

## VOLUME 16 *number 1*

*Ezra* hopes you enjoyed the annual Conference, in Tucson. There were some restrictions on the live event, and fewer attendees than usual. Bouncing back next year! A reminder how energizing this can be for any translator, and a note that the ALTA website has an ever-increasing store of resources. This includes pamphlet/guides, especially useful for those new in the field. For all of us, it was important to fill out the survey on the conference, in hopes of tailoring it next year—not to covid but to your needs. If you missed the survey, you can always contact ALTA leaders and conference staff through the site, [www.literarytranslators.org](http://www.literarytranslators.org).

In a New York Times interview (1/2/2022) Maggie Gyllenhaal talks about making the film *The Lost Daughter* from Elena Ferrante's haunting *Storia della bambina perduta*. The interviewer leads her by mentioning that a character is a translator and that the director is also “translating” the book into film. In her response, Gyllenhaal (of whom *Ezra* is the most self-abasing fan) seems to pull her punches.

She says she has been thinking a lot about adaptation, and, of course, as with an ekphrastic poem's adaptation of elements (meaning? emotion?) of a painting, that is what she did with the film. At this point *Ezra*'s feverish brain plunged ahead to the boldest types of translation/adaptation, expecting an endorsement of radical translation theory (which, as our voices have grown stronger in recent years, has seemed less and less radical, right?). But the Rachel Cusk quote she offers to support her method seems to us to fall short: “I translated it carefully and with great caution, as if it were something fragile that I might mistakenly break or kill.” Director Gyllenhaal's enthusiastic reaction is that “something was communicated” that had to be translated, transferred, intact. We're glad that happened with the movie, but it refers only to an aspect of content, an idea. Possibly a tone. As a response this seems to shy away from the nitty-gritty of form and medium—short shrift from someone who has been “thinking about adaptation in general.”

To stick to what we know best, the linguistic area: we break things. Even without the radicalism of going from one medium to another, we are, these days (most of us), not too delicate. Not too intimidated by the “fragility” of something perfect in the original. Often our praxis is explained in terms of breaking, or at least taking apart. The perfect object—in the target language—has to come together again from completely different parts. That, at least in poetry, is the only way to think about it.

The danger of the “fragility” caution, at least in language products, is translationese. Or a language code that is too close to the original in a formal way and is empty of the content, tone or idea that was thought so important in the first place. The poet/translators in the following issue know this well.

We are thrilled to have Turkish poet Necmi Zekâ brought to us as this month's feature by Erik Mortenson.

There are two reviews and two publication notices in this issue.

FEATURE: **Erik Mortenson**

**Erik Mortenson** is a translator, literary scholar, and writer. After earning a PhD from Wayne State in Detroit, Mortenson spent a year as a Fulbright Lecturer in Germany and a decade at Koç University in Istanbul where he helped found the English and Comparative Literature Department. Mortenson is an avid translator who was invited to participate in the prestigious Cunda International Workshop for Translators of Turkish and whose work has appeared in journals such as *Asymptote*, *Talisman*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Berlin Quarterly*, *Two Lines*, and *Turkish Poetry Today*. He is also the author of three books, all from Southern Illinois University Press: *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence*, which was selected as a Choice outstanding academic title in 2011; *Ambiguous Borderlands: Shadow Imagery in Cold War American Culture* (2016); and most recently, *Translating the Counterculture: The Reception of the Beats in Turkey* (2018). He is currently working on a book-length translation of Zekâ's selected poetry.

Turkish poet **Necmi Zekâ**

**giddy harvest on the verbiage farm**

we set out to stroll in lukewarm gardens...pitter-patter sun...wiggly downpour...figuring out the essence of ignoring the disgraced...the revenue was weak...we set down to think bumpy thoughts...cursing our calender-obsessed natures...wishing that everyone would become seduced by the desire to destroy everything...we set about to laugh...all final things had the force of alms... we were tired of having discussions with lunatics under medical observation...leaning against the taste of carefulness...in order to choose a season of desolateness...brains which followed critical lawsuits were wasted...the time concept in proust was terribly misty...a game of disgusting was set free...we wandered around as collapsed living beings...with a secrecy certain to go off the rails... so now we've set down to keep quiet

**the broken language of public assistance**

they carry you into the middle of life  
and to the beginning of life  
and to the end of life  
they carry you in stretchers

*but it's quite possible to avoid suffering – just don't suffer it*

### **Clearing Personal Customs**

To each their own . . . take me as I am.

In my mouth there's a wad of *I'm sorry to inconvenience you—you've got to be kidding*.  
My teeth and my tongue are dripping with waste.

No, I don't wish to be a jar of secrets to be jumped into.  
He didn't say that. I didn't say it. It's an open space of chaos.

What flees others arrives at my mouth  
turning into a snake at the night market  
or into night at the snake market . . .

Acquiring a taste for banging into things.

An ancient treatise on chicory becomes my meal.  
On its last page, it states: *lose yourself in the busiest of streets*.

Why bother, if we can't even hang on to each other by a thread.

### **rat**

a knife stabbed in a wrong place  
held by hands fearful of falling behind  
no one to pull it out  
no one to stab it correctly

*well protest is always attractive and  
every painting craves being a sculpture  
yet sculptures always crave changing places.*  
what rubbish

we enter a monochrome field  
(not necessarily the cleanest place)  
arguing that our demands are mutual  
we cram a little sugar into each other and wait

entering the position of uncertain silence  
our language now filled with ugly words like *position*

you won't endure being yourself  
you won't consent to becoming a secret devil  
sooner or later  
you'll let others call you a rat

the filthy rat

## **Joy and Justice**

Her despair was causing damage  
not to herself but always to others.  
Would she compensate everyone's losses?  
She would say yes  
and we trusted her.  
We were patient, we let her belate justice.

She wanted to inform us about just protests  
and wore her strangeness as an assurance beyond reach.  
She still had so many things to do.  
But scrupulousness became laziness,  
her joy showing most clearly on sorrowful days.  
We entered her life,  
But with us she wasn't angry.  
She was angry with herself.

Believing is difficult. Rounding up numbers

is the easiest thing to do.  
In the coming years it'll be the easiest.  
With her we were happy to form a pleasant minority.  
Her uneasiness, well, we had to keep it a secret.  
She played both sides irresponsibly.  
But wasn't that a choice?  
If you ask me I would have given years from my life.  
But even so, is it fair?

Well, we have a future too,  
and in it we'll see what remains.

***Traduttrici/traduttori:***

Wally Swist	(Giuseppe Ungaretti)
Annetta Riley	(Pascal Petit)
A.Bohlmeijer	(Paul Rodenko)
Mona Pan	(Kim Sung-hwi)
Patience Haggin	(Fernando Pessoa)
Jake Sheff	(Chaim Nachman Bialik)

**Song**

*~~translated by Wally Swist*

1932

from *Sentiment of Time*, 1919-1935

I see your deliberate mouth  
(Nights the sea rises to meet it)  
And the mare of the loins  
Thrusts you into agony  
In my singing arms,  
And lulls you to sleep  
Back to color and new deaths.

Now there is an infinite tomb  
Dividing me from you always.

We are far away as in a mirror . . .

### **Outburst**

1928

from *Sentiment of Time*, 1919-1935

Evening has come,  
resting on the monotonous grass,  
I cherish  
The perpetual ache,  
The turbid, winged outburst  
That the light holds when it dies.

GIUSEPPE UNGARETTI

## **Both clarity and obscurity are meaningful**

*~~translated by Annetta Riley*

Look, there's not just the bow and the quiver with arrows. Look, all the details are represented with color:

A half-bitten apple.

An open pod.

A half-open button.

An animal that shines.

A fan.

A closed box.

A venetian castle on a hilltop.

Etc.

*(The spell begins.)*

Look for the difficulty, a discreet clue. I left some. Everything is at your fingertips. *Both clarity and obscurity are meaningful* is not the same as *both obscurity and clarity are meaningful*. We must find the order between things. Time will provide.

The precision of the details - the number of spires and watchtowers, the shadows behind each window - takes nothing of the symbolic dimension away from the castle.

## **Audacity**

Look, I am looking at something that is beside something you are looking at while slowly turning the pages of a book without reading them.

The bright colors are softened by the shade of the foliage.

Nothing is hidden that might be.

Nothing of what precedes or follows explains something. The noise of the water that I pour from the carafe into a glass is rendered with precision.

The Eiffel tower is on a piece of sugar.

I could say what is known.

An action could begin that might have no relationship with the preceding one that could continue simultaneously.

A certain time passes that does not especially give a sense of security.

In the presence of two lions, the atmosphere is not good.

The silences between words are spaces that create the tone.

I am acting like an interest pole and if I were asked at that moment what I represent, I would say "a fixed point".

Audacity is not to change anything, to recognize neutrality, to hide one's means, to defend unity of action.

PASCAL PETIT (France)

### **The February Sun**

*~~translated by A. Bohlmeijer*

Once more the world opens like a girl's room,  
the street motion comes floating from a white distance,  
with alum hands, workers are building  
a windowless house of stairs and pianos.

Like pupils, the poplars are throwing each other  
a ball full of bird voices,  
and sky high a faded plane is painting  
light-blue blooms on bright-blue silk.

Like a solemn child, the sun is playing at my feet.  
I'm wearing the downy mask of  
the first spring breeze.

### **Taking a walk**

The day is large and late  
and from old family,  
but somewhere the night  
is lying in ambush.

In quiet streets, our steps now seem  
slow and sagged,  
the houses are packed  
like stored bags,  
the cactus green is left behind.

No mirrors back up our strides,  
the window panes are hiding and blind,  
your hand is like a chess piece in my hand,  
a child's crying sounds far away,  
your mouth moves in a fright,  
your words are flapping  
like white shirts in the wind.

How can the sun's knot untwine?  
Who has told the tale of tiles?  
The anxieties of the heart  
are salamanders.

The hour remains quiet.  
Why why  
have all things changed?

PAUL RODENKO (writes in English and Dutch)

**Stream**

*~~translated by Mona Pan*

Stream  
It flows  
A fixated look

A thousand miles  
A long way  
Alone

It flows  
It flows  
It flows through

A lifetime  
Neatly  
It travels

### **What comes into the eyes**

What comes into the eyes:  
A smile without a sound  
A promise without a response  
A resurrection without destination

What comes into the eyes:  
A sorrow without subject  
A harrowing oblivion  
A rush of years

No, no, do not come  
What comes into the eyes:  
The God-given  
Pure white of the North

In eyes it outlines  
In eyes it lingers  
What comes into the eyes:  
A Red reunion  
A Blue farewell

### **The Cry of Han River**

In front of my face  
Han River rises  
Around your hair,  
Waterfowls sit,  
Who are you looking for?  
Whose name are you remembering?  
On the other side of Samgak Mountain,  
A collapsing silence continues.  
The bronze statue of King Sejong the Great,  
Shines on Hangul, my language.  
Conceivable names,  
Inconceivable scars,  
engraved in one heart.  
Cried the Han River,  
my mother,  
Cried the waterfowls,  
my brothers.  
I cried, too.

KIM SUNG-HWI (Korea, contemporary)

### **Autopsychography**

*~~translated by Patience Haggin*

The poet is a faker,  
He fakes it all so well  
He even pretends to suffer  
The pain that's truly felt.

And those who read his writing  
Feel sharply, as they read  
Not the poet's pain, twice-biting,  
But their own, though fantasy.

So, spinning 'round its track  
A little clockwork train,  
That thing we call the heart,  
Is toying with our brain.

FERNANDO PESSOA

### **On a Hot Summer's Day**

*~~translated by Jake Sheff*

When noon has put its firefly  
The height for sky to magnify  
And dreaming hearts just long to sigh,  
Then come to me, my weary friend.

A shady carob grows within  
My garden grove, remote from sin.  
The greenness whispers: "Citizen,  
For goodness' sake, come in, take refuge!"

Here's the sweet hidden prime of noon:  
Whose lemonade could fill the moon;  
Whose every dawn says, "Coming soon!"  
And blesses June with shade to spare.

And when the winter wind is black,

When snow is bruised by night's attack,  
And ice is crawling up your back,  
Then come to me, beloved of God.

My place is humble, but it's home,  
Much warmer than a catacomb.  
My table's set for all who roam.  
Dear brother, are you lost? Please stay.

We hear the storms' and strangers' tears  
Across the street, across the years.  
Our pity feeds their starving fears...  
Take heart! Have courage! Let me serve you.

But when leaves fall in autumn's shtick,  
When damp is not impolitic,  
When cold itself is getting sick,  
Then save yourself. Be gone. Get lost!

As barren things take shape in me,  
As love decays and mystery  
Forgets my name, please, let me be  
Alone, and this my final note.

CHAIM NACHMAN BIALIK

#### PUBLICATION NOTICES:

**SMALL BIBLES FOR BAD TIMES.** Liliane Atlan, translated by Marguerite Feitlowitz. Co-publication of Mandel Vilar Press and Dryad Press. 2021. 156 pp. Bilingual edition.

Prose and poetry from the French poet, memoirist and playwright. This book introduces Atlan's poetry and prose to the English-speaking world for the first time. As the publisher says, "Liliane's distinctive poetic voice shares qualities with the compressive forms of Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan."

FROM A DISTANT RELATION. Mikhah Yosef Berdichevsky, translated by James Adam Redfield. Syracuse University Press, 2021. 388 pp.

As Hillel Halkin says, “Redfield’s new selection of Berdichevsky’s Yiddish writings, finely translated and accompanied by an illuminating introduction and helpful notes, will surprise even those who thought they knew Berdichevsky well.”

## REVIEWS:

FROM A RED BARN, Victor Rodriguez Nuñez. Translated by Katherine M. Hedeem. Co.im.press, 2020. 174 pp. (Note that the original title is in lower case italics.)

*Ezra* offers a brief review here, because the Hedeem translations of Rodriguez Nuñez are both numerous and well known, and because we have had something to do with producing one of these in the past.

This is absolutely brilliant poetry, some of the most powerful images and consistently surprising Spanish being published today (and translated into a dozen other idioms). Rodriguez Nuñez is a Cuban currently writing and teaching, along with Hedeem, at Kenyon College.

She is his primary translator into English, and also describes herself as “his partner.” While she says that she “struggle[s] for the distance [she] automatically has with other poets,” she clearly has the key to both his Spanish and his vision. The whole suite (what Hedeem calls a “cycle”) of eight books is magnificent, and, in the words of Don Mee Choi, whose blurb is the most helpful, the work is “simultaneously bodily and abstract, tender and brutal, bucolic and geographic, mnemonic and exilic.”

Among many name-checks Hedeem invokes Pierre Joris and his “nomadic” poetics. And this book’s subject, along with its method, is chiefly a rejection of nationalism, easy identities and

borderlines. An example—not rare in modern poetry, and surrealist in flavor, as it was in the days of its exploration in the wake of French Symbolism—is the mix of concrete and abstract:

as he searches through guts  
with the rust from his bayonet  
for something he hasn't dreamed

Against great successes like this (in both English and the original), there are a handful of moments where Hedeén's lack of "distance"—or simply the lack of the distance any translator has to take, as a rest period, from the translation—causes minor wobbles:

the anima is tougher  
than Orinoco jet  
won't dissolve in the current  
dart in the blowgun

The "dart" (*dardo en la cerbatana*) is a substantive, but reads more easily in the translation as another verb, following "won't dissolve." This is easily fixed, and simply went unnoticed, in this reviewer's opinion. The image

the bunch of basil the goat tallow  
still the house curdled with books

doesn't make clear that "curdled" is a verb (*se cuajó*) not an adjective. The meaning is close enough, of course, but the line is slightly addled if the reader doesn't realize that "still" is not the stillness of much of the poet's imagery (adjective), rather it's the word "but" or "yet" (*pero*). These are minor points; no doubt they occur because of Hedeén's extensive task and equally vast comfort with the original material. We should point out the successes—on every page—of rhythm and diction. We note that, in the first of the two citations above, Hedeén's rhythm is better than that of the original.

To this reviewer's mind, Rodriguez Nuñez is the indispensable contemporary Cuban poet, and Hedeem his indispensable translator.

~~*Peter Thompson*

SUB VERSE WORKSHOP TALLER SUB VERSO by Giancarlo Huapaya. Translated from the Spanish by Ilana Dann Luna. Diálogos Books: New Orleans, 2020. 104 pp.

Among a plethora of definitions and subverting classifications, translation stands as a living, breathing process. It begins as an act of desire before it becomes an outcome. The translator of Giancarlo Huapaya's *Taller Sub Verso* (Sub Verse Workshop), Ilana Dann Luna confesses in the preface to the collection that Giancarlo Huapaya's vibrant, erotic, fluid poems gave her a chance to produce a potent translation bound to offer "its own infinite readings." She calls it "a transcreation" when poet and translator have the privilege of sharing together the peculiarities and intimacies of both text and language.

The poetry collection is shaped as an Abecedary where each letter is "a space where processes and performances are developed." To Ilana Dann Luna, translation begins as an act of listening, since reading poems out loud offers a key to language and content alike. Yet, most important is the dialogic process a translator can hold with the poet, capturing the true essence of the poetry, while both tending to the source text and adjusting it to the cultural idiosyncrasies of the target language.

Giancarlo Huapaya is a curator of visual poetry and translator himself and this versatility reflects into the collection's playfulness. His poems are dynamic and lively, stretching the boundaries of language and equally compressing its veins: "Lie back down next to an organic puddle, sink your tongue in and write with it: I'm a transplant, I'm a transfer, I'm a translation, and X." The focus moves from the "I/eye" to "we" and "you," and these shifting permutations turn readers from passive bystanders into a vibrant audience: "Seize the word wellbeing and make the most enthusiastic of the audience." Exploring their insides but mainly, their bodies, readers are led to subvert their own sexuality and sharpen their sense: "look out from within your microscopic technological pores: break the screen that surrounds you all."

The poems pursue their visual potential, in an outburst of colors and physicality: "You will hyperact with an eye covered by a wet red heart-shaped piece of paper dysrhythmia when you ingest a strawberry, chocolate, and vanilla one all through the same eye." There is mutation, division, metamorphosis, becoming in the language choices, as well as the vivid imagery displayed in the poems. The wordplay in the title of the collection –*sub verse/subvert*– is an allusion to the various ways of subversion of expectations, norms, gender, race, physicality. The collection practices a subtle ebb and flow, and its fluidity is attuned to the way the reader's own projections are met, only to be challenged.

Without doubt, such richness and elusiveness of language raised linguistic concerns and most likely challenged the translator. The musicality of the Spanish and its Latin-infused grammar structures had to initially fuse with the English target audience, only to break off into a text of its

own. Translating means to inhabit the text in an intense, intimate manner while softly scrambling the edges, disrupting the assumptions inherent in the source text.

Ilana Dann Luna beautifully captures the passion and rhythm of the original text, rendering the music of the Spanish poems, as well the poet's style, idioms and nuances, or what she calls "his playful and labyrinthine nature."

The splintered texture of the collection, as well as the poet's ability to flex his acrobatic prowess, make *Taller Sub Verso* (Sub Verse Workshop) an open invitation to rethink, reshape, reinvent poetic language and once again, prove translation is, in Mira Rosenthal's words, "freedom that comes through constraint."

Rosenthal, Mira. Poet to Poet: An Interview with Mira Rosenthal. Interview by Emily Wolahan. *Two Lines Journal*, Spring 2018, <https://www.catranslation.org/journal-post/poet-to-poet-an-interview-with-mira-roenthal/>.

~~Clara Burghelea

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