

VOLUME 13 number 2

Ezra begs you to register now for that translators' bacchanal, ALTA Conference, November 7-10, in Rochester, NY. The most fun you can have without actually hang-gliding with a margarita in one hand and a translation (Borchardt's?) of Gombrowicz in the other.

The following is from Denis Feeney's *Beyond Greek*, and is by way of broaching a favorite subject of ours, the freedoms and prestige of the translator. But note—these are explicitly broached 2,000 years ago:

“From the time of Friedrich Leo onward, scholars have stressed the free and creative way in which the Roman model of literary translation works. The translations claim to be artistic works in their own right, not just representations of some other entity. The regular word for this kind of translation is *uertere*, “to turn,” a word with connotations of metamorphosis, of magical transformation, not of ferrying across from one place to another [...] [Ez note: the *-ferr* in “transferring” is the same Latin verb, believe it or not, as the *-late* in “translate”]

This self-assuredness and boldness is present in the first fragments of the new translations—perhaps disconcertingly for those moderns who are stuck with a patronizing attitude toward the supposedly parasitical nature of translation, and also toward “archaic” poets, who should know their place.” (53)

The Romans, often seen more as copiers than as inventors, should get more credit. And what happened between their time and ours, when, until recently (and still, in some benighted corners) people muttered that great literature could not be translated?

N.B.: The Tadjó poems at the end of the issue are untitled and are part of a book-length suite. The book, translated by an Ezra staffer, is available, *Red Earth* (original title *Latérite*). Hats off to Alex McKeown for reinventing this great African writer.

There are two reviews and three publication notices at the end of the issue. The acclaimed Robert Alter has made a major impact with his new book on Bible translation—a rich pairing with Aviya Kushner's *The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of The Bible*.

FEATURED WRITER: **Joanna Chen**

Hadassa Tal is a contemporary Israeli poet and winner of the coveted Leah Goldberg Poetry Award. She has published six poetry collections with Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House. Her work has been translated into several languages and she is the subject of a forthcoming documentary produced by Truestories. "It is poetry refined as crystal" wrote Bruno Doucey, who published Tal's work in France and where it has now been declared part of the Ministry of Education's syllabus. Her poems have inspired leading artists in various fields and has been set to music and dance worldwide.

Joanna Chen's translations and essays have been published in Guernica, Poetry International, Asymptote, Mantis and numerous others. *Less Like a Dove*, a poetry collection written by Agi Mishol and translated by Chen, was published in 2017. *Frayed Light*, a poetry collection written by Yonatan Berg and translated by Chen, is forthcoming with Wesleyan Press in 2019. *My Wild Garden*, a novel written by Meir Shalev and translated by Chen, is also forthcoming in 2019. She writes a column for The Los Angeles Review of Books and teaches literary translation at The Helicon School of Poetry.

How Much Yearning Does Time Weigh?

You yearn from within me
passing a shadow over my words, pushing
toward the source of light.

On a page of the universe your face rests
softly twirling the world around

You've been emptied of clocks yet time happens
dangling the world from a thread
a night and seven days and always
the unknown depths
and emptiness
filled with itself

Lacuna

I want to lure you with words impossible
to hunt, translate or plunder.

This morning I listened to hushed tones, and then
a word, I swear, began singing—
if only it would sprout feathers
you'd never know the difference
except for
the comma—
take it, it's yours, only promise me
don't pause

Handwritten

I know the handwriting of the wind, the prose that dust collects,
free of weight, April's sky when winds are driven inward,
when clouds hover low over trees, and feijoa flips
from branch to branch, and black-blushed pitango
scribbles verse, tossed by the wind. Speak the core of being
speak crude, elusive. Speak without fear,
core within core, speak pearl that is not camellia but
sweet primrose pulling bees to
naked petals blanching in yolky dress,
blue as lavender, daisies entangled in lust.
Speak the core, speak time that lies ahead. Soon the passiflora clocks will ripen

curling in

and as they strike violet

the last lemon will fall.

Leave berries in the branches, flimsy letters seeping through the page.

Cry the peony whose beauty impedes silence, wear the pulverized rose
with tatters of light—shout

yes yes and cry some more

imbibed by beauty.

I'll recognize the script, the forest-cradle dangling:

Here I am, in two heartbeats – here

Lonely Planet

Cry oh earth, oh pretty child, beyond the western edge

lies un-land, between the gates of Helios, aside a paling rock—

she lies in a pocket of stars, kiss-close

from dream lagoon,

kiss-close to a river bleeding painfully,

where Lethe's delta drags lazy legs. They say

Acheron flows downward, slow

as forgetfulness. Minnows flash redolent eyes

while Venus, crimson-caped, wallows in auric feathers.

Hermes, winged in sandals, devours road-scrap

to darkened shores, devours them whole.

Hushed by heartbeat is their spangled gossip, soothed by dock leaves

and mellow mulberries. But You –

so distant -

where are you? Why the ebbing labyrinth
with no one
to ask? Orpheus touched down, glanced back.
Away was I and so were you, turning

Let Her

let her be the feather that flutters your heart.
free within and out, from speech or silence,
let the bitter rise up on the slopes of sunrise mount
let the taste of storm
awaken

HADASSA TAL

Traduttori/traduttrici:

Alexis Levitin	(Salgado Maranhão)	Boris Kokotov	(Nikolaj Reber)
Diane Neuhauser	(Pedro Solis)	Kristin Mathis	Sappho
Philip Krummrich	(Laura Gomez)	Alex McKeown	Véronique Tadjó
Will T.F. Carter	(Sebastián Bondy)		

A Gaze

~~translated by Alexis Levitin

and she cannot even see she's killing me
in anonymity.

SALGADO MARANHAO

Tortoise

~~translated by Diane Neuhauser

Everything seems immobile: the wind, the dance of the leaves.
The water quiet, as if it were solid. A foliage of slime
stagnates in the old basin. Everything seems inanimate: life.
Two eyes, alienated, almost of stone, appear.
Domed shell, grainy, rustle of a sloping wall.
Its sluggish stubs move in a soft langor, hermit.
Everything seems nirvana: death, the womb.
I breathe in ancient days: home, cradle, grave.

Bipolarity

Some days your mind opens like a sprung cage
with birds breaking away, chirping, flapping their wings
fluttering and swooping over the high green of trees
free revelry without limit, only light and song and flight.

Other days your mind capsizes into the depth of your heart
like a boat inundated in the darkness of the sea bed
with a chorus of ghosts singing in the deaf night
sunken, prow encased, without sail or keel or direction.

Sonnet Searching for Light

Why, if I go on so professing love
and with it, such good fortune finds me,
do I instead have my soul undone
and my will, agonized unceasingly?

Why, seeker on the road to devotion,
do I lose the way with each step,
with little effort tire to exhaustion
and leave half done what I attempt?

How to continue with this life of mine
if my baggage is vanity
and I pack it with death instead of life?

Today, I want to be rid of triviality:
I, a man of deceit and artifice,
want the most exacting light to shine.

Revolution of the Butterflies

When in the year 939

Taira-no-Masakado rose up against the dominance of Kyoto
there appeared an enormous cloud of butterflies
as if beckoned by some mysterious warning of death.

The people believed they were spirits
of thousands of men dead in battle.

Masakado had prepared in stealth for his revolution,
but was defeated and decapitated, and according to legend,
his head took flight on its own to reach Kyoto.

All change begins in silence, all transformation (metanoia)

let's say of some tiny white eggs, of a poor larva
unable to cover its nakedness, so makes a lair apart,
a capsule hanging from the branch of a tree,
spinning its sheath, suspended until the chrysalis breaks

and then encounters the freedom of flight.

The Falling Years

I casually picked up a book.

Tapped it on my leg and the impact freed a small cloud of fine dust.

It belonged to my great grandfather and was edited in Cordoba, Argentina

in 1957,

during the military dictatorship called
the Liberating Revolution that brought down Peron.
The title was *An Introduction to Politics* by Harold J. Laski,
who influenced the creation of modern India, controlled by the British empire
until 1947.
It was purchased from a bookstore in San Jose, Costa Rica,
in 1959,
where a decade earlier the revolution figuerista had triumphed
and abolished the military.
This year '59, while my great grandfather—on his return to Nicaragua—
read and annotated the book,
in El Chaparral, the squadron sent by Somoza annihilated a guerrilla unit.
The armed battle would continue until the sandinista revolution
of 1979
that produced another armed battle.
My great grandfather died in 1964.
I think about these interlaced contingencies and the dust
on my fingers: so goes time.
Under the dictatorship of Daniel Ortega, in 2011 Anno Domini.

PEDRO XAVIER SOLIS

II. poem

~~translated by Philip Krummrich

You remember how nice it seemed to us back then
arguing about how fast the clouds could go
in autumn.

I ask you if you still think of that night,
when all at once the weather came down hard on us
and when we got back home mom yelled at us
telling us never to do it again
not mind her get back home so late.

Try to remember how many years have passed
since the last time you had to stand
and give your explanations to that same mother
who now is feeling that she's gotten old
and that she has no right to question you
why sometimes you don't come and sleep at home.

Try to remember how long
It's been since that face looked back
at you in the mirror, that face you no longer recognize,
the selfsame eyes since then
that do not give you back the selfsame look.
Think on the precise measure of the days,
on how it fits in one memory
that swift moment that is life.

LAURA VILLAR GOMEZ

A note for a young poet

~~translated by Will T.F. Carter

Do not be alone
Do not speak to yourself about yourself
do not frequent
the cinema of your twilight.

If you are asked
why the flower isn't yet a bonfire,
if the damp sky drags,
if the sun neglects
its music,
its seedpods,
its owls,
its kingdoms of straw and mineral,
do not put the key to your door,
to your smiling window.

Leave, go outside
cross the bridge
that spans dream and word
and if question combusts
a vacuous eye in the night,
if freedom fans the earth
before you're able to kiss a girl,
it's because it's chosen you
to billow in its name.

And so, do not be alone
with your silent film.

SEBASTIAN SALAZAR BONDY

The Warning

~~translated by Boris Kokotov

Be vigilant, attentive to details:
a single puncture or a little cut --
and light will splatter on the bathroom tiles,
and gears will fall and scatter all around.
What else will come? Gunk, mucus, ugly worms,
some other stuff (directly to the drain),
the soul escaping to the farthest corner,
and, last of all, god will tiptoe away.
You'll put a bandage promptly on your finger
and rush out of the bathroom, scared to death
to find no parents there, no brothers and no sisters,
no love, no hope, and certainly no faith.

Childhood-adolescence-afterwards

From shaky memory as bottomless as coma,
akin to stunned fish they're slowly bobbing up:
freight railroad cars without any load,
a locomotive wearing a fluffy cap,
old foxy gossips taking no offenses,
sandboxes, dogs, ubiquitous dog waste,
wide-winged sunset, bloodthirsty and relentless,
another one as vicious as the first,
a monster with pigtails clad in a corset
(a folder with some notes clamped in her hand),
card players hanging over a table, cursing,
suspended by smoke jets of cigarettes,
a cranky giant skilled in dirty magic
of turning ink into horrendous wine,
an Asian girl, fast-living and romantic
(got pregnant at thirteen, seduced at nine),
and many others... From the past -- to where?
It should be a place or probably should not.
Just let them go, without shame or scare:
they will return to dust -- not into dirt.
And you, rejecting gravity and reason,
will soar into the sky where clouds dance
to solemnly regain the unobstructed vision
as if your eyelids were removed at once.

NIKOLAJ REBER

Sappho 1

~~translated by Kristin Mathis

Dapple-minded deathless Aphrodite
Child of a trickster god: I beg you,
don't vanquish my heart
with anguish and grief, my Lady.

Time and again you've
heard my voice from afar,
quit your father's golden house,
and come to me.

You yoked your chariot, and
swift, noble sparrows
spiraled you down
over the dark earth,

a thick whorl of wings
from heaven through the ether
until—suddenly—
you were on me.

Blessed one! With that deathless
face of yours, you chuckled
and inquired why, yet again, I suffered.
Why, yet again, I summoned.

And what I wished you'd work
in my frenzied breast:

Whom should I cajole?

Whom should I draw

into your love play?

Come on, Sappho—

who's wounded you?

Because whoever flees,

will turn and give chase.

And whoever won't give it up,

will suddenly grant everything.

And whoever doesn't love you now,

oh, they'll love you all right—

whatever their will.

You came to me before, Aphrodite.

Come again now.

Break me free from my tortures.

Glut my heart with its desires.

Do it! You, yourself—
be my comrade in arms.

Sappho 31

I do believe

that the sound of your laugh
and those honeyed cries you make
is heaven, and
whoever gets with you
may as well be God.

Just thinking of you, my heart
hunkers, trembling
under my breasts.
And when I see you
my words crumble.

To be precise: My tongue
splinters. Exquisite fire
shoots under my skin.
My eyes see fuck all, and my ears
whistle incoming.

Drenched with sweat
rocked with tremors
I turn the pale green of buds, but

I'm only one remove from death.

SAPPHO

(untitled)

~~translated by Alex McKeown

will he know
the soldier
how to retake
the ash streaked fields
and devastated lands

will he know
how to vanquish the fear
and the blood streaked dreams

will the shining soldier
still fuming from battle
still know how to sow these seeds

(untitled)

if i could

i'd live those nights
with you
those nights you couldn't sleep

i'd sweep your sadness away
with my handmade dreams

i'd promise you promises
i'd never not keep

i'd offer you dates
i'd never not keep

O Warrior

Orator

Friend

let me hold your brow
in my hands

let me hold your brow
unheavied
of pointless games

VERONIQUE TADJO

REVIEWS:

VISION OF THE CHILDREN OF EVIL, Miguel Angel Bustos. Translated by Lucina Schell, Co.Im.Press, 2018, 302pp

Steve Hall and Co.Im.Press have done a magnificent job with this extensive English presentation of Bustos. Lucina Schell, though near the beginning of her translating career, has shown a masterful touch. She has solved many difficulties (like the ambiguity of “*olvido*”—both “forgetting” and “oblivion”) to completely unlock the beauty and strangeness of the Spanish original (*Visión de los hijos del mal*, 1967; the present translation also includes *Fragmentos Fantásticos*, 1965). It’s wonderful that Stephen Kessler, who knows what he’s talking about, compares this poetry not only to Vallejo but to Leopoldo Panero. The darkness is that of the latter, and of other poètes maudits (and mad), Nerval and Artaud.

A press release has it thus: “In Bustos’s poetry, language is both a tool of subjugation and a device to conjure a strange world that transcends the one we *think* we know. And like a postcolonial Rimbaud, he repurposes symbols to develop his own...” These poems, particularly the following, have an eerie concision. The concision is part of the heritage of modern poetry, ever since Rimbaud and Mallarmé and the latter’s primacy of the paratactic. But Bustos’s concision is not that of Pound and Eliot, who shepherded French Symbolism into other cultures; it’s not the connotative concision of Eliot’s evocation of an age and what Pound called “its accelerated grimace.” Bustos is closer to a purely Imagist concision—one that unsettles because it suspends and eliminates so much. In his richest imagery Bustos reaches an eeriness that is closer to surrealism:

Don’t cross a plaza at night beneath the distant roar of flaming cobalt suns. Wait for the rain to extinguish the shadow of high heaven in the grass.

Now that you’ve closed one of those pieces of mahogany furniture gleaming with all the brilliance of sleeping wood, open it forcefully. You might surprise strange ceremonies of handkerchiefs, murmurs from empty suits, trembling canvasses, a long light smothered in its flight through the folds of lost letters.

This poem has Paul Eluard’s lightness, sparseness of touch in syntax and detail—but also has the French surrealist’s reversals and contradictions, the strange force that lifts the reader to what his cohort called another “zone” or “level” of perception.

While this is true in different ways for much of poetic art, here the similarity is Bustos’s spare collusion of nouns. The translator has to maintain an intimate tone here, even while the nouns at

first seem to collide more than they collude. The shock of their mixing comes from the typically modern blend of abstract and concrete, and the translator has to preserve this, not allowing her choices to make the abstract tangible and the concrete intangible. There is great sophistication in Schell's handling of the building-block substantives here. The fungibility of substantives (with the caveat above) is stock-in-trade for the original surrealists, who also played the tangible (nouns) off the intangible in their imagery. Schell shows some boldness, always good, along with a sensitive touch: she adds "cobalt" to cover "esmaltes," and connects the word more intimately with "suns." She comes up with "gleaming" instead of the noun "fulgores," Instead of "hollow murmurs in the suits" ("huecos murmullos en trajes") she feels free to move things around, "murmurs from empty suits." Instead of "folds and lost letters" it's "the folds of lost letters." The fungibility there is that of the folds, which could have been of cloths, or of papers—and so the substantives are married, and the Fargue-like or Eluard-like intimacy is increased.

The book is a signal achievement, though for a time we thought the signal of this young translator's importance was her wonderful website: Reading In Translation (www.readingintranslation.com, now under new direction). Do the bold traits we see in this work derive from the new respect that translators enjoy—or are they one individual's talent? There's no doubt, either way, that we'll see more of them. It's all good.

~~Peter Thompson

OF DEATH, MINIMAL ODES, Hilda Hilst. Translated by Laura Cesarce Eglin. Co.im.press, 2018. 142 pp.

The poetry of award-winning Brazilian writer and artist Hilda Hilst (1930-2004) was celebrated during her lifetime and remains influential in her homeland but has not been widely available in English. Uruguayan poet Laura Cesarce Eglin's vibrant and faithful translation of Hilst's *Of Death, Minimal Odes*, published last October by Co.im.press, seeks to bring Hilst to a new readership. In light of the autocratic turn in US and Brazilian politics in recent years, Hilst's passionate, seeking, experimental work is especially welcome. Hilst waited out the military dictatorship that ruled from 1964-1985 at her countryside retreat, Casa del Sol, fleeing the social pressures of Sao Paulo, where she was born into an ancient and well-connected family.

This volume opens with a handful of short poems written and illustrated, with watercolors of women and animals in a red, gold, and green palette, in 1977. In short stanzas, Hilst juxtaposes rider and beast of burden, painting and verse, language and action. The first poem of the collection reads, in full:

Elephant rhinoceros
I lived on top of a mountain
trying to bring your gesture
your horizon
to my desert

The puzzle of the first line's doubling of pachyderms gives way to the poignant absurdity of the mountaintop poet struggling to bring the beloved's gesture "to my desert," a shift in perspective and distance that Hilst uses to powerful effect throughout the volume.

Much of Hilst's work is in conversation with, and dedicated to psychoanalytic philosopher Ernest Becker, who argues in *The Denial of Death* that the repression of the terrible awareness of our mortality compels art, heroism, and evil. Hilst shares with Yeats an impulse to dramatize the duality of the human condition through animal imagery, but while Yeats's heart is "fastened to a dying animal," Hilst imagines herself and her "living death" "alive and united." The thinking, perceiving mind and animal limbs are united unwillingly in the confusion of the present:

"brain and hooves / in the pitch dark."

In the last of the watercolor poems, the speaker "dreamed that I rode you, lion king," and "led you through eternity to my home." The richness of this imagery is mythical and satisfying, a counterpart to the absence and impossibility of the opening poem. Such narrative closure is absent from the next set of poems, the "minimal odes" of the title. Eglin, who has published four volumes of poems in Spanish, discusses her work in an afterward, where she compares her work as a translator to Hilst's dialogue with death in the odes. Both conversation are simultaneously metaphysical and interpersonal. Eglin argues that, for Hilst, "the lyrical subject knows that death is 'made of question.'"

The volume also includes Elaine Cristina Cintra's essay "Of Passion and Death: The Poetry of Hilda Hilst," a helpful introduction of Hilst's concerns to the new anglophone reader. Cintra identifies "death as the voice of the poetic subject, granting it the place of protagonist in the work," and while death is everywhere active in the poems, death is also the object of the poet's attention. Death is a sister, a partner, a "little mare" whose hooves may be "bandaged" to better take the poet by surprise. Hilst conceives of herself and death as "two strong women in their difficult hour, but fish and horses return as possible avatars for death, for whom the poet generates dozens of names and associations, ending with "a speck, a little nothing." This flirtation with a negation both tiny and overwhelming is typical of the psychoanalytic impulse in Hilst, whose engagement with absence and desire prefigures Anne Carson's. Hilst offers along the way a catalog of the body from anus to voice, from claw to dream. The ludic and erotic in

Hilst, whose work was deplored as pornography by some critics during her lifetime, are in the service of mystical aims.

Hilst imagines death arriving inopportunely, “in a moment of emptiness / and insipidness,” and missing the usual vitality of one who “has lived in red because I’m a poet.” Death, “dressed as flower and fountain,” wants, like Milton’s Satan watching the Garden, [t]o look at life,” while the poet sees “you, death, my sister in the instant, at the core of everything.” The moment of death, while traumatic, is an encounter that consummates a lifetime of watching and waiting. The encounter is as rich with possibility as any rendezvous.

Elgin preserves syllabic and sonic effects as well as the spareness and surprise of Hilst’s diction and is a flexible enough poet to recreate what she cannot preserve with absolute fidelity, as in this stanza:

I don’t understand. I only
try
(sweat, slope, gravel,
drought)
to add your body
to my thought

where the slant and visual rhyme of drought/thought) replaces the tento/pensamento rhyme in the original. These poems are both sophisticated and stubborn, insisting on pleasure, sweat, and humor as rewards for the poet’s vision, the faculty that permits her to see death so clearly.

The next sequence in the collection, “Time-Death,” are leaner and more repetitive, tightening the coil of questions. “What’s your name?” demands the poet, unsatisfied with the answer, “Time,” until she revises her query: “What’s your name, dark?” This apostrophe allows for an identification of time with dark, and thus death, that is allowed to stand. Elgin preserves the menacing, Brechtian repetition of the phrase “with his fine knife” and the shifting verb tenses of death’s movement; “He will pass.. has passed...passes.”

The last poems in the volume, gathered under the heading “In Front of You. In Vanity.” push the interrogative form of Time-Death even further. Each poem, some brief as haiku, opens with a question (“And if I stayed eternal?”) and some of the poems end there. Others contain answers, though they often complicate or open up the question rather than resolve it. This series of chained conditionals implicates the reader in the poet’s restless seeking, shared by translators and readers of poetry in translation everywhere, to “continue to look for / the thrill of the word.”

True to form, however, Hilst anchors us back in the smelly world of the body; the last line of the book is “Guano on your face.”

~~*Alyssa Elliott*

PUBLICATION NOTICES:

THE FIRST DEATH, (2nd edition) Dimitris Lyacos. Translated by Shorsha Sullivan (earlier publication in Lyacos’s *Poena Damni* series reviewed in *Ezra* vol. 11 # 2). Shoestring Press, 2018. 600 pp.

THE BOOK OF HAVANA, ed. Orsola Casagrande, translated by Orsola Casagrande and Séamas Carraher. Comma Press, 2018. 115 pp.

THE ART OF BIBLE TRANSLATION, Robert Alter. Princeton, 2019. 127 pp.