

Volume 12 number 3

Ezra hopes to see you at ALTA (Indianapolis, October 31). You won't be lodged with the rest of us, unless you've already reserved, but you'll be able to register at this late date (probable cut-off is October 16). The best party you could possibly throw for translators. *And* the best bookstore.

Friends returning to this issue are Alexis Levitin, Judith Skillman and Joseph Bienvenu. The latter's Czech piece (Otokar Brezina, translated along with Viktor Svoboda) is astounding. The issue ends with a suite by Abraham Sutzkever (Hebrew original) whom we had not known. What at first seems mannered in his work soon yields to dense glimmer (a bit Rimbaud) and cosmic flashes (a bit Vicente Huidobro).

Key update: RinT (readingintranslation.com), a great site in its own right and a key service (reviews) for translators, will continue Lucina Schell's fine work with Lucina and Managing Editor Stiliana Milkova.

Speaking of our community, ALTA's endowment could always use a gift, as could The Ezra Fund. The latter supports our Residencies and has paid the copyright fees for many translators. Contact the editors if you wish to donate. News of the 2018 Resident in the next issue.

Our Feature is Carolyn Tipton, award-winning translator of Rafael Alberti. These versions are brilliant. Alberti was part of the "Generation of 1927" Spanish group of poets, with Lorca. Ezra reminds you that, along with Alberti and Lorca from this group, you can now read Emilio Prados and José María Hinojosa in English (Diálogos Books and U. New Orleans, respectively).

There are two reviews in the issue.

FEATURED WRITER: Carolyn Tipton

Carolyn L. Tipton is a poet, translator, and teacher. She has a Master's Degree in English/Creative Writing from Stanford University and a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Berkeley, where she currently teaches in the Fall Program for Freshmen. She has published many poems and translations in various journals and anthologies, including Norton's *World Poetry: An Anthology of Verse from Antiquity to Our Time*, and Robert Hass' *Now and Then: The Poet's Choice Columns, 1997-2000*. She has been

the recipient of various grants and awards, including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. Her first book of translations of the poetry of Alberti, *To Painting: Poems by Rafael Alberti*, won the National Translation Award. Her second, *Returns: Poems of Love and Distance*, won the Cliff Becker Translation Prize and was long-listed for the National Translation Award. Her latest book, *The Poet of Poet Laval*, a collection of original poems, is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry Press, of Ireland, next Spring

Return of A Sunset At Ravello

Always, you come back, and always
more clear and heightened, ripened
to sheer blue and ancient transparency.

I saw the distant sea from there
as now I see it from
this evening on another continent,
suspended in my memory, stretching
across it from east
to west, from north to south.

I also plumbed the depths above--hyaline
sky foregrounded by statues, soft voices--
so I could fully grasp you and retain you.

In the openness below, you hovered
as if on invisible
wings, as if borne
on the shoulders of the air, weightless,
diffusing beauty everywhere.

The gods, constant guardian
deities of that place, still green
from their grove, were beginning to appear
at the overlook of the lingering sunset.

Seen from the pines, that lucky sun,
lulled to sleep by the praise of the fountains,
didn't seem to be leaving; no, it did not want
to set, the sun, the sun, that sun, floating
refreshed on the sea, imperceptibly

poised in the foam.

That evening, it was going to accomplish
the utter defeat of the night, and fix
fast the light, creating
a miraculous, unending splendor:
day without death.

It was the earth's wish: uncovered
by shadows, it could prolong
its delight. Human beings
could shake disaster from their bodies, feel
for the first time free, true
owners of themselves, melodious
flesh without statutes of suffering,
each breath an inhalation of pure grace.

And even though one might sense in the distance,
rising like a language whose syllables were tanks,
an invading wheel of cold calamity, still,
above the blue of the sea was about to begin
an age of tranquil symmetry, the longed for
time of luminous song, the dream
of diaphaneity and harmony, of peace
now finally without end, the sunset

having been stopped.

Love Returns On A Summer Night

Tentatively, love comes, blindly in the dark,
maybe a star ripening in the branches,
I go back so I can feel it, back,
wet with the warm dew of the night, pressed
into a hollow of crushed mint and thyme.

It's not like anything, it's what my hand,
the skin over the whole length of my frame, the shadow
of my newly risen heart, the subterranean
center of my being most desired.

It's come back, transformative, and then
there's just the shape that I am touching, we're
enveloped by her hair, all one pulsation,
blood entangled too, a heartbeat felt
inside another heartbeat.

But words--where have they gone?
No words. No air for them to occupy
in this parched August night, not even
that little space that separates two mouths
before it shrinks into a silent flower.

But a secret fragrance wafts up, gliding by, a scent
awakened on the dark bank scorches me.

Someone lights a murmur in the grass. Always
on a night of love, a river's flowing past.

Return of An Assassinated Poet

You've come back to me older and sadder in the somnolent
light of a quiet dream in March, your temples
dusted with an unexpected grey, and that bronzed
olive skin that glowed with your magical youth
furrowed by the marks of age, as if
you had lived out day by day in death
the years you never had in life.

I don't know what you wanted to tell me tonight,
appearing out of the blue in a well-cut suit
of glossy alpaca, new-tailored,
with your yellow tie and long-suffering hair
wind-tousled, just like before
in those gardens of student poplars
and summer oleanders.

Perhaps you thought--I want to try to grasp this
now in the clear after-light of the dream--that you ought
to come to me first from those underground
roots or hidden springs where
your bones mourn in despair.

Tell me,

confess to me, say
if by the mute embrace you gave me, by the tender
gesture of offering me a chair, by the simple
act of sitting down beside me, gazing at me,
smiling quietly without a word,

tell me if you didn't mean to signify by these
that, despite the little battles that we fought,
you are still joined to me, even more perhaps
in death for all those times--forgive me--
that we failed to be in life.

If this isn't so, come back to me in dream
another night to let me know.

Love Returns To Landscapes Still Alive

We believe, love, that those landscapes are asleep
or dead, along with us, their true life locked
away back in the days we spent in them;
we believe the trees have lost their memory,
the nights have thinned and given away
whatever made them beautiful and timeless.

But it takes just the slightest trembling of a leaf,
the sudden breathing of a burnt-out star,
to find ourselves the same ones whose delight
filled the places that held fast our own embrace.
And so today, love, you awaken at my side,

among wild currants and hidden strawberries,
protected by the staunch heart of the forest.

Here is the wet kiss of the dew,
the tender blades of grass that cool your bed,
the enchanted sylphs who decorate your hair,
and the high, mysterious squirrels whose play rains down
the green small-change of branches on your sleep.

Leaf, may you always be happy and
never know autumn, leaf whose slight
trembling carried back to me
the fragrance of those blind and luminous days.
And you, lost star, who opened up for me
an intimate window onto my youngest nights,
may you never stop shining
on all the beds we slept in until dawn,
and that library lit by the moon,
and those books fallen quietly open,
and the mountains outside, awake and singing to us.

Returning To A Deserted Museum

Something remains to me when I'm alone, and
taking the path of the heart, climbing
the steep incline of memory, I choose

from a blurred sweep of meadow, from a desolate
willow, a lost hillside, the fork
of a river murmuring to itself, or a beach--
I choose the one that calls me back to life.

But tonight, this time,
on this night with the south windows shaking,
I twist in an ill wind of Spring, I round
its gusting corners, go numb, and fall
into the middle of an agonized November.

War-time Madrid: worn-out, spied on,
with twenty thousand doors that no one enters.
It's sweet, yet makes me flame with grief, to know
that in the evening, I can always open one.

Inside is the vast gallery, the much-loved hall
that used to give our eyes back childhood's dream.
I hear my echoing steps, I see the strange sight
of my footprints in the dust, this emptiness.

It's like watering my memory to walk round putting names
to the deserted walls that used to hold so many.
There are shadows wearing crowns who are not here, solitary

ghost horses, haloes
of heads cut off and set on fire, armor
permeable even by air, helmets
fallen away, and gauntlets without hands.

I want to sit down, to pause

as in the old days, by the forest pool
where the goddesses bathe, unaware,
to tremble like the faun, and slowly part
the leaves that curtain them from my desire.

I go from room to room,
from vestige to vestige,
from silence to visual silence, I cross through
the inanimate blind squares, and ask the light
about the life that used to dwell here, and I weep,
having hoped a little, I weep until even
the hollows of my ears are cupping tears.

Because loneliness alone resides here,
fearful, in the half-light,
where a multitude of pupils glows
and slides invisibly
across the stripped, accusing walls.

Love Returns On The Summits Of The Wind

You come back, love, preceded by the wind
which rose up from the blond fields of bread
brought to flower during the warm hours
of our first summer, blowing you stalk-
straight and burnished mid the stones.

You swayed on the narrow way beneath
the arches of a monument once set
by Roman hands above the temples and the towers
of their town, with hope, perhaps,
that someday you might crown it
with the gleam of your white steps.

You took to yourself, in the midst of that humming
framework of sonorous stones fixed
in place, the face of light that rose
on the bare mountain, the villages of faded
brick, the burning paths, the sleeping vastness
of a landscape astonished to see you
like an apparition on the summits of the wind.

Ah love, to be able suddenly
to see you once again just like before,
under that same high sun which gave

to our first summer's days their harmony!
All that bright and luminous music that you were,
beneath the arches of those ancient stones!
And to be able, once again, when night arrived,
to go down and lie out in the soft dark,
lifting our heads only occasionally
to gaze through the open arches at the stars!

RAFAEL ALBERTI

Traduttori/traduttrici:

Judith Skillman (Jovica Tasevski)	Alexis Levitin (Carmen Vascones) (Rosa
Peter Schulman (Pauline Dugas)	Alice Branco)
Viktor Svoboda, Joseph Bienvenu (Otokar Brezina)	Murad Jalilov, Kevin Rabas (Sergei Yesenin)
Irena Praitis (Sonata Paliulyte)	Shohreh Laici (Aba Abedin)
Yuemin He (unknown)	Maia Evrona (Abraham Sutzkever)
David DeGusta (Gebre Kristos Desta)	Morgan Shafter (Elena Kostyleva)

Birth of the Future

~translated by Judith Skillman

The trembling poem lies
On the black and humid land
With hair of exuberant fish roe
With eyes of black circles and a dark depth in them
With hands like hot plows
With light, fast, and firm legs
With sweet and lush breasts
With a pink, playful round face

With an emptiness in the body
With a bloody emptiness!

The trembling poet lies
With paths of needles, mud and marble
With food from ambrosia and nectar

A source in the tiny, infidel body,
A source of fertility!

In the night with a full moon:
The poem was born a new poem.

All in Synchrony

Syntax of the light
Floats over somber clouds

She reaches out transparent hands
To the darkness
That settles
On the surface of the earth

To ascend
Beyond the murky shapes

She spreads white wings

And vigorously flutters through bluishness

As bitter darkness slips down

Through her bright fingers

She goes down to the thorns again

At other times

A gentle vortex descends

Nursing darkness

With sweet sips

So that it is not forever thrown

To vanish

Glowingly they embrace each other
And meteors soar towards the emptiness

Out of the touch of their palms
Waves of heat emerge

To

Blanket

Everything

Next Step

Until when it will be beside me,

Until when and until where

It will follow me

This winged lion,

This gentle beast,

A protector

That was sent to me

As a gift

By my best friend,

Who taught me not to withdraw

From the road paved with flint-stones,

Edged with myrtle,

So that I would not enrage

My faithful companion,

And he tears me apart

Before I make that fatal step

To the Abyss.

JOVICA TASEVSKI (Macedonia)

Far off

~translated by Peter Schulman

the snow is on fire
and yet
I walk with bare feet

far off

we can hear the braying and sizzling of black iron
and the stars line up obediently
before being devoured in gusts within your eyes

PAULINE DUGAS (French-Acadian)

Hands

~translated by Viktor Svoboda and Joseph Bienvenu

In a blinding white light the earth was laid out before our eyes
like an opened book of songs. And so we sang:

Look, right now the hands of millions link together in a magic chain
that circles all the continents, the forests, and the mountains
and reaches out across the silent domain of all the oceans to touch our brothers:

In the cities, those tragic sites of sacrifice, that blacken the day's last light from deep horizons,
and in that place where the sun, that mystic lamp,
lowered down from the dome of azurite,
smolders bloody in its smoke, rolling over train stations and cathedrals,
the palaces of kings and their armies, the parliaments, the penitentiaries, the amphitheaters,
where the embers of millions of hearts, throughout the dusky skies of the departed ghosts,
inflamed by a solar wind of bliss and death,
flare up like grains of burning coal stirred up with iron hooks;—
in the sullen silence of the lowlands, in the poignant foreshadowing of summer,
when the outpouring of all the powers of spring in its fallen blossoms hardens like flowing lava into stone,
and the days, like workmen in secret foundries, trudge tired one after another,
and in beads of sweat both man and beast sparkle, joined as brothers in a yoke,
under one unseen whip, lashing from east to west;
on the waves of the ocean as in the turbulence of the soul where the anxious shouts of swimmers
caught in a whirlpool, swirling around the mast, are drowned out by the lightning's trumpeting
and the skies and the waters fuse into one element of terror and death;—
next to every furnace, loom, and press, in quarries and in the underground mines,
at the construction sites of pharaohs where enslaved nations howl
as they build giant mausoleums for those governors of the immeasurable;—
in the demonic motion of wheels, pistons, and levers and hammers whooshing overhead;—,,
on the battlefields, in planetariums, academies, lazarettos, laboratories;—
in the workshops of great artists, musing over marble, where a world
of more potent dread and glory slumbers, which emerges half-lit out of the material
of primordial sleep in the chisel's flickered frenzy of creation's insight,
there where the passion nesting on the fatal slopes of volcanoes cultivates
orange gardens of desire where the spiciest wines and poisons age
beneath that fiery never-setting sun; and where lust,
that alchemist poisoned by the fumes of her futile distillation,

sputters through hallucinations;— at nightfall with its mystery and its music
where thoughts inch closer to unthinkable places and, through the thundering orchestras,
through the dream of a lost melody, the brass will blare, and from the strings
a tide of songs as primal as the earth will swell over the exhaustion of souls;—
beneath the electric gestures of young women in which an intoxicating spring sparkles,
the fateful night resounds with a flight of kisses, with lips like glowing stars,
and a woman quickly turns pale when called by her secret name and, as if on a stairway slippery
with blood, she descends heartbroken to the miraculous fountains of life,
and shrieking while she is endlessly chased by a furious and jealous mob of invisible creatures,
with a frightened scream, white-faced, she falls back, and with blazing flames for hands
she clasps her victim to her chest: a being, howling on contact with this sun; —
amidst a battle of a thousand wills, shattered by the cataclysm of your divine will,
alone but surrounded by millions, humankind keeps working, countless hands are trembling,
from age to age never resting, their muscles spasm,
on both hemispheres of the earth... in a triumphant tragedy of dreaming,
like the hands of children, they fling stars like jewels,
but on waking, they are swollen and stiff, bloody from murder,
turned blue by centuries of ice, and as the earth spins, they tumble over cliffs,
grasping branches in desperation... Deranged hands of a sadistic hunter
who stalks even the elements! Hands of a half-naked slave weighed down by a curse,
heavy from the scarlet crucible of labor! Hands clasped in prayer, hands of the defeated,
like sand fused into glass by a blast of lightning! And hands bathed with tears, glistening,
bursting with luster, forever marked by the bleeding stigmata of love!
Magical hands, healing hands, touching a brother's forehead and reading his thoughts!
Majestic, generous hands! Soothing to sleep with a sublime caress!
Disembodied as pure light, like the fruit of mystic trees,
stretching out the entire cosmos to infinity! — —

And these hands of ours, clasped in a magic chain of innumerable hands,
oscillate in a wave of fraternal power that crashes upon them from far off,
made stronger by the tension of millennia. Unceasing waves
of pain, courage, madness, lust, delusion, and love
vibrate through our bodies. And in the blast of that wind, our senses turning inward,
we feel how that chain of ours, grasped by the hands of higher beings,
is enveloped by a new chain into all the stellar fields
that circumscribe the planet. — And then in answer to that painful question,
concealed by dread for centuries, the mystery of being born,
that the first-born reveal to their first-born as they are dying,
we heard the rondel of the waters, stars, and hearts, and between the verses
in intervals of melancholy rhythm, the dithyramb of worlds, one following another.

OTOKAR BREZINA (Czech, 1868-1929)

Becoming

~~translation by Irena Praitis

and the wall became mine

and the windowsill became mine

and the ceiling became mine

and the bed became mine

I became encircled—by things

become become—becoming sown
siege!—screamed the door

the event became mine
become become—you engraved on

you my becoming

everything—only becoming
became becoming becoming

become

become

become

to become

to the point

where becoming

is not

SONATA PALIULYTE (Lithuania)

The Mulberry Trees/桑 中

~translated by Yuemin He

Where to gather the dodder
But in the field of Mei?
Whom am I hankering after?
None other than the Jiangs' daughter.
She'll meet me amid the mulberry trees,
entertain me up in the city tower,
and bid me goodbye by the River Qi.

Where to gather the wheat
But in the north of Mei?
Who has swept me off my feet?
None other than the Yi's daughter.
She'll meet me amid the mulberry trees,
entertain me up in the city tower,
and bid me goodbye by the River Qi.

Where to gather the mustard plant
But in the east of Mei?
Whose presence occupies my heart?
None other than the Yongs' daughter.
She'll meet me amid the mulberry trees,
entertain me up in the city tower,
and bid me goodbye by the River Qi.

In a compilation (some authors unknown) by CONFUCIUS

Two poets from Alexis Levitin!:

~translated by Alexis Levitin

Camambú, petals ruddy with nostalgia, Hades,
call the novice sleeping in silence

Summer of mitigated shimmering a dreaming species
The spirit collides with captivated emptiness
the divine floats in memory
mutilated innocence wanders towards
the abandoned ship
Macondon butterflies have lost their hue
They lie half-buried in the river's sands.

Your silence is like universal sorrow falling among waves

Your silence is like universal sorrow falling among waves
The moon appears breasts burst from wanderings
a culvert turns into the melancholy of a lyre
A charcoal path a nymph prairie flowing
the febrile smell of the bayou
your confusion
a breakwater born afresh
A threshold surrendered on white spreading tulle
An empty star on the prow fleeing the asphyxia of paradise
an aboriginal thrust
Shadow of the sea, taboo's festival.

CARMEN VASCONES

Prototype of a Kiss

~translated by Alexis Levitin

Names are the flesh of the city, the lights begin
to flicker on after you, we speak of an embrace the moment
when I cease to be and your words alone
give me shape. Do you understand that no one can recover from beauty?
Suffering dissipates when days grow longer
and we change to daylight saving time. But not beauty, not
the mouth red with the wine you poured, the shivering pulp
of my lips. Sweetness overflowing from the edge of tongue
barely drawn, a rapid sketch, the torture of the guessing.
I let a petal from a rose travel on my mouth
as if it were a hazelnut fallen on the mat, the mouth
appropriates all objects, we chew the dashboard, the wind-shield wiper,
the burning dust of afternoon, the eyes galloping bareback
within the throat. We capture the world with our tongue,
such a suchness and so much to be said: not even a welter of words
could say it. Perhaps the dawn, perhaps the dew might distill a thornless
click into reality. The rose is the beginning of a kiss.
Far off the grass and the splendor of the lake when the sun lavishes
lingering doubts into our hands. We don't even know what fears us.
A rose enfolded in a scarf. A petal surrendered to the care
of fingers. Dense, smooth: the exact texture so I may return
to that afternoon of velvet and ask it only for the exact
flavors that come from the depths of the earth, from the heights of the land.
Silence is part of a countryside born in the core

of the city. We breathe the sea, the liquid matter of a kiss.

ROSA ALICE BRANCO

By the Grave

~translated by Murad Jalilov and Kevin Rabas

This is for the memory of the sleeper

in this grave under simple willows,

he sleeps, buried in soil

with a clean soul, but with holy fits,

with faith in a dawn of fire.

The glorious, quiet fires go out,

dampening in the sufferer in the soil,

and on his forehead, unnoticed,

dark shadows come.

He sleeps. The willows lean over,

hang their branches, surround him,

as though growing pensive,

thinking about him.

Still to the wind, which unleashes a yearning,
the horizon cries, frowns,
as if the wilderness pities the poor man
who died young.

SERGEI YESENIN

Poem 2

~~translated by Shohreh Laici

Abandoning kills people
Or
the falling trees force the birds to flee their nests...

Imagine
the firing squad taking aim.

And suddenly,
someone could be so lonely that worms –with a feminine tenderness– cleave the skin
and make her love them.

The commander grew enraged
as the shells dropped around us.

Nothing could turn back the time.

You threw away tender words of love
and said “Go to Hell” instead.

Gone is gone.

Nothing could frighten you anymore
and just
listening to the birds, into which the echoes of bullets were lost.

Abandoning kills so many people
and poetry becomes interesting when readers imagine their murderers
rather than their victim

Poem 3

I've been thinking of you
since the beginning.

The beginning of peace in which war began,
and I would leave your capital city...

My brain commanded,
I was fighting
it seemed you were the murderer of my children,
I was fighting
it seemed you took my motherland from me,

I was fighting,
chest to chest,
bumper to bumper.
It seemed like live television,
fire in the wheat,
moon in the leopard's paw...

Headquarters referred to your eyes
and
I lost.
You won the battle in which I was a hero.

ABA ABEDIN (Iran, contemporary)

Prisoner of the World

~translated by David DeGusta

Shallow puns do not suit me,

I would die killing time,

Sleep like a grave man in the earth.

Make a broad way for me ...

That I may rush to the sky

Speed past planets and stars

Cross the infinities of the heavens

Faster than light itself.

I am a new star, birthed in lava and ash,

I swim in the floods of fire,

I light a million flames in the land of the dead.

Make a broad way for me ...

That I may go to the darkness,

The unseeing charcoal black darkness,

Where time is trapped in empty eternal caverns.

In that endless emptiness,

Let me float and watch.

Stars are my playthings.

I am a piece of earth, and earth I chronicle

On the dark parchment of the night sky.

I charge through galaxies,

Vandalizing the heavens,

Storming bolted gates ...

Until a strange thing is created

Until the silence is broken.
In one large stride
I leap from the earth to the moon
Then to the stars, from world to world
 Traveling, creating
I make my home on the sun
I cast my shadow there
A million flames scorch me in Hell.
Make a broad way for me ...

GEBRA KRISTOS DESTA (1932-1981, from the Amharic)

Blue Velvet

~translated by Morgan Shafter

sometimes, laying in the bath or in bed, I know myself to be so big and unwanted
on stage I seem so weightless, almost transparent
I know there's always two or three creeps in this bar
who come here every evening
in the evenings in this pub I sing a little song
about
Blue Velvet
1986 - USA - 120 min.
Director David Lynch
Dorothy Vallens Isabella Rossellini
Jeffrey Beaumont Kyle MacLachlan
Frank Booth Dennis Hopper
Sandy Williams Laura Dern
blue velvet
american night
old lover
young lover
preference unclear
unclear preferences
fill in the emptiness

of my heart
of my mouth
he lost his mind
and so did I
(morning to night thinking about blue velvet)
about the sky?
about the sea?
about my dress, for that matter?
not about me

not about me
that would be too vulgar
like lips too red
like fear too naked
like their white blouses, supermarkets, this climate
like light too bright
like death, like me in the mornings
I don't even want to hear about it
(whether I sleep or not,
for that matter)
he will always come
as long as he breathes, as long as he rages, as long as he sleeps broods
as long as they're not out of cocaine in America
as long as they're not out of coke
the blue consumed us, the blue is sleepless
the blue is lethal
the blue spares neither young nor old
the blue hides wherever it wants - in bits of cloth
the blue pierces the haze we inhale
the blue hung an enormous door over us
nowhere never, no running no hiding
no trying, no writhing, mixing in
it's too vulgar, certainly, too intimate
mixing in, writhing, no lying down
tumbling, struggling, into flesh teeth sink
until blood spills - the blood of David Lynch

ELENA KOSTYLEVA

My Fingers Wandered Together....

~~translated by Maia Evrona

My fingers wandered together. And they knead
my savior from the clay of dreams, which is a clay
from other planets. A kneading both painful, and strange:
Just as out of Adam's rib was kneaded Eve.

The clay is elastic, supple. I feel out an eye, an arm,
a wonder takes shape in its most wonderful form.
Its scent is of honey above rustling buckwheat,
the Milky Way, my inspiration, courses through its limbs.

The kneading and the mystery last until dawn,
until the morning star crows and bees begin to stir.
Until the line evens out between spirit and flesh,
and my fingers are only the hands of their dreamer.

But when the morning star crows for the second time
and then the third, my savior's limbs scatter like petals,
they wander off, those *Lamed-Vovniks*, my fingers,
Praise them: a single grey hair is growing younger.

A Concert By Night, A Funeral By Day

A concert by night, a funeral by day,
and to be both there and here is my fate.

Fate is a yoke on the neck:
two tender buckets full of good and bad luck.

If one bucket were emptied, could be
more full the second never would be.

A grain of salt would not embody its flavor
and seven lesser salts would be paid for in treasure.

And the light would become wrinkled and sallow
if there were no shadows left to be swallowed.

A concert by night, a funeral by day,
and to be both there and here is my fate.

And to complete the marriage of song and terrain:
those tender pails full of pleasure and pain.

Together, together the there and the here and a ray
of light bends to swim down all the way.

Such is the connection between scythe and stem,
such is the unity between fiddler and sound.

Like so are the brothers: there was and there is.
Like so are entwined a man and a woman's limbs.

You Quivering Wave

You quivering wave on the Mediterranean seashore,
don't tell me that you are a wave, all gust and reddish-rose and death throes.
You belong to me. You are a self from my cluster of selves,
You have disguised yourself for appearances sake: An actress of a wave.

So many waves. You are not similar to any one of them.
And if a demon put you in chains, you would come,
a shackled wave, to kneel on this Mediterranean seashore,

for, over you, only my sky-reaching silence holds any power.

I have dreamed you out from the grave so you could bring
seven small leaves from the Tree of Life in bloom.
And now you have been rescued from latitudes and longitudes
and you are bringing me eternal life, heavenly and divine.

I will add it to itself in the garden; pour it
through sliced-open lips, so their grief should be lessened,
and see a vision as tomorrow dresses itself in today,
and children and children's children sharing eternal life with my lips.

ABRAHAM SUTZKEVER (contemporary)

REVIEWS:

THE UNSTILL ONES: Poems written and translated by Miller Oberman, Princeton Series of Contemporary Poetry, 2017.

This collection is a hybrid volume, containing both the author's original poetry and translations from Old English. The connection between the two is not always apparent, but the strongest original poem "On Trans," best illustrates the interrelation. The poem is a meditation on the etymology and usage of the prefix "trans," which discovers the morpheme as meaning not so much going beyond boundaries as crossing through them in a way where the boundary no longer exists and both sides of the change coexist in a state of perpetual indeterminateness. As the first line of the poem states, "The process of through is ongoing."

Reading Anglo Saxon poetry requires exactly this sort of ease with the in-between and uncertain spaces. The works found in the Exeter Book are undefined in context, tradition, form, and genre. The so-called "elegies," like *Wulf and Eadwacer*, which is the highlight of the translations in this collection, have at best only a tenuous connection to the elegiac tradition and are almost certainly in some way connected to the literary tradition of the riddles that they are nestled between in the

codex. The quirks of Old English lexical ambiguity combined with this uncertainty of genre make these “elegies” notoriously frustrating to translate. Although ostensibly monologues with some sort of narrative, the dramatic situations of the poems are essentially unparsable. Miller’s poem *Wulf and Eadwacer*, inspired by the Exeter Book poem, does as good a job as any academic work of communicating this dilemma to readers who have not read these poems in Old English:

The poem is either about a woman
separated from a man by a petty
tribal war, or about a woman
forced to live with a second man
because of a petty tribal war.
Either way, she bears a child.
Either way, one man is kept
prisoner on an island, guarded
by bloodthirsty swords. Either
way, the woman sits crying
in the rain, sheltered by trees,
or it could be the rain is crying,
or it could be there is no rain,
she’s only using it as an image...

Miller’s *Wulf and Eadwacer* excellently conveys how the original poem’s nebulosity creates a disquieting atmosphere that not only adds to the feeling of the speaker’s loss and longing but, in its inability to be pinned down, opens up a multiplicity of possibilities for poetic beauty that could not exist in a more defined work.

Unfortunately, Miller could not find a way to convey the exquisite uncertainty of these Old English poems in his translations, which are for the most part fairly literal journeyman affairs. His translation of *Wulf and Eadwacer* is readable and fairly easy to understand, though it has none of the lyric intensity and mystery of the original and is occasionally marred by odd phrasings intended to stick closely to the source language but which come off tone deaf in English. No contemporary speaker would use the term “battle gift,” and it is entirely inexplicable why “bōgum bilegde” is translated “held me in his branches” when it could just as easily be translated as “held me in his arms.” Perhaps this is a bungled attempt at preserving ambiguity?

For a reader unacquainted with Anglo-Saxon riddles, the selection given here does give some sense of the fascinating enigmas of this not well-known genre, although the choice of these five riddles is somewhat baffling. The Exeter Book manuscript has pretty severe damage in some places, and the riddles that Miller translates here all seem to come from those damaged portions with copious bracketed blank spaces where the original text was unreadable. Perhaps these lacunae, by inadvertently further obscuring riddles that by their design were already arcane, appealed to Miller’s poetic imagination.

There is the seed of a good idea in *The Unstill Ones*. Using original poems to interact with and elucidate these difficult and perplexing Anglo Saxon poems is a novel and potentially effective strategy. And at times the strategy works to good effect, with the author’s poems hinting at the very core of what makes the Old English poems so beguiling. Miller’s success at doing this in his own poetry, however, stands in stark contrast to and highlights the ineffectiveness of his translations at recreating what he recognizes as effective in the source.

~~Joseph Bienvenu

THE BAYARD STREET TIGHTROPE WALKER, Eduardo Chirinos. Translated by G.J. Racz. University of Montana Press, 2017. pp. 92.

In his introduction written in 2013 (to a collection originally published in 1998), the Peruvian poet Eduardo Chirinos backgrounds how he came to author his first American collection of poems: soon after moving to New Jersey to begin their doctoral studies in Spanish literature at Rutgers, the poet and his wife rent a “humble” and light-filled second-floor apartment on Bayard Street. Directly across from their house stands a 19th-century Magyar Presbyterian church. Auspiciously, this church connects to their apartment by a wire of some kind. This is a key

detail: Chirinos tells us the apartment's "previous inhabitant" walked back and forth on this wire, from window to steeple— neighborhood children looked up in wonder; adults grew immune to the ritual's effects; the indifferent street waited below, always. Chirinos keeps it wonderfully simple: "Jannine and I rented the apartment that had once belonged to the Bayard Street tightrope walker. That's how this all began."

On one level, the walker gives Chirinos something timely, something he needs: a myth to channel, and by which he might navigate a new life in the United States (a place he perceptively calls a "collage of dreams, biases, and expectations that vary over individuals, times, and economic crises"). In this way, Chirinos forms a kinship with the tightrope walker, who surfaces (as a figure) periodically in the collection but whose spirit resounds throughout: as the poems unfold, this spirit is one of seeking on the margins and periphery; of finding the obscure and infinite amidst the "anodyne"; of undertaking (on the other side) an act of balancing, baring, remembering, relating. No doubt we could add more emphases to this list of what Chirinos channels in the *equilibrista*—each would somehow resonate with what the poet also senses (or hopes for) in the poetic act.

Perhaps most memorably, poet and walker both pursue a ritual that would not take our humanity for granted; that would forge expression out from over the abyss; that would remember the nearness of "falling" as that which renews the possibility (or the imperative) for relation and encounter. For instance, in the opening poem, "The Bayard Street Tightrope Walker" (Chirinos' first lyric written in the United States), we get, simultaneously, a mythology of the walker *and* the poet's own sense of the poetic attitude: the walker eschews "heroism, grandeur," and he's "so useless a prodigy." But he possesses a poetic kind of courage, one that is aware of our fragility,

He fears nothing, the Bayard Street Tightrope Walker,
although he hasn't slept well for several nights now.
They say he dreamt his shoes were hanging from the wire
While the children hoped he'd splatter his guts once and for all,
the Bayard Street Tightrope Walker.

Here, in the tightrope walker's dream, in this evocation of falling and loss, there is a reckoning with what we cannot see, with what we do not know. Paradoxically, it's this embodied awareness of our finiteness that also calls the walker back to the tightrope, or that calls Chirinos back to his own delicate dance of relating things across latitudes and time.

In this way, remembering and listening play an especially important role in the collection. Throughout, everything is layered (almost as a default). In one section presenting itself as fragments from the walker's travel memoirs, we get memories of Paris—musicians, children, "flies and mice," "postcards of prostitutes from the turn of the last century"—but it's the speaker's own personal paradoxes that cut through the copia of it all: "I'll always remember your kiss on the *rue Bayard*, the cemetery off in the distance, Vallejo and the Napoleonic Wars." In this same way, when the poet is in the north, he's thinking of Lima. When he is in Lima, in the summertime humidity and heat, he remembers that it will be snowing in New Brunswick when he returns—that "soon the sun will be a memory." It is "this yearning for home" that keeps him moving: "Because of it / I've traveled to many destinations and, because of it, / I've never

arrived anywhere.” Because of it, “[r]eturning is always a little sad”—but we see too how this *sadness* gives way to an awareness, and makes possible a certain kind of listening, one akin to going to the other side, to walking on the tightrope, to seeking through the poem itself.

At times, Chirinos’ association between poetry and listening is gratifyingly straightforward. In “How Poems Die,” he tells us how poems don’t necessarily expire on their own; rather, we stop listening for them: they become like “crow food, a dark blotch on the pavement”; they evaporate like the “old movies we loved as kids / but don’t bother now to remember.” In “Listening to Old Love Songs,” we get another simple (but also profound) call to remember: here, the poet channels (or even writes from, we could say) those long-forgotten tunes to which his parents may have fallen in love. He heard them as a child, and that relation, that proximity, now comes back, encoded in the poem itself, which reassures the poet “that the years have not gone by, that people still listen to them / and will stay in love forever.” The closing poems, which I’ll discuss now, develop this in an especially poignant way—continuing to reveal how keen and intent Chirinos is to connect remembering with what is poetic.

In “Central Park,” the poet traces out a day spent with his brother Carlos. In the “ugliness of a wet but snowless winter,” it was—simply—“not the best day to visit Central Park.” “Still, it was our day,” Chirinos adds (here finding a way to emphasize that poetic need to embrace whatever comes). The brothers initially speak of the “futile desires of the flesh, / of longheld grudges and forgotten friendships, / of insignificant incidents that time turns into legends.” There is great subtlety in how these images advance: with a close look we see how they foreground a potential, moving from what is “futile” but still embodied (the “desires”) and towards an antipathy or bitterness, yes, but one that’s paired with a latent possibility (“forgotten friendships” can also be remembered). Finally, in those “insignificant incidents” that time has somehow imbued with mythic quality, we hear how randomness and coincidence open onto destiny and the unseen. Accordingly, in the next stanza, the poet makes an ever-so-gentle turn towards the present, noting how “[t]he past shines on faintly / like the winter light in Central Park.” Then, in the closing lines, the brothers find, or are found by, the act of remembering—specifically, a photo of them as children, one taken by an “itinerant photographer” at a park in Lima. Zooming in closely, Chirinos elicits their “rather serious” expressions: “maybe because we felt lonely / or because we were onto something.” Children, the poet’s remembering now from the inside (he does so parenthetically in the poem), are always “onto something,” and from this memory the poem turns away from the maps of our lives and takes a stance in relation with the territory, the world in its present, living totality. In familiar rhythm that closes several of these poems (that sounds the old Magyar church’s knell—and that announces the first lowly steps of the abyssal walk of the *equilibrista*), the poet simply writes about the children, “the ones playing and smiling / in a well-lighted corner of Central Park.”

To give one more example of Chirinos’ subtle but powerful case for poetry not as celebration but as remembering, consider the lyrics “Thirty-Four” and “Birthday.” In these poems, the poet turns thirty-four and thirty-five, respectively. In the former, the younger Chirinos remarks how, now that he’s almost thirty-four, he’s closer to thirty-five; and this is “really / flattering for an admirer of Dante”—he could soon “write a poem that began: / ‘In the middle of the road of my life.’” While there is some uncharacteristic deferral to others’ myths here, this hoping (both characteristically playful and sober about mortality) is actually not what hurts the poetic intention. Something else does. Chirinos goes on:

Still this isn't the voice that hounds me
but another firmly planted in the mirror
telling me that it's only been one year more
that I'll never get to experience paradiso
and that dark forests really weren't made for me. (16-20)

“[P]lanted firmly in the mirror,” this voice that hounds is the one that wants to downplay mortality; that wants to forget time's obscure passing; that wants to deny the rareness and finiteness of life (“it's *only* been one year more”). We might notice again here, in lines 17-20 above, how subtly these images progress towards the clarification of an ego or subject, moving towards an “I” that increasingly comes into relief, as if (in line 20) “dark forests” were somehow a manufactured product, “made” for use. Again, Chirinos warns us about *this* voice—this the one, “firmly planted,” that “hounds.” Later in the collection (and giving just one example of the kind of light but profound intertextuality that makes this book such a joy to read), “Thirty-Five” resumes these inquiries (which, I would argue, are essentially questions about the nature of the poetic). By now, by thirty-five, the Dante-inspired longing has faded: conceding that “he has turned thirty-five so many times now,” the poet remembers that he chooses poetry as “neither the road to purification / nor the re-counting of magnificent disasters.” Rather, he chooses words because they choose him, because he

couldn't choose silence
and because they [words] visit me in the night, relentless and beautiful,
to make old circles come full circle,
cause forest fires and reorder constellations.

In this act of waiting for and listening to language itself, the poet's whole history of remembering, of going to the other side, of walking the tightrope—it returns (not unproblematically but still somehow sustaining a future poetic potential). His collections, his tracing, his etchings come back into relief, like

shooting stars that sink into the sea
while I wave goodbye to them with my handkerchief:

—Notebooks, Chronicles, Files,

Sermons, Rituals, Books, Songs, Remember
Body, in those eyes that looked at you,
yet you could do nothing but keep silent
and write these words for no one.

Here, in this self-talk from upon the wire (always rendered so sensitively by G. J. Racz), we get a sense of the poetic that is far from the celebratory or monumental, far from the overly broad and vertical category of a landmark age. Instead, it tells of a secret history of tracing, following,

corresponding, something low and relational that may hold closer to what the muse calls for now, in our time, where poetry does not provide founding myths, but instead (however desperately) seeks contact and encounter and recalls how it is still possible for language to speak us. In this way, Chirinos goes through the myths and clichés of old (as in his other evocations of Rubén Darío, of “Ithaca,” of New Brunswick) only to create his own, and doing so he also tells us, invaluable, about poetry.

No doubt, Racz senses just how much poetry mattered to Chirinos; in turn, he stays as faithful as possible to the poems’ semantic and rhythmic spirits, carefully rendering their understated but important nuances but also privileging rhythm where appropriate. As my quick analysis has hopefully shown, the poems in English endure as both readable *and* opaque, and one is left feeling so grateful for this chance to hear, in loving translation, an important writer’s unique sense of poetic enduring. When admiring these lyrics (which the collection features in both Spanish and English), readers will also be reminded of (or introduced to) the profundity of the loss that was Chirinos’ early passing in 2016. Perhaps here, in closing, we can recall here what Walter Benjamin named the “courage of poetry.” For Benjamin, real poems come from a kind of courage that senses the danger but refuses to heed it. Also, just as great poems come from this courage, they extend it into the future; they somehow offer it to others—the new rhythms and myths encoded in the poems somehow send out the call for more. In “Raritan Blues,” as in so many of these remarkable Bayard Street memories, Chirinos writes from and of this courage:

They say the river is life and the sea death
Here is my elegy:
a river is a river
and death an affair that shouldn’t concern us.

~~*Christopher J. Monier*

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