took Kira a while to realize this was huge hail that had fallen while she slept.

All of a sudden the alarming, latent vibration was replaced by a sharp, ear-splitting whistle. The wet birch grove visible over the fence was whipped once, then twice, as if it had been doused with a flood of heavy water. Kira quickly turned around and sat down painfully on the ground. The twister, a slanted, spinning column, coiled as if it were being squeezed out in the

air like a sheet and moved straight toward Kira and Smolyakov's compound. The stormy blot from which the monster plait was descending did not seem especially terrible; it was even sunny on its long blurry side, but Kira had never in her life seen anything blacker than the clear blue in the gaps of that storm cloud, which was edged in glittering, almost honed, cloud steel. Rotten boards, roofing iron torn like a blotter, and some dark shreds were flying through the air; a crimson dot flashed by and snapped—and Kira recognized her own umbrella.

She quickly got up on all fours, feeling among the clumps and stumps for her lost camera. Then she saw that there was no one standing there anymore, behind the wet fir fluttering in the slanting beam of light, as if it were entangled with shaking tinsel. Smolyakov was running toward Kira from across the way in awkward leaps, his face like a piece of bandage half torn from a small wound.

“Hurry! Down below!” he hollered, swooping down and grabbing Kira roughly by the elbow.

“No! I'm going to take pictures!” Kira finally felt the strap in the withered nettles and pulled out her camera with its muddied lens.

“Who do you think you're talking to!” Smolyakov rasped furiously, dragging the stubborn Kira like a goat on a rope.

“Let me go! It's none of your business!” Kira jerked her hand away in anger.

“Yes it is! Very much so!” Smolyakov, who had an abrasion on his forehead as round as a seal, shouted into Kira's ear. “All right, I was lying to you yesterday! You think it's easy for me to admit? After half a lifetime! For crying out loud! Drop the camera! We're rich! Do you understand? Starting today!”

“You made a bet on the Internet?” Kira was thrilled, but her words were immediately carried off by the roaring wind.

“No! I made a bet on the Internet!” Smolyakov outshouted the hurricane with his thick actor’s voice.

The mud trembled and coursed under their feet. The translucent haze plucked half the fence out of the ground, neatly, like a comb out of hair, and immediately after that there was the triumphal elevation of the Chrysler, which sailed through the dim garbage-y air, wagging its trunk. Konstantin Vozhevatov, dancing in place, his coattail pulled over his head, was catching the swollen and darkened body of the twister in his lens.

“Come here! Idiot! Run here!” Smolyakov shouted to him, waving his hand.

“I’m rich! I’m rich! . . .” reached him through the intermittent howl.

That same minute the Chrysler kissed the corner of Smolyakov’s house, gently and deeply, scattering broken glass, and made a crash landing, out of juice. Then the twister swooped down and fell upon the big house, landed on it like a bear, and spun in a column of chewed up chips. Choking on the dingy hurricane, Kira and Smolyakov grabbed each other’s hands and ran for cover.

**i traduttori/traduttrici:**

Sarah Rae

Hao-yuan Lo

Anna Wing Tso Bo and Irene Horiuchi

Olga Zaslavsky

Adam Sorkin and Olimpia Iacob

Inara Cedrins

## **Stone Upon Stone**

*~~translated by Adam Sorkin and Olimpia Iacob*

It is a hierarchy that can be seen today in the North:  
the mud under the roots, the scree twists  
and enters the stones as if sucked in, swallowed by  
their voracious silence; the vines, tree trunks,  
undergrowth and weeds slip  
beneath the surface of the stones. All enter the stones:  
the air, the light, the wind.  
There is nothing more than stone upon stone.

*(Fool, to believe that you can read the stones...)*

Scattered stones, emerged from my sadness  
like boils, like shadows I strike against;  
stones that seem to wish to grant me  
the full mineral substance, the absurdity of the kingdom  
and the enigma that enfolds them.

*(And if God exists,*

*He participates in this world disguised as one of these stones  
ready to give anything that He may*

*vanish in a ripple of water.)*

Fool, to believe that you can read the stones  
of the North. You cannot set them on your knees, you  
cannot leaf through them, you cannot borrow them  
like library books.

You kneel before them when it rains  
and when there is lightning and thunder, when they are cold or warm  
like your skin. No one taught you  
to believe in the spark at their corst like a woman in the fetus in her womb.

### **The Glance Over the Shoulder**

I do not come to bring peace to the Stones of the North.  
The stone is not for dialogue: everywhere around it  
hemlock grows, snakes slither together and bake it  
with their scales. There are people who cannot live  
without hemlock (*Et ne nos inducas...*)  
they pay well for it, kill for it.

It is written in books, in good books, that the North  
is baneful, it oxidizes, it gives rise to epidemics  
out of the clays and the stones. There also exist books that breathe  
not a word about where the North is (*And lead us not  
with these words into temptation.*)  
All are “teachers of poetry”: they keep their poems

in formalin. On the paths of the North  
as in *The Gospel of Thomas*: “Lift up a stone  
and you will find me there. Split a piece of wood:  
I am there.”

My hemlock awaits you: who wants to be there,  
on the Stones of the North, not on the steps of the Academy?

My glance falls upon the stone like a hammer  
and awakens its bugle’s brass.

(What I cannot stand in poetry is “the glance over  
the shoulder.” You write with its stakes stabbed into you.

The text is like a field divided into lots.

As the coffin is the frame of your corpse.)

High above, the clouds of the North are the blossom of purity.

Can I gaze upon them with the mud of flesh in my eyes?

If it is not dangerous to see with a blind eye,

if you can write with your teeth instead of your fingers

like Constantin Draxin,

who would be able to hold the Poet’s hand?

how dangerous is it to scratch

a verse on the walls of the Academy?

Go on, call him blind

call him a drunkard

call him a clown

scare the children with his corpse in the closet:

what is so dangerous beside a corpse

unless another corpse?

Hallelujah! “The glance over the shoulder” has detached  
from the Eye of Almighty God like a stone from the Mountain –  
how can it stop itself from rolling  
if its claws do not grow so as to cling to you?

As in Chaplin’s film  
writing leaves the back door open  
*(and lead us not into temptation...)*  
it is a nail driven straight into the brain  
a brain that creeps out of you  
on fear’s paws  
and scampers away leaving you with your own corpse

He who wants to be there:  
the Blind Eye and the Eye that sees  
both lie in Your Eye, God,  
shedding night over all the letters...

**For Such Beauty**



Only the wolves and I are on the Stones of the North  
no one between the wolves and the roebuck in my lines  
just as between words  
the hand that writes is one with the hand on the knife  
only death knows  
that the hand on the knife is her hand  
both the hand that writes  
and the hand on the lover's breast  
as she makes love with us  
the whore death whom you can't refuse

The wolves and I are on the Stones of the North  
lightning has furrowed the sky and the fir tree  
in front of me has been splintered by the blaze  
for such beauty you can die, I said,  
stretched out on the grass. It seemed I no longer had legs  
but paws the wolves recognized as theirs  
they recognized the wolf bone in the knife handle  
with which I was one

*In the dew, in the mist*

My forefathers knew how to find trails  
by the light of the knife  
amidst thickets is the same as amidst words  
peace, peace, the forger can dream:  
the line of the knife is like a woman's thigh  
along which you pass your hand  
once and more than once  
Only death knows

that the hand on the knife is her hand  
and both the hand that writes  
and the hand on lover's thigh  
as she makes love with us  
the whore death whom you can't refuse  
before whom we stand like the soldiers  
who come to the brothel from the front lines  
dragging to bed behind them the front lines  
along with her flesh  
If you could see them there single-file in a warm row  
where heroes and cowards are one  
you would be here above the pages  
washing their feet as the devout women did  
On the Stones of the North the wolves and I

*In the dew, in the mist*

no one between the wolves and the roebuck in my lines  
peace, I said, peace  
at least today, God, let this fir tree struck by lightning  
be the rainbow between You and me.

## **The Stones and Romanian Literature**

I hold no hazel divining rod in my hand.  
I speak only to Row, the blind man:

“The village graveyard is my library:  
if I set it on fire  
it would still remain land to sell  
in this whore of a country

You could praise the fire: it fertilizes  
the earth  
effaces the names from the crosses  
destroys the teeth in the mouth of poems that gnaw  
at the whore of this life”

Today at the tavern Ioachim proposed  
*the humanization of the graveyard:*

“Though alive  
we’ll inhabit coffins, we’ll spend no more silver coins on houses:  
the ghost will no longer seem demonic,  
the return will no longer seem frightful...”

But Row, the blind man, replied,  
“Does the North spend so much beauty  
only to hide it from eyes?...”

I was the last Costoboc among them –  
I ordered more to drink, bought drinks for everybody:  
I had just sold my parents’ house in Tireac.  
I kept thinking,  
“Father, Father,  
now I am as burden-free as a field after the storm:

hail has garnered the entire crop...”

Row, the blind man, continued to hold forth:

“What should I say to the blind about what letters are?

The grass over which the wind passes?”

I hold no hazel dowsing rod in my hands.

No one digs wells any more. And letters

burst out from the blank page on their own. They emerge

like the dead from beneath the grass of graveyards. They leave

their space empty for us. No interdiction:

the mole no longer hides beneath the molehills

it comes forth at midday and asks:

the Pythia’s babbling, doesn’t it drown in blood the gullets

of those in the choir? In the forest of metaphors

don’t wolves have the sharpest fangs? In the poet’s transparent eye

doesn’t the raven want to break the ice with its talons

and seize the brightly colored fish?...

Row, the blind man, warns us:

“...When you learn to understand the inscriptions on the Stones of the North

Romanian literature will change...”

“But who gives a damn about literature when you pass

among the Stones of the North?” Ioan argues back.

“Day after day I pick up a stone from the path:

I hold it in my hand as though God Himself

were at its core.

Lord, I cry out to Him, when You sift my ashes  
between Your fingers, will You still see me?"

GEORGE VULTURESCU (Romania)

**In back of the tree**

*~~translated by Sarah Rae*

*for Robert Valerio*

I smell fire  
in this slow rain,  
as if May did not exist;  
letters, witnesses  
to an imaginary carnival.  
The poet dies  
as pages dance an empty waltz;  
the library darkens without his hands;  
an unfocused silhouette  
walks among steel sculptures.  
The flapping wings of the raven  
cross the starless night.

I

In the well, the carp lives—  
no space or sky,  
only darkness and loss.

II

The carp swims to the surface  
and gazes at the light;  
blinded, she falls again.

III

The carp floats in her solitude;  
a mosquito approaches her,  
and, dazed, she eats it.

IV

The carp traces  
the thousand circles  
of her life.

V

The carp crashes  
against the curve of her home  
and dies from neglect.

VI

There are no carp  
in the well—  
only a cloud of mosquitoes.

(untitled)

The passionflower covered the tree in the patio.

My bedroom, the sheets.

I took refuge like a sheet of paper  
crumpled in a hand.

I wanted to wake to other times,  
as when I visited the Moorish castle  
in the early dawn.

The rain battered the bougainvillea

trapped in a spider web.

(untitled)

A thread

long as the city

divides the bodies

a thread

woven by the spider in the attic.

My fingers feel

its trembling

the tension

of the distance

that separates us

from point to point.

In the basement we hear

a voice singing a cappella

against the passage of time.



## **Breastfeeding**

I'm so far away  
from that young girl  
on the bicycle.  
Everything pauses  
to nourish  
the blossoms in May.  
I can't keep surrendering  
to my deaths.  
I hardly belong to me.

GUADALUPE ANGELA

## **Soap Bubbles Love Song**

*~ translated by Anna Wing Bo Tso and Irene Horiuchi*

While taking a shower  
feel free to let the young gigolo go running

May is a guitar  
a football  
drums of small birds

sounds

and

I am a stealer

Hang up your hat

Pick up the phone

Don't you know how to dance?

So long, oh

May the soap bubbles bring my love song

Drift on and cross the Missouri

SHUJI TERAYAMA

### **The Dog and the Ninth Beer**

*~~translated by Hao-yuan Lo*

From behind, the dark  
eyes of the night opened wide  
staring at a dog  
which lived in a bottle of beer

*"This dog," you said,  
"Is the bastard that betrayed us."*

Then we siphoned the fiery liquor  
made it into a strange stuff  
that only we could understand.  
As for the rest, there was only desire  
blindly following the loneliness.

We would never forget:  
the beach filled with darkness,  
and unimaginable lies.  
Gently we buried the desire,  
which was much silent than the eyes of the dead.

We wrote of nothingness  
with our shaky hands.  
The words were piles of bones  
thus burned into charcoal.

And with those charcoal words,  
we wrote graffiti  
on the city walls  
but the painfulness was slashing its own heart.

Under the weird moon  
(as if the squinted eye of a leper, you said)  
the dog in beer bottle  
was staring at us;  
while we two liars insist on believing  
there is a Goodness of World.

*"A city  
with its entire population  
attacked by a mad dog  
that might be an interesting story."*

But in such a city full of liars,  
Who is the bastard:  
the mad dog or us?  
Then I talked about the revolution.

*Revolution is a dog  
which feed on the sadnesses  
given birth by itself*

*"Right now I do not need revolution," you said  
"I need a maxi pad. My menstruation comes again."*

I answered: it's sad for men.

It's like as our tongues touched each other,  
thinking we were wet enough to travel  
the heaven; billions of galaxies died in graves.

You pointed out:  
those nine bright stars,  
a less famous constellation.  
"Perhaps, these stars presage that  
in the future, we will die as apostles"

But, unlike the last supper,  
on the ninth bottle of beer  
I went away from the beach.  
Left you alone.

In the distance was the silhouette of a glittering city.  
And thousands of dogs were howling,

in my heart.

DJENAR MAESA AYU (Indonesia, contemporary)

## **Surrender**

*~~translated by Inara Cedrins*

so I end  
among empty destinies  
with a cabbage leaf compress on my arm  
battering the face  
of the thieving hospital attendant  
who nevertheless was careful  
to collect my 30 Judas farthings

how unendurable the smell of fresh cabbage leaves  
when under them heals an arm  
with which one longed only to fondle

so I end  
phlox with its sad scent in the garden  
snails creeping over my feet

the last bottle of hooch exhaling spirit  
the delirious one herding pink crocodiles  
the overseer of the garden begging me to write her a poem  
but I no longer know how to order the names of flowers

autumn's poison in the blood

so I end  
not having been

\* \* \*

don't tell anyone  
that I laid my head  
on the table among tear-soaked cigarette butts  
and gave myself over to captivity  
there are no clocks here  
so there's also no time  
trained rats dance the cancan  
phlox smells like the unwritten poem

at last I understood everything  
not to be afraid any more  
one has to give in to captivity  
here are no jungles and tigers  
no day's work and gentle evening

now I can write poems for the overseer of the garden  
like phlox like flutes like truth

now I'll have my own gardens and worlds  
snails will bring me pearls  
my loved ones will rise from their graves to feed me  
with wild strawberries

can't  
close the final door  
there is no final door

to surrender to captivity isn't shame  
still it's better not to tell others  
how I remained  
at a way-station between anecdote and death

\* \* \*

the world is still playing marc chagall  
sunny morning tastes of orange liqueur  
in the overgrown garden beside a phlox stem eternity sleeps  
lethe flows right here beyond the gate  
all words are only butterflies  
that flutter in the breath of eternity  
some caught by a tricolored three-legged cat  
some tire and settle on my soul\

\* \* \*

beetles crawl past my head  
they have their paths  
maybe I too  
will be a black beetle  
perhaps that's my path  
further into the garden

\* \* \*

the overseer of the garden accepts my poems  
as members of the household  
the smiling prophet neighbor asks  
that I translate his stories  
who is to save humanity  
I don't know  
if I believe in rescue  
I already surrendered to captivity

\* \* \*

a few pages left unwritten on  
in the last notebook  
soon it'll be necessary to write on clematis leaves  
on palm fans  
on concrete slabs  
or simply in the clouds

if there's a god  
perhaps he'll send some particularly white ones  
clouds particularly suited to writing

\* \* \*

in the tall grass of the garden  
apples shine like round moons

the tricolored three-legged cat plays with them  
and meows demandingly  
for me to come play  
here there's no lack of time for games  
because there's no time here

earlier I was a skinflint with words  
afraid to say too much  
there's no fear here

AMANDA AIZPURIETE

From the diaries of Georgy Efron – son of Marina Tsvetaeva

~~translated by Olga Zaslavsky

## Diary #15

April 25, 1943

[...]

Hmm..., my debts. M. M. treated me to three delicious meat patties. I could eat ten of those; they were awfully delicious. There are so many delicious things around: meat patties, bagels, halva, and so much more. Finished reading Čapek's brilliant play *The Mother*. This is what you call art! At school we are reading *Hamlet*. I am already anticipating a feeling of joy from studying this celebrated work. I love *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; I don't think I have read *The Tempest* and, most likely, haven't read *Othello* or *King Lear*, either. Tomorrow will possibly get a pass to the children's cafeteria for a month of May, will try, at least. The Allies

in Tunisia have started a general offensive on all fronts and are moving in all directions with fierce fighting. The Germans have shown fierce resistance. The American paratrooper teams have started operating. If things continue this way, hopefully those Germans will be kicked the hell out of Tunisia soon. And after that, the Allies will attack Italy; this is where the Second Front is most likely to open. [...]

April 27, 1943

Didn't go to school for the last several days, while trying to get a cafeteria pass for May. Still don't have it, maybe will get it tomorrow. This is not entirely legal, since I am 18. The Soviet government has severed diplomatic ties with the Polish government. The Soviet government accuses the Polish government of a pact with Hitler (the case of executed Polish Prisoners of War in the Smolensk region): "It sank so low as to conclude a pact with the enemy." I wonder what the government of England would say in this regard. Most likely, it won't say anything. Of course, papers like *The News Chronicle*, *The Evening Standard*, and *The Manchester Guardian* will, quite likely, blame the Polish government, but this has no decisive importance. What is important is to know Churchill's position on that. The Japanese have stated that they will shoot the pilots responsible for deliberate attacks on residential property, the bombing of innocent civilians, and other atrocities. Aha, here they go, beating their drum. They



were the first to start the mess, they were the most vicious, and now, of course, they don't like the "Flying Fortresses." At the Tunisian front, the advance of all Allied troops is continuing. Went to L. G.'s today and finally picked up my composition, which I will, probably, hand in today (am going to school today). Today we will be covering *Hamlet*, which is great. I obtained a translation by Pasternak and a book on Shakespeare by Smirnov. This is perfect. Today, perhaps, someone will bring Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*. Someone named Valya Berestov — a young poet, a prodigy, a native of Kaluga, and a female worker's son rumored to be very talented — will bring it. It's possible that I, he, and two or three more people will "publish" an almanac of our own works. [...]

## **Diary #16**

June 10, 1943

[...]

Had bagels with scallions and salt in the evening and read Byron's biography; finished it today. A very interesting life. I am more and more interested in the details connected with my novel. And this is why I absolutely need to be in Moscow, since Lilya can give me abundant information about her mother, Elisaveta Durnovo, and I actually need exact dates and exact facts. My whole first chapter is random and approximate, but I can only find out from Lilya what is imperative for my novel: the exact information about Elisaveta Durnovo and Yakov Efron, about the acquaintance of Marina Tsvetaeva and Sergey Efron, about Elisaveta Durnovo's Paris tragedy. I am also plagued by the questions of composition: what comes first, how do I arrange

the sequence of events to reach a certain effect, what sort of reflections should I avoid? Next, I must have the materials that show Paris of the 1900's — Maupassant, first and foremost, and *The Bells of Basel* [by Louis Aragon]. I have to provide the most precise and convincing depiction of Paris of those times. What I have in the first chapter, regarding that, is only a sketch, an outline, and a very incomplete one. Basically, the first chapter is only a layout, the details of which will be worked out later. Since I am writing about real events, I need real dates and a clear understanding of those events. Who was Yakov Efron? What kind of person was he? What is the story of his marriage to Elisaveta Durnovo? What political views did the latter hold and what was the nature of her revolutionary activity? How often was she arrested? What was the husband's and the children's attitude towards Elisaveta Durnovo's revolutionary activity? What year did Elisaveta Durnovo leave for Paris? Where did her children live? What was her life like in Paris? What year did the tragedy of her and her son's life take place; what was the nature and what were the details of this tragedy? And so on and so forth. The answers to all these and very many other most important questions for this novel can only be found in Moscow. I have to read a load of books. The members of the French Committee of National Liberation are curiously colorless; there is not a single famous political leader, not even a well-known one. But could it be for the better to have "fresh faces," uncorrupted by politics? The National Committee of *France Combattante* has been annulled: the French Committee of National Liberation is the only entity unifying French efforts in fighting the Germans. Eventually, it will be dismissed, then, according to the republican laws, a (provisional) government will be formed, which will choose the day of the elections. De Gaulle and Giraud will take turns as chairmen. Algeria will be the location of the Committee. The Committee will send its diplomatic representatives to other countries and other countries will, likewise, send their diplomatic representatives to the

Committee. The coming together of Giraud and de Gaulle is of great significance, which will accelerate the victory and the revival of France (at least, this is what I am hoping for). But my hunger still persists. They are selling American canned food at the market for 170 rubles.

[...]

GEORGY EFRON

## REVIEW

A BODY THAT MUST REST ON AIR, Ahmed Barakat. Translated by Hassan Hilmy. Seeing Eye Books (now Mindmade Books), 2008. 31 pp.

“Must” is the curious, ineffable part of the title, and the reader wonders how this works in the original language (Arabic); the front matter does not give an answer, as these poems are a selection from a book called *Dafater Alkhusran*, (Rabat, 1994). The title poem merits its own discussion.

One of the richest pieces this reviewer knows in any language, this long poem—like much modern work that inherits from Rimbaud—blends the abstract and the concrete in a way that constantly provokes mystery:

And in every single tale there is always one

Who would put an end to the arrogance of mills

This trait, at its most powerful, always has a metaphysical ring:

What’s the worry?

Here’s the wind, blowing as usual, upon the entire past

A second gift of this blend, with Barakat (and it’s rare among its adepts), is intimacy:

Here

Time

Drips

From the ceiling of the room

This intimacy appears elsewhere in the book:

Come let's rain together

Under this umbrella

A disturbing power, the real gift of modern, non-logical metaphor, is the mark of this poet:

The air belongs to feathers

The soul is on the brink of buoyancy

And, from the title poem:

On red grass that struggles up the edge of its own existence

As for the translation, it appears to this reviewer to be flawless, despite what must have been challenges. To be sure, the concrete portion of this kind of imagery sometimes translates quite easily. But the result can have an awkward rhythm, or be a little louder than the tone of the original—in this case that would have been fatal.. We can only imagine what travails may have produced this great line: “The last queen to reign over myth had long lain awake.” This is the kind of result that any translator recognizes as masterful, regardless of his or her knowledge of the original. Translator Hassan Hilmy is a vastly experienced writer who has made enormous contributions in the field of translation.

There is no Arabic original *en face*.

Seeing Eye Books (now Mindmade Books) outdid themselves, as on many other occasions, with this important contribution. Ahmed Barakat, whose death at the age of 34 in 1994 has hindered our acquaintance with his poetry (importantly—his prose poems), deserves to have all his work translated; he is in the front rank of gifted poets.

Like all the publisher's work, this is a chapbook. The typeface (ITC Mendoza) and paper quality (design by Guy Bennett) are apt, in fact lovely, enhancements.

~~Peter Thompson

\* \* \* \* \*