

SPRING

VOLUME 16 *number 2*

Ezra just had (April) its fifteenth birthday. Wish us many happy issues!

An *Ezra* writer once said the magazine has “attitude” and that this befits a translation journal. We tend to agree with the second half of this, but it’s only an ill-formed and vaguely anarchic agreement. We *lack* editorial attitude in one sense: we’re open to all languages, styles, eras. In another sense our attitude is more pronounced, leaning toward translators who vigorously stir up the raw material, the original version—who take “the task of the translator” to be a fearless creativity.

A kind of activism, you might say. Jhumpa Lahiri (“Il Calvino del mondo,” in her *Translating Myself and Others*—see the Publication Notice in this issue), quotes Calvino and seems to back us up: “La vera letteratura lavora proprio sul margine intraducibile di ogni lingua.” This might appear to mean “true literature is untranslatable” (you’ve run into people who believe this). But the quote comes from an essay whose title, “Translating is the only true way to read a text” (“Tradurre è il solo vero modo di leggere un testo”), shows what he (and Lahiri) really think. The “margine intraducibile” suggests that *even in the original version* the language was not only a translation (possibly a mistranslation) of what the author was groping toward—but also a movement (a translation) away from that language’s common modes and registers.

So the translator after *Ezra*’s heart works within a “margin” which he or she sees as wider than the translation-negos and other readers do. And works within “the true way to read,” as Calvino says.

Our next issue appears around the time of the ALTA meeting. There will be no joyous talk about seeing you all; this year the Conference is virtual.

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

FEATURED WRITER: **Suzanne Jill Levine**

Suzanne Jill Levine needs no introduction, of course, and has been our featured writer before. She is one of the best known translators of contemporary South American work. Ezra especially prizes her translations (and biography) of Manuel Puig.

Sea Notes (from “Notas del mar”)

~~translated by Suzanne Jill Levine

The fireflies attend a glittering sky over the sea at night. Writing, unfolding infinitely, awaits this sea that is even more infinite, night after night.

In the distance a tear splashes and slides in the sand.

This sea, perhaps only my sea, has only a few islands to spare. Perhaps only two, quite far away. I think of the solitude of a couple of islands under a rainfall of ashes. When my heart was like a seed, poppies grew beside the sea, guiding my dreams. The sea watching over me, like the firefly of a good night's sleep. I imagined her covering me with sheets, rocking me gently. I imagined her imitating siren songs for me and the seashells and I grew up.

I grew up between the sea and dreams of water.

How was that sea? Was that sea yours too, the one we saw in the distance, bringing us the voices of the wind and of fearless women?

It was only the sea and its words.

The sea and its eloquent world.

Endlessly seeking light over this sea, I found the light in your eyes. Thus, a hand reaches for mine or lips seek in desire some wave that leads us half-asleep around the moon. That sea at night is a sea of fragility, a sea of absence, an ocean of questions.

The children of the sea who descend the steps in their patent leather shoes and dressed in silk. They walk beside that sea condemned by mankind. Children trapped in the deep and condemned by the decree of men.

My mother's eyes are ancient like the sea, sometimes blue and at times violet. I have seen myself in them and have also found in them a sea of mirrors like fate. One day I found an island in her eyes and a dark sadness shipwrecked upon her shores. She looked at you that way until one day you filled with light the world you kept captive in your eyes.

In her brief pauses, in the amazement of a silence that seeks us out, I learned that what is forgotten and that love itself would fade away. What is treasured in the days can be found again in the sound of a freshwater sea, in a sea that enfolds everything into its refuge.

The sea is what one loves from afar.

The sea that every night becomes peace and sleep.

The subtle cadence and rhythm.

The sea at night that tells stories and that I also desire.

The sea also waits and wants your eyes, needs your lips to name it from time to time. The sea also looks for warmth among us, a light with a voice, eyes that come to gaze. The sea and its shared solitude.

Beneath that sea there might be a nest, a nest that is always warm and still, a nest is a country. The sea along these coasts makes me dream of waves, waves that bring that word back to me, that word I lost one day when I left its refuge behind.

The sea one day went to the mouth of a river, to the banks of its water, to the coastal edge where everything is a constellation of life, of clear and muddy waters, of mud and salt.

One can neither silence the sea, nor the voice of love one hears way out in the deep blue sea. The same sea that would fall in love with its islands, as little as newborn waves—I want to get close, sail around and make a nest among their hidden coves.

Of all we miss, all the absences, the sea holds my deepest desire, feeling in one's senses the night of its nights, my night, the night abandoned. The sea that knew nothing about absences tossed faraway the magic in those letters time took away. And the sea of foam emerged. The fiery lightning between the paths of its water. The sea of love, that enfolds bodies and puts them to sleep, the sea of clear nights, the sea that gives.

Did the sea in its bay look at the names of those children? Those who descended into the deep beyond any light? Does the sea look at the name of boats coming from other seas? At the names of women who gather their tears from the sand?

Only the sea embraces those who go far away, those who bring stories which spill the tears that will emerge in the foam where the waves break, where all at once there is nothing and everything.

The children of the sea who descend the steps in their patent leather shoes and dressed in silk. They walk beside that sea which men condemn. Children trapped deep down in the sea and condemned by decree of men.

Of all absences the sea has what I most deeply desire, feeling in one's senses the night of its nights, my night, the night abandoned. The sea that knew nothing about absences tossed far-flung magic in those letters time took away. And the sea of foam emerged. The fiery lightning between the paths of its water. The sea of love, that enfolds bodies, that puts them to sleep, the sea of clear nights the sea that gives.

Did the sea keep in its cove the names of those children? Those who descended into the deep beyond light? Does the sea keep the name of boats coming from other seas? The names of women who gather their tears from the sand?

Only the sea embraces those who go far away, those who bring stories which spill the tears that then arrive in the foam where the waves break, where there is nothing and everything all at once.

MARJORIE AGOSIN

Traduttrici/traduttori:

Timothy Provost	(Clemente)
Florence NG	(self)
Aaron Poochigian	(Gruz)
Christoffer Dharma and Harper Campbell	(Anwar)
Gabor Gyukics	(Molnár)
Ici Vanwesenbeeck	(Rauf)
Irina Moga	(Băciut)

I. Ingestion (from the work **FAST**)

Contaré hasta tres y,
si en ese momento aún no hemos parado,
nada nos va a detener.
Uno, dos...
Ser Brigada/ León Benavente

10.

You talk about the plan; the eyebrows arc.

Pursed lips, heads telling you no, asking you for what.

You smoke your last cigarettes on the terrace of the apartment.

Each trip is capable—whether you know it or not—of changing it all. This one isn't leisure—it's not vacation, not a visit.

The terrace isn't yours either.

You lean on the railing as the seagulls sail over your forehead. They see you; they know that you're there but they don't care about you. They carry on with their journey as you light a cigarette to go with your coffee. Your only land is the tiny grey mountain that covers the ashtray.

For those seagulls, you're just another crab on the wharf, but to lose that status is going to be a tough loss for you.

A journey starts with the thudding of the pulsations in your chest. Any change is susceptible, lightness a hazardous mechanism controlled by indolent operators. Sometimes a journey starts once you buy a ticket, once you get the visa or once you pass through the checkpoint of some particular place. Sometimes it starts with a taste, or a skin, or a coast. Sometimes, you have to return before you can feel the journey's impact. You feel a dizziness from getting up too quickly, from cigarettes on an empty stomach. These feelings start today, which marks two months to the big day. You don't have a ticket. You don't have much of a plan for anything, except for the fact that you'll quit smoking just to show how serious you are about it all.

9.

Two forces pull the same chord inside you. One consecrates each moment, each encounter, each smell or corner that keeps you here. *Enjoy*, screams the team that violently pulls the chord from extreme A. *Savor it, keep that sunset for yourself*. You pull hard from that side of the chord. From the other side, from extreme B, you can hear the crowds screaming their *LO lololo lo LO LO* from the stadiums.

You run into the president of your apartment complex in the elevator. He's wearing a yacht club polo and competition swimsuit. His wife is with him, not that she gives a damn. She doesn't give a damn about being with him, doesn't give a damn about the presidency, or the yacht club, or the complexes that he manages.

He's wearing polarized swimming goggles over his head; they're pulling each of his hairs back painfully, and he keeps adjusting them as he notices how his toes stick out from his flip-flops. She smells of your land—of an ashtray—of a sweat that isn't from exercise or sport, of an endocrine system, of the antidepressants that she keeps in her coin purse. With a dry, hoarse voice, after the doors slide shut, after asking you what floor, you hear, for the first time in the two years that you've been living there, her say something other than just an everyday greeting.

“Well,” she says. “Let's see if we get trapped in here.”

You talk about that. That's all she says.

About that ugly habit of fear.

About that bondage to fear, like an ankle chained to a steel ball. You can't take it anymore. You stop the elevator by pressing the emergency button so that you can go down the stairs. They stay in the elevator (which has the capacity to hold six people, or over 1,000 pounds) until they get to the first floor, where they finally get out and make their way to the beach.

*

This afternoon they've thrown out your sister. Once she got back from lunch they gave her the notice and a few hours to gather up her things. She feels guilty for having done her job well for six years, without making a single complaint. You envy the consistency of her career. She's always held the same job, never once collected unemployment. She's afraid and she has two kids. Her husband also has money problems. Their house seems more burdensome now that it has two cars and two tiny mouths that ask for answers and for food. You know that she'll find a new job soon because you know that she's the type who doesn't know how to be without work. You know that, in a few months, she'll somehow come to realize that it'll be the best thing that's ever happened to her. By then you'll be on the other side of the Atlantic.

*

You've put your van up for sale. You already have someone set up to stay at your apartment during the next three months. The landlady, obviously, doesn't have to know a thing about it. You wrap up at your job and you leave. Maybe you can earn a few more bucks. Nine weeks, a little more than two months and you'll be gone. Only then will you know what book, what clothes, or what valuable junk you'll have lost in the move.

*

Mar sends you the location of the house on Google Earth. The hallway, the street, the red bricks of a Bostonian neighborhood—even a neighbor sitting on the stairs. Up-to-date details of the front of the house. She doesn't want to show you the inside of the house, though. She wants you to see that in the flesh.

You love her.

You're also going for that.

You picking up the belongings in your room like a shoe picks up a piece of strawberry gum from the floor.

“You’re going? Too bad.”

People that look familiar mourn their future loss of you and it makes you feel weird. People with whom you’ve never held a serious conversation, people with whom you’ve never even shared a meal. They mourn a loss, their loss, and they appropriate your future departure. All their comments upon hearing the news are more or less the same.

“You can always come back.”

Their commentary also reveals a resentment.

“This place won’t change.”

8.

Your journey starts to become rectangular and maroon.

At the police station, they send you home because the system has fallen apart. The policeman at the counter, who, if he were black would undoubtedly be played by Morgan Freeman, is exhausted. Just a few weeks away from his retirement, he suggests that you come back tomorrow at 8:30. The next morning at 8:10 there is already a frenzied line in front of the station, but the doors don’t even open until 8:55. Morgan Freeman has the type of dark circles around his eyes that you’d expect to see on a parent, like he’s assisting someone with some type of chronic disease, someone who’s bedridden. He gets frustrated when he finds out that only two of the twenty-five people in the room (which is cramped with school desks) have come with a prescheduled appointment. You tried booking your appointment in advance, but they scheduled your date for forty days away. Not soon enough. You need to make sure that you have your passport as soon possible so that you can have it in your back pocket—absolutely no exceptions; you need it. Some of the people around you leave and so you decide to crouch down next to Officer Freeman’s desk and remind him that just yesterday he sent you home, that you need your passport now. He asks if you have the exact amount of cash.

It’s 25.76 euros.

If the state wants an exact amount then why don’t they round the price? \$25, \$26, even \$70...anything but 25.76.

You have the correct change.

Morgan tells you to meet with him at the door in five minutes.

Once you’re inside, something prohibits you from scanning your picture. The other officer grows impatient and he huffs, apparently wanting to make sure that you catch a whiff of his breath. Imperturbably, he tries to enter into a state of hypnosis—or at the very least, tries to just keep waiting a few more years until the moment when he can finally go home and put on his pajamas and stay away

from the burdens of the real, outside world.

You ask for the American consulate on the island. He checks a list and asks you if the Brazilian one will do. He continues explaining that it's tough, that there aren't a lot of jobs over there, that he hopes that you can get lucky with your visa.

Then the phrase comes out.

"My girl is there."

Your mouth fills up the way it does when you watch her sleep with her lips pursed.

"Ah, of course," he says. "Well, if the missus is there..."

"No, no, Morgan, she's not my missus. She isn't my wife. You don't get it. She's my girl."

HUGO CLEMENTE

My tongue

~~self-translation by Florence Ng (from Cantonese)

is the descendent of pirates and barbarians
tongue of hawkers, triads and band 3 schoolers

tongue that buzzes and bumps into faces and ears
that none in power can squash or swat clear

tongue that stinks like salted fish, shrimp paste,
smelly tofu and fried pig intestines

tongue of cha chaan teng and betting branches
of construction and protest sites

tongue that baffles with nine tones
and snaps and shouts and swears all the time

tongue that must be shackled

in brackets or banned from the official

tongue that can't sing to the raised flag
or voice in the great hall of the people

tongue as weeds blazed by winds
hatches by its will and has begotten 80 million

with life tougher than cockroaches and flu
which I will carry and rise in heaven with

my
tongue—

Doll

~~translated by Aaron Poochigian

embarrassed and confused
she was standing in the twilight:
“I cannot love” she muttered
“Close the door that leads to the darkness room” said the dawn demon
She was silent
“I will brim with love the shards of her body”
glass doll

Room

Drapery in a breeze
Brushed an armchair
A sharp-angled table
Spread its legs
I entered the room
Greeted the furniture

I live now in the habitat
Of reticent furniture

GENA GRUZ

Night in the Mountains

~~translated by Christoffer Dharma & Harper Campbell

I'm thinking: is it the moon that makes everything cold
So that houses pale and trees stiffen?
This once I want so much to be able to answer.
Eh, a little boy is chasing his shadow!

CHAIRIL ANWAR (Indonesia)

The First Reel

~~translated by Gabor Gyukics

I'm Etruscan.

I've been watching time
like those who lean on their elbows
for a long time.
On one elbow, the eyes are glassy.
Like the statue's on my mother's sarcophagus.
The hair is well aranged. The hand is smooth on the pillow.
Smooth face. Without features.
What it's looking at is undecidable,
yet the look is fixed
in the in and out attention
without a mirror.
In vain device and ophthalmologist
the focus can't be estimated.
The reason is simple,
it's easily understood
that these eyes
aren't motionless and see
only the past and the future
copied on top of each other.
What a montage.
The pictures of a film reeling too quickly.
The reel can't be deciphered
just like the Etruscan marks
on the twisted canvas strips on the mummy,
the posture is rigid,
can't squirm because then he fails.
Invisible,
bitter feature around the chin.
Meanwhile, there is an unshakable buoyancy
It seems though, the wolves are on the move,
fighting is out of the question,
there is no place to flee, and worth it not,
it'll be either fast or slow, but a transition.
This yesterday had happened before, this tomorrow also.
Time goes forward, backward. Shamelessly hovering
above us, running away.

KRISZTINA RITA MOLNÁR (Hungary)

Three Prose Poems from a collection entitled *Black Pearls*

~~translated by Ici Vanwesenbeeck

If You Were Mine

Year 1314

If you were mine, ah if that could be...I would take you far, far away from all humankind. So far away that we would be there, all alone with Nature...with the sea, with the sky, with the desert...There, we would be alone, with the leaves in the woods, the shrieking, impetuous winds, with the distant, frightened sea wrestling with the waves, [with] the sound of the uncouth lightning roaring with the thunder in the sky...Only you and me...

Only you and me there, having forgotten, having been forgotten, we would live like two souls absolved of all shackles. Live like the first humans. If you were mine, I'd find the strength to bear the trials, the tragedies, and the calamities of life; unearth the meaning of life. If you were mine, I would love this life.

For Each Other

To Sermed

Year 1316

Whereas life has decided to unite two orphaned souls like us who for long languished in tyrannical solitude, whereas fate generously decided to mend two broken beings, so reach for my hand that I extend to only you, in total reverence. Surrender your ill-fated life to me in full confidence so that we can be happy, that we can belong to each other with all we have. Let's

belong to each other so strongly, so violently that the newfound happiness of our miserable and forlorn lives entwines itself even around that orphaned past of ours. United in every sense, every desire, united in the calamities and torments of life, as well as its desire and joys, so intimately united, so incomparably united; after mighty fate unites us with such fervor, with me drunk with the divine poetry of my allegiance, let fate part us not, not with petty miseries of life, not even with death.

Let's be together in such a way that one doesn't die and leave the other in a sea of sorrows, or is left behind to be alone again. Let's be together to compensate for all the loneliness we endured while waiting to be in each other's arms. Let's be together so that we cannot be separated even in death. After this life, which is nothing but a bond in mortality, let death unite us in eternity.

My Love

My love, know this. If you have even a humble inkling of interest, know that my love is a dark and mysterious, treacherous wild fire. A fire that, while it burns me up every second; it desires every second of your life. My love is a brutal, jealous, selfish rancor. As it conquers and possesses my every rising thought, it violently, so violently and obsessively longs to own and possess your most ambiguous thoughts. Counting the seconds, the breaths, the breaths, the glances, and long to be their sole owner. My love is a catastrophe, a tragedy, a crisis. As it scorches my life, it longs to conquer and possess your life and soul, even with blood.

Yes, my love begins with such pleas, enthrallment, gratitude, and endless sacrifice. It begins so and ends so. There would be nothing left for me, not a speck in the universe, not a speck left for me if it's not a part of you. But, this love quickly turns into a flash of lightening. When I love, I love until death, until I die, until I kill... There, that's my love! If your soul has room to enter this tragedy, this fire, this space, brightness, I am thy slave. But know this, then you, too, are my slave.

MEHMED RAUF

Reptile

~~translated by Irina Moga

I better watch the leaf fall,
I'm fine sitting aside and shut up -
the clock faces the wall,
his passing leaves traces of crabs.

I better listen to the night break
the branches of a day of chlorophyll –
an autumn which is not autumn,
rain like a reptile.

CORRESPONDENCE

We were writing more and more often,
I sent her pressed flowers,
she was writing to me
in hot sand
until I ran out of herbariums,
her sea ran out of beaches,
and she sent me a minute hand
which rarely marked time,
moments,
rains,
blades
of grass
from another calendar...

Now words have started
to emerge —
but we don't write anymore,
we no longer remember;
beyond
ebb and flow,
an obedient
ragdoll
stayed behind.
Fiat lux.

NICOLAE BACIUT (Băciut, Romania, contemporary)

REVIEWS:

TRAS-OS-MONTES. Poems by José-Flore Tappy. Translated from the French by John Taylor. Cheshire, Massachusetts, MadHat Press, 2021. 210 pp.

José-Flore Tappy is the author of several poetry collections, among which is the most recent, *Trás-os-Montes*, which received the 2019 Prix Suisse de Littérature, the highest Swiss literary distinction. All her work has been translated into English by John Taylor who wrote a detailed, rich preface to this collection that accounts for his familiarity with the texts and the author, alike.

The poems of Trás-os-Montes fall back on a series of poems published in 2003, *Tombeau*, a tribute paid to an important person in the poet's life. As a poetic genre, the tombeau is a poem written in memory of a beloved one, making sense of both absence and the person's life. And even though the poems in the most recent collection are of a "different kind of portraiture," as John Taylor describes them, they very much sprang from the same feelings of respect and affection that led the speaker to acceptance and appreciation.

The collection is split in two sections: *Before the Night* set in Trás-os-Montes and *The Blank Hour*, happening on one of the Balearic Islands. The protagonist of the collection is Maria, a woman living in Trás-os-Montes, an isolated, poverty-stricken region in northern Portugal. The title means "on the other side of the mountains" and it is an invitation to closely look at things and catch those unseen reflections, layers, shades that make them uniquely beautiful. The sequence of poems softly sketches the woman's portrait from daily chores and life hardships to her devotion and wisdom:

Curtains drawn, feet propped
on a low chair, she knows without knowing,
vanishes behind the lamp,
hastily folding around her
what little shines

wrapped in wool, rags,
her legs look like dolls

Beneath her blouse,
the raw onion blends with sorrow,
love, or whatever resembles it,
she holds it tight between her breasts,
remembers

Rideaux tirés, les pieds posés
sur une chaise basse,
elle sait, sans savoir,
s'efface derrière la lampe
et replie hâtivement autour d'elle
le peu qui brille

emmaillotées de laine, de chiffons,

ses jambes ressemblent
à des poupées

Sous sa chemise,
l'oignon cru se mélange à la peine,
l'amour, ou ce qui lui ressemble,
elle le serre entre ses seins,
s'en souvient

Comparing the heart to an onion that equally serves its purpose to enchant the taste buds while mercilessly tearing the eyes sparks some vivid imagery. It provides an opportunity to remember, and whether it is a soft or hard memory she holds it “tight between her breasts.”

There is another kind of search in the collection that goes beyond the geographical connotations of the title. “On the other side of the mountains” is a quest for something lost—it could be a person, the past, a former self—that resonates with the woman’s immersion into her chores:

Tiny and bent over
the sink, so far from us
in her blue apron, lost
in her rain boots, she’s sorting
the black cherries, setting the ripest
off to the side, separating them
from the rotten ones
She seems to be measuring
an old dream from a distance,
visiting it with her fingertips
behind the bare windowpane
the clouds
leave stains

Menue, penchée au-dessus
de l'évier, si loin de nous
sous son tablier bleu, perdue
dans ses bottes de pluie, elle trie
les cerises noires et pose les plus mûres
à l'écart, les sépare des pourries
On dirait qu'elle mesure
un vieux rêve à distance,
qu'elle le visite du bout des doigts

derrière la vitre nue
les nuages
font des taches

Perhaps the poet's gaze is "measuring an old dream from a distance" behind the image of the tiny, bent lady, whose fingertips visit its shadow, while busying themselves with sorting the black cherries. This is such a lavish moment that José-Flore Tappy beautifully captures in her lines and the reader gets access to the intimacy born from switching between English and French and vice versa. John Taylor's closeness to both source language and the work of José-Flore Tappy permeates the English translation in its fluidity and musicality. The chromatic mélange—blue, black, the suggested white of the clouds—blends in with the stillness of the moment, while the woman's fingers are weaving memory yarn on an imaginary spindle.

Positive and negative perceptions seem to pepper the entire collection, especially in the first section where the poet's image overlaps with that of the Portuguese Maria. The woman is an inspiration in her resilience and dignity and the poet brilliantly renders it:

Thin as a handkerchief
my page I scrub and clean
down to the darkness that destroys it
and is stronger than words
while she awakens early, like a nail
boring into the cold, braving it,
moving forward,
all her thoughts gathered
into a silent point,
a single point that hurts

Aussi mince qu'un mouchoir
ma page, je la frotte et la nettoie
jusqu'à l'obscurité qui la détruit,
plus forte que les mots
tandis qu'elle, tôt levée,
tel un clou qui s'enfonce,
brave le froid, avance,
toutes ses pensées accumulées
en un point silencieux,
un seul point qui fait mal

One tender moment is swiftly followed by “a silent point, a single point that hurts” and this ebb and flow guides the reader towards the second section which is more personal and departs from the domestic splendors of “the other side of the mountains.” The presence of Maria grounds the collection and its stability echoes in *The Blank Hour* part where the reader encounters images of ruin and neglect: “dirty papers,” “dusty bitterness of the fennels,” “a sky of black snow,” “gravel strewn with garbage,” etc. The poet is in motion, and her gaze registers the shifting nature of things. The third person turns into first person and this unfiltered account mirrors her solitude and nostalgia:

A single fault line suffices,
however, and that look from the past returns,
slipping by mistake
into the heart, reopening
what had been locked up so well

a nearby star twinkling
and ripping

Une faille pourtant, une seule suffit
pour qu’il revienne, ce regard d’avant,
qu’il se glisse par erreur
jusqu’au cœur, rouvrant
ce qu’on avait si bien fermé
proche étoile qui scintille et déchire

The reference to the past seems to become stronger, more pungent, and tension deepens as the first person becomes the third, only to fall back into the second. The lines now reek of loss, wounded selves, absence, yearning. The collection ends with a dedication to “Hemingway” which, much as it is emotional, reminds the reader of Maria’s patience in the first section. While the poem mourns the death/absence of the beloved, it also concludes the poet’s search in a most tender way:

Sheltered by white walls
our heart beats
beneath their vast unfolded wings
so deeply it dreams of me

at a distance and unlaces
my shoes

À l'abri des murs blancs
sous leurs grandes ailes dépliées
ton cœur bat si profond qu'il me rêve
à distance et délace
mes souliers

~~Clara Burghelea

SOFFIATI VIA BLOWN AWAY POEMS, vito m. bonito. Translated by Allison Grimaldi Donahue. Burlington, VT: Fomite Press 2021. 140 pp.

vito m. bonito's poetry collection, *Soffiati Via Blown Away Poems*, translated by Allison Grimaldi-Donahue, is an invitation to consider the disruptions of language and how the poetic word resides in the spaces between death and life. His poems inhabit a world of their own for which the poet creates a special lexicon. The work is innovative at a linguistic level and sparks vivid imagery in the mind of the reader, especially since there is a suite of original poems in Italian, followed by their English translation. The translated work preserves the source language vibrancy:

children flower dogs

angelic the cane flutters

the dogs

you make soap

the coddled dogs

on the small boat

chrome-plated babies

on the leash

blessed

The poems range from seductive images to linguistic twists, playing the child versus serial killer, or another realm versus reality dichotomy. Their visual texture ignites surprising emotions:

as a little girl sitting

in blood i wanted to know

what remains of the dead

to the little hands that I kill

now i ask

what of me remains

what doesn't come back

ever again

Innocence finds itself at the heart of many of vito m. bonito's poems who, in his note on the collection, confesses to his own struggle to give form and shape: "Since becoming a father (and already saying father kills me) I have discovered the ferocious and sweet irony that children (even in simple babbling) carry within themselves." The naivety of the new-born is equally captivating and disarming and the child figure becomes central to his preoccupations in sheer contrast with "blood," "death," "killer," "butchery," etc. Such antagonisms reflect the speaker's fixations on poking at what remains too dark or too ferocious to be spoken of, a sort of purging of the word demons that inhabit the poetic mind.

Writing itself is seen as giving in to death; once a word is uttered, shaped, laid on paper, it “is being born to death.” Forgetting or renouncing the language allows the poet to look closely at children or serial killers and turn the collection into a path for bodies and souls to pass through:

how many lives do you die
when the soul explodes and undresses and everything
begins? all the body ash
and the pain and then without weight
it all falls imploring and turns off
and then it all begins
light still of blood
from the radiated heart
without forgiveness vague hands

In the translator’s note, Allison Grimaldi-Donahue addresses the feeling behind the process of working from Italian into English. *Soffiati Via Blown Away Poems* became an immersion into the language and realm of vito m. benito’s poetry, whose ethereal quality disarmed her, making her aware of the performative stance the poet embraced, as well as the versatile possibilities of the poet’s lexicon. Such permutations saturate the English text and reveal the splendors of both vito m. bonito’s poetic choices and the translator’s finesse: “to sweat the flowered heart,” “caramels of blood,” “the chrome-plated babies,” “a crooked miracle.”

Translation changes writing and in her article in *Electric Literature*, “The Pleasures of Influence: Escaping Ourselves, Dreaming Someone Else’s Dreams,” Allison Grimaldi-Donahue further

explains the process by which the self spills out and the otherness seeps in: “I read Bonito’s poems so many times, transcribe each of them by hand first in the Italian and then into English, repeat this on the computer, and revise three, four even five times. These readings turn into writing.” In doing so, the translator goes beyond the shell of the language, reaching for the inner layers of sound, emotion, musicality, everything that shall resist the meticulous deconstruction/destruction of the source language to allow the rebuilding of the text in the target language. Inhabiting the poet’s conscious, accessing his creativity and force allows the translator to take up and let go, while deeply immersing itself in the poetry to the point of inhabiting both form and content.

The linguistic freedom that the poetry of vito m. bonito carries is beautifully captured in Allison Grimaldi-Donahue’s English translation that retains the Italian playfulness and musicality, and the bilingual collection stands out as a journey into the margins of another world, a limbo that very much resembles the creative process of translation itself.

~~Clara Burghelea

MEATY PLEASURES, Mónica Lavin, translated by Dorothy Potter Snyder. Katakana Editores, 2021. 121 pp.

Speaking of a Lavin collection, the translator says “Those stories—including *Ladies Bar*, which is in this book—explored the fraught terrain of love, sex, desire, obsession and fantasy and they were the most visceral and unabashedly physical tales by a Hispanic woman I had ever read.” So

you get the idea. The present is a book of twelve wonderful stories by the under-translated Mexican, no introduction, with two brief biographies (Lavin and Snyder) as end matter.

Lavin has steadily risen to the first rank of contemporary Mexican fiction. She has done this with engaging and deftly crafted stories with well-developed characters. Her reputation is sealed, in addition, with the magisterial *Yo, La Peor*, which has a non-fiction basis (the life of Sor Juana de la Cruz). Her ten novels have been excerpted and taught in American schools, and she has had her champions (this reviewer and the American translator C.M. Mayo included). But Snyder's work, in this edition, is a signal break-through for both Lavin and Mexican literature. There is no question there will be more translations of Lavin.

"I shouldn't have done it, but I couldn't help it. For me, all it took was to see them walk in with that excited yet guarded stride, she with her voluptuous figure and long, shapely legs and he, tall and slender, his gaze shielded behind dark glasses and his arm firmly wrapped around her waist. I caught sight of them from behind the half-open door of another room as they passed through the dark hallway, and, after they slipped by, I felt relieved that they were the same ones as always." The unadorned simplicity of this prose—the beginning of the story "Thursdays"—is handled with perfect ease by the translator. It is also typical of Lavin; phrases such as "guarded stride" are superb, but as a rule not startlingly rich in metaphor. Also typical of this book is the way this simplicity soon plunges to erotic extremes and even flirts with madness.

During an interview with Karen Codner an issue of propriety, or sensitivity, or "correctness" arose. The interviewer reminded Mónica Lavin that in the current climate *Lolita* couldn't get published. Lavin has many justifications for her method, and her body of work. The challenge and self-evident quality of *Meaty Pleasures* is her best defense. We are fortunate that stories as disturbing as "You Never Know" are not only published but translated.

As Snyder says, “These stories are not for the faint of heart—but they are for those with heart”
(back cover).

Katakana has released a lovely edition, with superior paper and beautiful covers.

~~Peter Thompson

MOON AND SUN: A SELECTION OF THE RUBAIYAT OF MOLANA JALAL AL-DIN RUMI. Translated by Zara Houshmand. Amrevan Books, 2020. 208 pp.

My daughter had her first translation class yesterday. She is taking part in a literary competition that requires high school students to translate a poem by Romanian poet, Ion Minulescu, into English. Apart from being an opportunity to reflect her cultural and linguistic heritage, she has understood how to defend and debate word choices and her thought process. What she learnt above all was that the power of translation lies in its ability to build bridges between here and there, and now and then.

Translator Zara Houshmand made a commitment in 2000 to translate one of Rumi’s quatrains every day for a year and a half for an Iranian magazine. She, too, began by following a personal interest and ended up producing a beautiful bilingual, English/Persian, edition. The poems of the collection belong to the Muslim poet Rumi, one of the most loved poets by the American audience, who lived eight hundred years ago. They explore love, longing, spirituality, friendship, among other things, in a language that is both universal and paying tribute to the musical Persian culture.

Your love stirs the ocean into reckless storms.
At your feet, the clouds drop their pearls.
Dark smoke rises in the sky, a fire burns
Where your love's lightning strikes the earth.

The collection includes the beautifully-ornated original lines, familiarizing the reader with the music and magic of the Persian culture. American and international audiences have been previously introduced to Rumi's didactic work and ghazals by poets and translators such as Robert Bly, Coleman Barks, A.J. Arberry, Nadher Khalili, or Kabir Helminski. In her collection, Zara Houshmand groups the selected quatrains in fifteen chapters, guiding the reader into Rumi's deep mind and poetic endeavors. In the chapter entitled "Alone in the Desert", Rumi speaks of self-discovery and the inherent pitfalls and temptations:

I journey through the desert of your love
Searching for some hint that you might join me.
I saw in every home I passed along the way
Scattered corpses of those who went before me.

Zara Houshmand does not necessarily retain the original poetic core in her English translation but still manages to spark vivid images in the reader's mind, especially since it is well known that classical Persian poetry is layered with meanings that are hard to contain and render. She clearly states in the Introduction to the collection that the "the RUBAI or quatrain (the plural is RUBAIYAT), is one of the oldest verse forms in Persian and has an unusually flexible meter." It opens with a catching line, turns around in the third unrhymed line, only to fall on the fourth which goes back to rhyming with the first. Its feminine rhyme acts as refrain further emphasizing Rumi's musical verse.

A bilingual collection is always inviting, acting once again as a bridge between speakers of Persian who can always enjoy the original, artistic text and the English audience who can marvel at the beautiful Nastaliq, while also savoring the seducing quatrains. Rumi's spirit travels though

the poetry both ways, and such fluidity “honors the musical quality of the original” as Zara Houshmand skillfully explains.

Indeed, her translation leaves its mark on the reader’s ears such as in the chapter called “Burning in the flame” where the poet mourns his companion’s disappearance:

If one day you pass my humble mound
Stop and say, “My love whom sorrow killed”
From the blood-soaked field I’ll cry out loud
“My Joseph who was lost and now is found.”

Apart from the close attention the translator paid to form, the generous introductions to all the chapters, therefore familiarizing the reader with the context and the process, the translator Zara Houshmand encapsulated the spontaneous nature of the original poems and the poet, thus producing an organic collection, *Moon and Sun*, that pulsates with aliveness. The title itself reflects the closeness of Rumi/ Moon and Shams/Sun, his mentor, friend, companion, and echoes the translator’s intention to have the Persian and English poems mirror one another.

I shared the collection with my daughter, introducing her to another culture and its remarkable representative, telling her there is nothing impossible to translate, much as ambiguity and puzzling word dilemmas pepper the process. Little by little, we are building bridges that can tame the wildest waters and offer safe passage to wonderful literary worlds!

~~Clara Burghelea

PUBLICATION NOTICES:

PLAGIOS/PLAGIARISMS, vol. 2, Ulalume González de León. Translated by Terry Ehret, John Johnson, Nancy J. Morales. San Francisco: Sixteen Rivers Press, 2022. 167 pp., bilingual.

“...the finely wrought, scrupulous translations chart the shifting realities, the cumulative mysteries, by doing what the poems do: They live and breathe, and invoke the untouchable language of silence.” —William O’Daly

BELONGING AND NOT BELONGING, Mary Jacobus. Princeton U. Press, 2022. 212 pp., with photographs and end notes.

The sub-title is *Translation, Migration, Displacement*, and this is a profound monograph—a meditation is more accurate—on “identity poetics,” and border crossings. Essential reading for the modern international discourse on the intersection of poetic space and identity spaces.

TRANSLATING MYSELF AND OTHERS, Jhumpa Lahiri. Princeton, 2022. 198 pp. with Selected Bibliography and Index.

As Princeton University Press says, this “is a collection of candid and disarmingly personal essays by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jhumpa Lahiri, who reflects on her emerging identity as a translator as well as a writer in two languages.” Profoundly reflective of the process of self-translation.

DISCOVERING FICTION, Yan Lianke. Translated (and Introduction) by Carlos Rojas. Chapel Hill: Duke University Press., 2022. 135 pp., with Notes and Bibliography.

“This rich volume [...] sheds light on Yan’s own masterpieces, such as *Lenin’s Kisses* and *Dream of Ding Village*. It’s the kind of literary criticism that is both useful and edifying.” —Ha Jin

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