Speculative Fiction

5 Writers Who Dwell in Possibility

PIERRETTE FLEUTIAUX | RODRIGO FRESÁN | ANGÉLICA GORODISCHER
ALEKSEY LUKYANOV | ANNE RICHTER

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Not only is World Literature Today one of the oldest continuously published magazines devoted to international literature, but a remarkable continuity has prevailed on our masthead page in the past couple of decades. Dr. RC Davis-Undiano will soon celebrate twenty years as WLT’s executive director in what I like to characterize as a third golden age in the magazine’s history, following the tenures of our founding editor (1927–49), Roy Temple House, and our longtime editor (1967–91) Ivar Ivask. Moreover, as of 2018, I’ll become the third longest-serving editor in chief (2008–18) in the publication’s history, following House and Ivask. Standing on the shoulders of such giants, we feel fortunate to survey the horizons of the international literary scene from the Southern Plains of Oklahoma, a place that has always been a crossroads of languages, cultures, and the imagination.

Mindful of the continuity of our history here, I’m also pleased to announce four new staffing changes for 2018: Michelle Johnson, who has served as WLT’s gifted managing editor since 2008, is adding “culture editor” to her title—in the July issue, poet John Kinsella and visual artist Helen Johnson will offer a lively Q&A from Australia, and Michelle is already developing a music-themed cover feature for the September issue. Also of note, Jen Rickard Blair, previously our online editor and web developer, took over as WLT’s art director as of the March issue—readers will appreciate her sophisticated design aesthetic throughout the current issue. Rob Vollmar, while continuing to serve as our polymath book review editor, has also assumed Jen’s former online editing role. And we’re delighted to welcome Cassady Dixon as our new full-time colleague in marketing, public relations, and social media. Behind the scenes but no less vital to our presence on campus, Terri Stubblefield will consolidate her role as office manager in charge of programs, event planning, and development, and Kay Blunck continues to keep the WLT ship afloat by managing our subscriptions and accounts.

What remains unchanged is the unwavering support of the University of Oklahoma in providing WLT with both an operational base and an intellectual home. Speaking of golden ages, we salute OU’s longtime president, David L. Boren, upon his retirement this year and thank him for his generous support of the arts and humanities, and WLT in particular, during his tenure. We also thank Dr. Kyle Harper, OU’s senior vice president and provost, for his deep and passionate investment in fostering our continued excellence. In October 1926, when Dr. House initially approached President William Bennett Bizzell to request a startup budget of $150 for the first two issues of the quarterly that eventually became WLT, his rationale was strikingly modest: “I know our little magazine will be useful in various quarters. A good many of us, I think, are coming to feel strongly that the University of Oklahoma must begin fostering contributions to the scholarly and cultural activities of the nation.” That utilitarian emphasis remains at the core of our mission, even as the university’s scholarly and cultural activities have expanded beyond the state and region to become not only national but international in scope.

As I wrote in a previous issue, “To the students in my magazine publishing class, I often cite Michael Robert Evans’s assertion that ‘editing is primarily about people,’ not words. By extension, universities are less about buildings and the spaces—geographical or intellectual—they occupy than about the people who inhabit and enliven them” (May 2015). While a JSTOR keyword search might provide a “big data” view of world literature as cataloged in our pages since 1927, most readers who pick up a book are looking for deep immersion in the unique time and place of that writer’s world. Words always reflect back upon the multiverse at large—we read such literature to be enlightened and inspired, even within the spatial and temporal circumscriptions of our horizons.

Daniel Simon
WORLD LITERATURE TODAY

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When I pulled into Sligo on the morning bus with a dog-eared copy of W. B. Yeats’s Collected Poems, I carried two wishes: first, that it would stop raining. And second, that I might uncover some of the vital, inspiring force behind my favorite poet.

One gets over the rain.

Located on the coastal edge of County Sligo in the northwest of Ireland, Sligo rests on the neck of land between Sligo Bay and the placid Lough Gill. Riverside restaurants, shops, and lively pubs line the town center, where the swinging doors of little cafés disclose the smell of black currant scones or the flash of jam jars and bottles of cordial. Visitors’ maps lead to abbeys, churches, and other historical sites around town, but somehow, people seem to gravitate toward Wine Street, where the Yeats Memorial Building stands.

Lovers of Irish poetry have good reason to venture to a less-trafficked town like Sligo. Yeats’s early work draws deeply from the natural features and fairy stories of the area where he spent much of his youth, and his footprints linger. With a car, a bicycle, or a sturdy pair of walking boots, one can retrace the journey of “The Stolen Child” through the deciduous canopy of old Slishwood to the rustling waterfall of Glen-Car, where the fairies swing from fern fronds. Bus and ferry can bring you to the famous lake isle of Innisfree that hummed peacefully in Yeats’s memory amid the bustle of London, or to the Salley Gardens where he would rendezvous with Maud Gonne, ever aloof. The more solemn-minded make their way to the cemetery where Yeats lies interred “Under bare Ben Bulben’s head / In Drumcliff churchyard” and ruminate on the lines cut into his simple headstone.

Despite the area’s many draws, travelers from too far afield are regarded as something of a pleasant surprise. Tours are more likely to be filled with visitors from another county than curious continental or pond-hopping Americans. Let slip a foreign accent and you may find yourself caught up in a chat with a lifelong resident. Should your dialogue take a turn toward poetry, you may discover one of Sligo’s greatest charms: here, literature never quite becomes history.

Sligo is a place of poetry without pomp. Verse is scrawled on the walls, written into folk songs, and etched into the memories of those raised with rhymes on their tongues. Yeats’s legacy is borne proudly and revisited frequently. One exemplar of this (and for me, one of the town’s great treasures) is the Hamilton Gallery, which, in addition to exhibiting artwork from a vast range of contemporary Irish artists, holds an annual invitational exhibition reflecting on some aspect of Yeats’s work. Each of these special shows is a culmination of the unique kind of presence with which Sligo is gifted—one that allows its inhabitants, and perhaps its pilgrims, to poignantly reenvision the life and work of W. B. Yeats.

Grant Schatzman is a WLT intern and a writer, editor, and student at the University of Oklahoma.
When asked to contribute to a speculative fiction folio, I noticed only afterward I’d picked two tales that revolve around houses. Freud would say I protest too much. (I am merely grateful his list of impossible things—to govern, to teach, and to cure—does not include translation.)

The house in every incarnation from crumbling castle to suburban abode, whether with skeletons in the closet or hearts beneath the floorboards, is a mainstay of the fantastic, locus of ghosts and seat of the self. The French fantastique as a genre is bound up with the word étrange of whose supernatural suggestion our “strange” retains...
but an attenuated echo ("estrangement" preserves some of the alienating force, though not its vector). And so étrange in this context is generally rendered as "uncanny," both of which are standard for the German unheimlich—literally, "unhomely." These words, each with their own origins and baggage, triangulate a concept that derives its lasting power from its very impalpability, but it is to translation that we owe their collusive proximity.

Home: you can’t go back again, but when you do, they have to take you in . . . or not. In his history of French fantastical literature, fantasist Marcel Schneider called Kafka a "delay-action bomb": the impact of Alexandre Vialatte’s translations extended far beyond their first appearance in the 1930s. The titular structure of Pierrette Fleutiaux’s tale (page 43), which updates the age-old gingerbread cottage to modern “independent senior living,” keeps its narrator daughter out as implacably as Kafka’s gate before the law. It is no diminishment to say the fable in Fleutiaux’s hands is “brought home”: father swapped for mother, the urban for the personal, chilly omniness moderated by wry rue. At the end, no light blinds; life goes on.

First hailed as the new female hope for the French fantastique—in an admiring preface to her debut novel—Julio Cortázar likened her to Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo—Fleutiaux initially disavowed the label, branding her stories realist because she wrote of “ordinary things everyone knew about.” “The House” dates from her first collection in 1976; by the time of its 2003 reprinting, Fleutiaux herself contributed a preface claiming Calvino as a model and coming around to the label fantastical for “lack of anything better.”

By 1995 Anne Richter had already included Fleutiaux in the second edition of her anthology Le Fantastique Féminin (the 1977 version only went as far as Patricia Highsmith). Richter’s introductory essay begins by quoting Lise Deharme, surrealism’s Lady of the Glove and Queen of Spades, herself a noted ghost-story writer: “A chair can start putting forth buds in any atmosphere that suits it.” The female fantastic was at once spontaneous and concrete, combining interiority with materiality. Developing from Ann Radcliffe, Emilia Pardo Bazán, and Vernon Lee, it moved away from explanation and mechanism toward instinct and transformation, ambiguity not merely ambient but embodied. Richter avoids essentializing femininity; her approach is descriptive, not prescriptive, and above all inclusive; several authors she features have yet to make it into English.

Proponents of the social novel have accused fabulism of a reluctance or failure to engage the contemporary big picture in all its realist particulars, as if imagination were a retreat and metaphor a surrender, but it is perhaps in paring specifics away, cleaving close instead to some bone truth, that fables find their haunting perennity. If, four decades after it initially lent its name to her second collection, it is now possible to read “The Tenants” (page 45) as a parable of the refugee crisis, that is only a testament to its roominess. As Homi Bhabha wrote, “the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence.” Unhomed from their native tongues, these stories now speak, across borders, of abiding unsettlements.

Editorial note: Turn to page 43 to read Gauvin’s translation of Fleutiaux’s “The House” and page 45 to read his translation of Richter’s “The Tenants.”

Edward Gauvin’s work has won the John Dryden Translation prize and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Translation Award and been nominated for the French-American Foundation and Oxford Weidenfeld Translation prizes. The translator of more than 250 graphic novels, he is a contributing editor for comics at Words Without Borders and has written on the francophone fantastic at Weird Fiction Review.
WHAT TO READ NOW

Unrequited Love

by Lori Feathers

Three brief, powerful novels in recent translation enriched my reading during the last few months. Stories of unrequited love, their protagonists suffer an unsatisfied, persistent longing for affirmation in the face of seeming indifference. Each of these works illuminates a universal human frailty: the affection we most desire rests in the hands of someone unwilling or incapable of giving it.

Hanne Ørstavik

Love
Trans. Martin Aitken | Archipelago Books

Hanne Ørstavik places us inside the minds of her two protagonists: a self-conscious boy, Jon, and his single mother, Vibeke, as they embark on separate adventures one bitterly cold night in small-town Norway. While Jon wanders around the neighborhood alone, his thoughts never stray from his beloved mother, whom he fantasizes at home busying herself with baking a cake and wrapping gifts for his ninth birthday celebration the following day. But Vibeke is not your typical mother. Narcissistic and self-absorbed, she seems to have forgotten not only Jon’s birthday but his very existence. Instead, all her attention is focused on the possibility of hooking up with a gruff, quiet stranger who is in town as part of the traveling carnival. Love is a deep and vibrantly alive novel. The effect of Ørstavik’s narrative, alternating abruptly between Jon’s story and that of his mother, is beautifully devastating. The prose and pacing set a tone of foreboding tension and impending doom. This is not your typical love story but rather the sharp-edged account of a boy whose need for attention from his heedless mother is heartfelt and full of yearning.

Antonio Monda

Unworthy
Trans. John Cullen | Nan A. Talese

Father Abram is a young Catholic priest who fulfills his priestly duties with true conviction yet repeatedly surrenders to his lust and desire to be in a loving relationship
with a woman. Lisa, his latest lover, understands his commitment to God and never asks him to choose between her and the church. When Lisa is diagnosed with terminal cancer, Father Abram feels helpless to her suffering and struggles to understand why God allows it. At the same time, he questions whether God truly forgives his repeated breach of his vow of celibacy. He despairs God’s silence in response to both his sins and his efforts to atone for them. Father Abram entangles himself in a tightening web of dishonesty as he tries to keep his relationship with Lisa concealed, and this causes him great shame. He comes to understand that his feelings of shame are a symptom of God’s grace—evidence that his striving to be good can never be finished. Unworthy is an immersive novel of one man’s fight to reconcile his flawed humanity with a godliness compelled by the sacred; his recognition that even the most devout face silence in their need for divine solace.

Madame Nielsen

The Endless Summer

Trans. Gaye Kynoch | Open Letter

The Endless Summer feels like a fairy tale—lyrical, poignant, and dreamy; a story set in an otherworldly, timeless space. A group of young people converge upon a ramshackle manor where they pass day after summer day in a state of hedonistic languor and ardent fascination with the beautifully poised and reserved matron of the house, referred to simply as “the mother.” This woman is indeed mother of three children: a teenage daughter, Stina, and two little boys. But for Stina and the handful of young men who decamp at the manor that summer (among them both Stina’s gender-ambiguous lover and her best friend from school), the mother is muse—enigmatic, beautiful, self-possessed—a being whose love and attention they all long to receive. To their great surprise, the mother takes a lover, one of a newly arrived pair of young men from Portugal hitchhiking across Europe. Months later the summer idyll abruptly ends when one of the group dies. Madame Nielsen fittingly subtitles her novel “a requiem,” and indeed it beautifully evokes the death of carefree innocence and, with it, the recognition of our time-bound existence.

Lori Feathers (@lorifeathers) is a co-owner of Interabang Books in Dallas, Texas, and the store’s book buyer. She writes freelance book reviews, sits on the board of the National Book Critics Circle, and is a fiction judge for the 2018 Best Translated Book Award.

The winter break was one of long reads: Exit West, If Beale Street Could Talk, Manhattan Beach, Little Fires Everywhere. After a busy four months of editing and teaching, with little time for reading novels, Managing and Culture Editor Michelle Johnson is looking forward to again immersing herself in other worlds. Here are three already on her list.

Therese Bohman

Eventide

Trans. Marlaine Delargy

Other Press

Swedish author Therese Bohman, who is also an art-and-culture columnist, creates for her third novel an art history professor navigating the politics of the academic world. The publisher’s catalog describes the book as posing questions about the “distorted standards to which women are held in their relationships and careers.” The online reviews promise “crystalline reflections on art and culture” (Sylvia Brownrigg) and a protagonist who ultimately prevails.

Rupert Thomson

Never Anyone But You

Other Press

To continue reading about strong women, art, and culture, I’ve already set aside the advance copy of Rupert Thomson’s Never Anyone But You. This novelization of the lives of two revolutionary women, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, traces their clandestine love affair in avant-garde 1930s Paris and Jersey. While smashing gender barriers, they played an influential role in the surrealist and dadaist movements and eventually risked their lives creating anti-Nazi propaganda.

Tayari Jones

An American Marriage

Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

With both Edwidge Danticat and Jacqueline Woodson recommending it, this story of a wrongful conviction’s impact upon a marriage is a timely must-read. Though not a courtroom drama, the novel promises enough connection to the law-and-literature genre to satisfy readers who, like me, want to reflect on how the US legal system affects both those brought into it and their families.


**PHOTO:** COURTESY OF BOOK BENTO BOX

**lit lists**

**5 Favorite Literary Instas**

by Reid Bartholomew

While social media gives us an unprecedented connection to each other, the vast amount of constantly whirling information can be overwhelming. Literature has always had a proud tradition of instilling peace and inspiring reflection, and this has never been more vital than in the hectic information age. We’ve put together a list of five Instagram pages that deliver literature’s power in small moments in between the vacation and baby pictures on your feed.

**@BOOKBENTO**

Book Bento Box is a literary take on a Japanese tradition of bentō, or single-portion home-packed meals that are often placed in elaborate, aesthetically pleasing arrangements. Book Bento Box builds on this concept with a book recommendation as the main course among a variety of carefully placed side items.

**@SUBWAYBOOKREVIEW**

Subway Book Review seeks to shine light on the time-honored tradition of reading in transit, taking readers aside to get their take on whatever book happens to be in their hands. The page features black-and-white pictures of readers from the subways of New York City, London, Cairo, and Mexico City along with their thoughts on the book.

**@LASTNIGHTSREADING**

Book readings can bring in all kinds of people, but authors can only hope to have someone like Kate Gavino in the crowd. Gavino has been to countless readings, during which she sits down and illustrates the author next to Gavino’s favorite quote from the event. Scrolling through the numerous illustrations and nuggets of wisdom is an inspiring experience, and there’s plenty to go through—enough for Gavino to compile into a book, *Last Night’s Reading* (2015).

**@SPINESIDEOUT**

Spine-side Out creates poetry from the spines of books. The titles fall into each other and form a poem, which makes for a unique bridge between books that may not otherwise have connections. It’s a great way to satisfy an itch for poetry while finding new and interesting reading material.

**@_TEJUCOLE**

Photography critic for the *New York Times*, author, and art critic Teju Cole displays art and photography on his Instagram page. He frequently adds poetic captions that deepen the experience, but often he’ll simply leave the work to speak for itself. His page is perfect for taking a moment to be still in the midst of the day’s chaos.

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Reid Bartholomew is a WLT intern studying writing and Japanese at the University of Oklahoma. When he isn’t writing, he finds himself catching up on his mile-long reading list or working with the staff of *The Aster Review*, a student arts publication at OU.
“It wasn’t too pleasant knowing you were making stocks for prison camp inmates or testing the Kutuzov or Homer eye-punches (on mannequins, of course). Next thing you know, they’d be inventing a portable wall for executions.”

—“Annus Mirabilis (Anus Horribilis),” by Aleksey Lukyanov

From the Speculative Fiction special section starting on page 42.
What is crime fiction about? One glib answer is the struggle between good and evil. As light is defined by darkness, there is no hero without the counterpush of an opposing character. The Greeks left us the terms “protagonist” and “antagonist” from their word for “actor” (agon), with the “protagonist” being the primary actor, and the “antagonist” being the opposing. In most stories, the protagonist is “good” in the sense that Aristotle describes in his Poetics, not saintly or morally pure—Aristotle was not a Christian—but making choices the audience would interpret as the proper ones. Consider the brilliant classic “A Jury of Her Peers,” by Susan Glaspell. A group of women conceal the fact that their friend, abused by her husband, murdered him. By the time we reach the story’s conclusion, we generally agree with their decision and have come to view the sheriff as an antagonist. The women are not doing “good,” in the conventional sense, but the sheriff is certainly not “evil.” His choices, as a man and a representative of the law, show us his blindness to the emotional cruelties inflicted on the wife for many years. Her suffering justifies the difficult choice to remain silent, and readers, with perhaps some reticence, agree.

In most crime stories, the choices are not nearly as ambiguous. Sherlock Holmes is on the side of God and the Crown, but we wouldn’t in the usual sense think of him as “good.”
treats the steadfast Watson—a wounded veteran and a physician—like a King Charles spaniel there to amuse him. Yet Holmes and his readers face little anguish in his choices. Something bad is afoot and he will end it. Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe often exhibits a rueful sympathy for petty criminals and other moral “small stuff,” but there is never any question about the big stuff. Sam Spade, in The Maltese Falcon, faces an agonizing choice between love or justice. Knowing how much Sam loves Brigid, the reader becomes afraid that Sam isn’t strong enough to make the proper choice. It comes as a relief that he makes the painful, but right, choice. He’s not even able to articulate well why he does this, but we like him, even admire him, for choosing what we hope we would have the strength to choose in similar circumstances.

The antagonist, in fact, does not need to make choices that the audience finds “not good.” He or she merely needs to hinder the “good” choices of the protagonist. By opposing the protagonist, for any motive, an antagonist fulfills the dramatic function. Aristotle controversially wrote that character is in service of the plot. You might have a play without character, he says, but never one without plot. It is one of the most attacked things he wrote, and yet think of all the entertainments you have enjoyed that are largely “characterless.” A good guy, a bad guy, and a series of events leading to a conclusion—it’s certainly the essence of most murder mysteries.

This is not to say that the highest quality of literature gives us characters without complexity or complication (“depth” if you prefer), but white hat/black hat conflicts are the rule in books, movies, and sometimes even quality television. Hired to write an original Law and Order novel, I was told that the novelist’s challenge was that the show was characterless; that is to say, unlike many other television series (like the spin-off Law and Order: Special Victims Unit), the internal struggles of the characters were of little or no consequence. Almost no one thinks of Law and Order as “junk” television, however. It runs almost every night on cable television, still delivering its thoughtful episodes to its audience. The old series Mission Impossible was similarly characterless. Barney in the crawl space clipping wires under the dictator’s palace was all you needed to know about Barney.

Novelist Dick Francis used to say that developing the hero’s character filled up his pages. However, in crime writing, I would say, the bad guy is usually underdeveloped, and frequently cartoonish. Why? Well, for the sake of mystery, the full character of the protagonist is usually concealed, but ideally, shouldn’t the antagonist be equal, a worthy opponent, a mirror reflection of the protagonist? Writers create plots, however, in which the conflict must be resolved, so naturally, a tie (to paraphrase Vince Lombardi) would be like kissing your own sister. The deck is going to be stacked for the “good guy.” Continental writers often push their resolutions toward ambiguity to both make them more “realistic,” like “literature,” and less obviously British and American knockoffs, but the collision of definite good and evil is much more popular, both in derivative writings and in imported best-sellers.

I would further argue that few people are capable of identifying with true evil. Even the most hardened criminals rationalize their behavior. The girl didn’t rob the store in order to show off her evil—she wanted a new frock. Raskolnikoff murdered his landlady to become Napoleon. We may be decadently amused by Hannibal Lecter, but can we identify with him? He lost me with the fava beans, never mind the liver. It’s worth noting here that no matter how entertaining Lecter is in his first two appearances, he is not really the primary antagonist in either. In Red Dragon, agent Will Graham pursues “The Tooth Fairy.” In The Silence of the Lambs, Clarice Starling pursues “Buffalo Bill.” Both antagonist killers are not sympathetic. Despite Lecter’s appeal, he’s structurally only a secondary character, a murdering Mr. Micawber. The agents need information from him, and that’s all.

Most famous villains are memorably cartoonish. Take Professor Moriarty in the Holmes stories. He is
If the detective enters a character’s chambers and he is playing Beethoven, call him the killer.

the prototype of many a master criminal: big brained, well educated, of a refined background. He turns to crime evidently because it’s in his nature, and the limited description of his character sets him up to be the forerunner of a long line of psychopaths in crime fiction. Psychopaths, as portrayed, are convenient antagonists, chameleon-like, intelligent, and utterly devoid of emotion. It is unlikely the average reader can identify with a psychopath, tormented as we are with inconvenient emotions. As if to emphasize their villain’s abnormality, writers may portray their antagonists as liking cats (Dr. No!) and classical music. If the detective enters a character’s chambers and he is playing Beethoven, call him the killer. Inexplicably, evil masterminds do not appreciate Mozart. Colin Dexter’s Inspector Morse defies all convention by being a good guy who listens to Wagner, usually played in fiction only on the Victrolas of Nazis.

We are much more sensitive today to racial, religious, and sexual prejudices, and this has altered our perceptions of fictional villains. We wince at the portrayal of drooling African American rapists in Birth of a Nation; at bucktoothed and sneaky Japanese in old movies; at conniving Jews; deceitful Arabs; grinning Mexican bandits; and huge, lascivious, murderous boys with low IQs. When I was a child, Native Americans were massacred on television in numbers that almost matched the actual genocide. Gradually there was a sense that those cathode-ray images weren’t quite palatable, and those types of westerns faded. Stereotypes linger, of course. The evil Dr. Fu-Manchu in Sax Rohmer’s string of novels from 1911 to 1959 was a much more interesting character than the staunch Inspector Whatssizname chasing him but would currently never be resurrected for books or film. Nonetheless, fear of the “Yellow Peril” unfortunately lingers, and images of leering Hispanic drug lords have recently become part of our national political discourse, drawing on the echoes of characterization in movies like The Magnificent Seven (1960) and The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1948).

Fear of the viral storms released as a reaction to racism inhibits the creation of many of these old-fashioned criminal masterminds, which is good, but it also might explain why so many of our movies have bad-guy robots or aliens or comic-book mutants. Transformers and Klingons have no social discrimination for us to feel uncomfortable with, and so they can rampage freely until the heroes blow them up (yawn!). In books, serial killers have served a similar purpose since at least when Red Dragon (1981) and The Silence of the Lambs (1988) bookended the eighties. It is hard to identify with the conscienceless rationalizations of someone who murders multiple times for amusement—or lunch. Pedophiles have also begun to show up in recent novels representing pure evil, perhaps because the public has become acutely aware of the problem, and even though the disturbing conclusion of Fritz Lang’s M is as close as anyone wants to get in identifying with that pathology.

Fortunately for thriller writers, but unfortunately for the characterization skills of many of them, the Nazis are always available. From Frederick Forsyth’s The Odessa File, to Ira Levin’s The Boys from Brazil, to Allan Folsom’s The Day after Tomorrow, to Arnaldur Indriðason’s Operation Napoleon, to Robert Harris’s Munich and numberless other books, Nazis, no matter how aged, have been and continue to march down the bookshelves as the antagonists everyone loves to hate. Worse perpetrators of evil are hard to imagine, and yet, ironically, popular literature often grants them the Übermensch status that they ludicrously attributed to themselves. These master criminals are geniuses in science, physical specimens of health, crack shots, and able, as the Nazi killer does in many thrillers, to wipe out any security detail. Despite this, they cannot seem to cure their accents or defeat a doctor from Omaha. One need only compare these “supermen” with the dweebish, idiotic, and deranged real-world Nazis (Himmler, Hess, George Lincoln Rockwell, the tiki marchers in Charlottesville) to see exactly how far fiction ventures from the truth.
Six Poems

by Mahtem Shiferraw

Nomenclatures II

Those which we are given
in the brink of sorrow,
or joy – or both;

those marked on our foreheads
the curse of a generation,
or more,

marked on our abdomens
birthmarks, like numbers
aligning us with a history
we seem to forget;

those we carry within
years later, many lands apart,
having something rotten
from the inside out
our bodies finally drooping
with the weight of the firmament;

those we carve new and milky,
pasty on our foreign tongues
monosyllabic, odd things
reminding us of everywhere,
nowhere;

those we receive, or hear
and not dissent to, shaping themselves
from our hair, the shape of our bodies, the color of our skin,
the foreign-ness of our mouths;

and those filled with grief
and strife – the names of our fathers
and foremothers, beaming through centuries, across the black seas
and into new lands, carrying us throughout, containing us –

containing this, all of it,
all our names and naming,
calling us of something filled with grim love.

Dust and Bones

Stranded at sea, bubble from
the earth, dust and bones
slide on my face.

This is not my story;
but in it I stand
called by other names;
the ghosts of my past selves
all reaching at the same time
and all refusing this –
this foreignness they smell
like something burned and tossed.

I dream of covering my body
with the white salt of Assab’s dunes –

even Lot’s wife
whispered the name of her city
with her last breath.

Instead, this body is bone,
constructed to fracture into multitudes,
black mud or dust
splintering my sides
here, there, here,

this, a new beginning,
a new death.
War

I have been described by it, often
seen it rise up the mouths of strangers,
as if to say all things foreign – note: referring
to me, or, my body, as a thing; an object – are
made of war, or: things infested by war.
This thing, I also notice, comes within
language: that which we use to define
our own, or not; the knowing we choose
to acknowledge, that which we ignore;
this thing, is also a fruit: thorns on the outside,
bleeding meat on the inside, quenching
a thirst, a cry, nostalgia for simpler days.
War, I find, is also this: constant hiding,
home within invisibility, or worry, or
brokenness. Not knowing what to do
or say to the grief-stricken. Having to explain,
amidst tears, or bewilderment, the difference
between the immigrant, and the refugee. I am
inclined to think: wretched, once there, now
here – lost. The constant loss, coating our skin
like thin ash. Having to beg – see me, see this
humaness in me. The knowing of our new selves:
as an alien – again, a thing, an object. Having to count
our fears too; that of assimilation, that of
unbelonging, that of a new death, imminent threat.
Knowing the gendered histories of our bodies too,
and shaping a way to forgetfulness – to survive
this thing – note here: not an object, but a
constant self of being.

The Languages I Speak

The languages I speak come to me
in my dreams. One is a serpent, but
I don't know which one. Toothless
and with blue venom, it enters my veins,
and I let it breathe black blood. When we
shed our skin, we stand, suddenly naked
and alone, our belly bloated with thousands
of words we do not recall. We call this
learning. The learning we do takes
years to muster, and never leaves. One
is an empty cloak, but its one, red eye
is turned backward. It does not see me,
or it does, and I do not know. The hissing
sound we hear is not new, but slowly whorls
our ears, our movements. On cloudy days, it
sounds like music too, but do not let it fool you.
I do not ask where I fit within the cloak – inside
or out. One is a cloud that refuses to rain –
this one drags itself behind me, its body the exact
shape of my shadow, and though fuchsia, or burgundy,
I know it is also of a bleeding shade. Its mist, an
old horror, coming back home. And this one –
this is absence, the smell of something missing,
or mad. Both. It does not leave, and somehow
I find it hidden everywhere: a toothache I
cannot get rid of.
The Cattle Farmer

Before I was born, my father was a cattle farmer, or so he would have me believe. He was also a thief, or a student without a master. In this story, we are both the same age, and we hum quietly. My father seems to be a fish too, and though I have written about that somewhere, I still find him swimming the strange waters of the universe, constantly asking – are we really here alone? To this, I do not know what to say. Here too, he becomes a strange thing I cannot recognize, refusing to die, now or ever. How many times has this soul lived, I do not know – but when it comes to me it is deep purple, a slash of oxblood rippling through. Perhaps he does not know which hues to adhere to – the dark blue he has known himself to be is but a thin gray, and his emeralds are imprinted on my mother – sawdust upon her body.

The Eucalyptus Tree

after Susan Hahn

I long for it on quiet nights and call it home. It stands tall and muscular above the mountains. It sees me but does not flinch. It feeds me honey and wild winds. It calls me child, but I do not hear. Its leaves a balm for blistering skin; what comes after a cry, or bleeding – its aroma, like autumn, like rain, standing green, translucent thing between my father and I, and the ghosts of Gojiam. It sees us bleeding, bleeding be. We carve wombs throughout its roots and rest our little bodies. We bear children the size of seeds and fold them into our branch arms. The rings of fire that embrace us are blue with fear. Everywhere we go, we smell of death and something sweet –

Mahtem Shiferraw

won the 2016 Silberman Prize for African Poets. Her collection Fuchsia was published by the University of Nebraska Press. She is the founder of Anaphora Literary Arts, a nonprofit organization working to advance the works of writers and artists of color, co-founder of the Ethiopian Artist Collective, and executive editor of black lioness press.
Three Poems

by Juan Bello Sánchez

We Learned to Pronounce Brooklyn in the Movies

we learned to pronounce brooklyn in the movies
to undress in the backseats of cars
to await chance with a roll of the dice

we learned the calmness of the cigarette smoker
and the coldness of the one aiming a revolver

but we also learned to go it alone
to die to say leave my sight stay the night

that the life of a man is measured by the size of his shadow
and that leaving
is not always the opposite of staying

Nothing Extraordinary

Take a look at the street
where nothing extraordinary goes on,
or where everything is so common
that you don’t pay it much attention.

The mundane
fights to overcome its transparency.

And of all these things
– the sun that falls through the trees,
the fatigued cars,
the woman pushing a stroller –
the traveling salesman
goes door to door, offering
a springtime in miniature.
Juan Bello Sánchez is a Spanish poet and teacher from Santiago de Compostela. He has published six poetry collections, three chapbooks, and has been awarded the IV Premio de Poesía Joven “Pablo García Baena,” the XVI Premio de Poesía Emilio Prado, and the VI Premio de Poesía Joven RNE.

Emily Socha is a translator of Spanish and Latin American poetry. She is currently focusing on the works of younger peninsular Spanish poets.

The Green Café

Someone told me that if you open the door of a tree you can see the sea playing the accordion.

At night, the woman in the red dress drank champagne in the star tamer’s tuxedo pocket.

There were bells that could only be heard in coffee cups, and actresses who painted their lips on the keys of the old piano. The waitress cleaned the bar with a Bengal tiger’s pelt, her face marked by the dark circles of an exiled soldier. There, the poet emptied wine bottles to refill them with crescent moons and shimmering fish. The sailors spoke with words of sand and the dancers stitched the rain to the golden hips of the trumpets. All before the sun rose in the eyes of the stuttering rooster, tinting the windows with its garish light.

Translations from the Spanish
By Emily Socha

Book Review Editor Rob Vollmar hopes to spend as much time as possible in his slowly expanding home garden but has his eye on these three books for the summer.

Alisa Ganieva
Bride and Groom
Trans. Carol Apollonio
Deep Vellum

Alisa Ganieva’s debut novel, The Mountain and the Wall (Deep Vellum, 2015), introduced anglophone readers to the intricacies of Dagestani culture and society. Her second novel in translation promises not only another glimpse into this poorly understood Muslim-majority subject nation of the Russian Federation but a refinement of Ganieva’s already impressive gifts as a writer, artfully presented by translator Carol Apollonio.

Eddie Campbell
The Goat Getters: Jack Johnson, the Fight of the Century, and How a Bunch of Raucous Cartoonists Reinvented Comics
IDW

Scottish cartoonist Eddie Campbell (From Hell, Alec) delivers his first major work of comics history in a quest for the holy grail: Who invented comics? Campbell thinks he has the answer, and armed with his meticulous eye for scholarship and an always-raucous storytelling instinct, he’s guaranteed to entertain as well as educate.

Roberto Tiraboschi
The Apothecary’s Shop: Venice 1118 A.D.
Trans. Katherine Gregor
Europa Editions

I am an absolute mark for imaginative historical fiction, and the more exotic the time and place, the better. This dramatic story involving a missing aristocrat’s daughter, occult mysteries, and the intermingling of East and West emerging from the Dark Ages checks off all my literary boxes.
Masatsugu Ono is a Japanese writer based in Tokyo and the author of numerous novels, including Mizu ni umoreru haka (The water-covered grave), which won the Asahi Award for New Writers, and Nigiyakana wan ni seowareta fune (Boat on a choppy bay), which won the Mishima Yukio Prize. In 2015 he received the Akutagawa Prize, Japan’s highest literary honor, for his work 9 Nen Mae no Inori (A prayer nine years ago). In addition, Ono is an accomplished translator who has translated several works from the French.

Lion Cross Point, a translation of his work by Angus Turvill, was published in April 2018. Here, he discusses some of the themes central to his work, such as the prominence of place and the power of compassion, and some of the major influences on his writing.
Reid Bartholomew: Jeffrey Angles, 2017 Yomiuri Prize recipient, has called you “one of the most important Japanese novelists of the post-Murakami generation.” What does it mean to you to be considered a part of this “post-Murakami generation”?

Masatsugu Ono: Jeffrey Angles is right to use the term “post-Murakami generation.” I think Murakami has changed the regime of literary Japanese language. When he first started publishing fiction at the end of the 1970s, his style—in which some critics saw the influence of Kurt Vonnegut Jr.—was both new and unique in its lightness and gentle humor. At the time his style was considered rather nonliterary, especially when compared to the seriousness of modern Japan’s literary tradition. Looking back on the history of postwar Japanese literature, we can see that Murakami made a clear mark in it: there is the pre-Murakami period and the post-Murakami period. Born in 1970 and having first started to publish at the very beginning of this century, I can say that I’m writing in the post-Murakami period, in other words, in the Japanese literary scene (or “literary field” in the Bourdieusian sense of the term) strongly marked by the work of Murakami.

Bartholomew: Two Lines Press describes Lion Cross Point as “reminiscent of Kenzaburo Ōe’s best work.” What parallels do you see between your own writing and his?

Ono: I myself was surprised by this comparison. Most of Ōe’s stories take place in two places: Tokyo, where the narrator lives with his family, and a small village situated in a valley on Shikoku Island. Ōe says there are two important subjects for him: the writer’s family life with his handicapped son, and literary investigations into the local popular culture of his pays natal (homeland), which he calls a “small peripheral place.” I have been very interested in the latter subject. Most of my stories take place in a small fishing village modeled on where I grew up.

Bartholomew: I understand you’ve spent a lot of time studying French philosophy and literature. What piqued this interest?

Ono: In the eighties and early nineties, in the literary milieu, the presence of so-called French high theory was very strong. The works of intellectuals such as Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida, Barthes, and others were widely read by students in the humanities. I was also interested in the work of French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss. No doubt influenced by this air du temps, I was very keen to learn French so that I could read these intellectuals in their original language.

Bartholomew: What aspects of that background with French philosophy and literature have worked their way into your writing?

Ono: I worked on Edward W. Said’s Orientalism for my BA thesis, without knowing that Ōe was a great reader of Said. They are friends: as you know, the title of Ōe’s last and probably final novel is a kind of homage to Said’s book On Late Style. For my MA, I worked on Michel Foucault, in particular on the role of literature in his work. For early Foucault, literary texts were his preferred materials for analysis. However, from the mid-1960s, he turned his back on literature. In my MA project, I tried, in vain, to explain the reason for his abandonment of literature. There were days when I couldn’t write even a single page, so I started to write a short story about my hometown. So perhaps it can be said that I started to write thanks to my study of French philosophy.

Bartholomew: I read that you have translated works of literature by Édouard Glissant and Marie NDiaye. Has having that experience with translation impacted your writing in any significant way?

Ono: Translation is good practice for reading a text precisely. The experience of having done translation often made me consider if I translated this or that phrase of my own writing into French, would the effect on the reader remain the same, or would it somehow be diminished?

Bartholomew: Do you read any of the translations of your own works?
Ono: I don’t read the whole translated book. But in the case of my English translations, I do take a look at the places in the text that I imagine would be particularly difficult to translate.

Bartholomew: In Lion Cross Point, you decided to write inside the mind of a fourth-grade child named Takeru. What aspects of that perspective were you most concerned with emulating?

Ono: When I started to write this novel, I got the feeling that this story had to be told from his point of view. I could have written from a first-person perspective, but I didn’t do that because I have never experienced the same hardships as Takeru. Therefore, writing this novel was for me an attempt to get as close as possible to his mind so that I could feel his suffering. I wanted to write in such a way that the reader would understand that there were a lot of things about Takeru that not even the author could grasp. I didn’t feel like I was “creating” a character. To me, Takeru is there just like a real person.

Bartholomew: In Lion Cross Point, you focus a lot on the importance of place and the way that it influences characters. In fact, it isn’t just the physical attributes of the place that have an impact, but the history of the place seems to actively engage the characters. Tell me a bit about your decision to make place such a prominent factor in this story.

Ono: As I said above, most of my stories take place in a small seaside village modeled on my childhood village on the east coast of Kyushu Island. The village where I grew up is known for its deeply indented coastlines, and I have always been interested in writing about small places in the countryside rather than about cities. I have been very influenced by my own childhood experiences, though I left the village when I was eighteen. It is very common to say that the place where we grew up continues to have an influence on us, on the way we are. A place is not only a geographical site. It is woven from the people who live there, each with his or her own complex history, as well as from the history and culture of the place itself. As you suggest, the place in which this story is set is also one of the main characters in the story.

Bartholomew: The story incorporates some fantastical elements on top of reality, such as things that only Takeru can see. What made you include this dimension in an otherwise very real story?

Ono: I think these “fantastical” elements are very real for Takeru. As I was writing, I felt that the boy really saw them. So it was quite natural for me to include this dimension. When we were children, we saw and heard things differently from the way we do now: our perception of the world was very different. It may well be that, as adults, we are just not aware of the elements that surround us, which are very real but simply not visible to our eyes.

Bartholomew: At the 2012 PEN World Voices Festival during a conversation you had with Stuart Dybek, you spoke about how the ocean of your hometown was almost confining to you, something you always wanted to go beyond. From what I’ve seen, however, it’s a constant presence in your writing. Why do you choose to return there in your writing?
Even though the closeness of human relationships in a small town could be suffocating at times, I liked talking with the older inhabitants and listening to them talk to one another.

Ono: Well, my small hamlet is situated on one of many coastal inlets that form the coastlines of my hometown. The sea itself seems enclosed by the surrounding hills. This landscape gave me a sense of confinement when I was a child. Even though the closeness of human relationships in a small town could be suffocating at times, I liked talking with the older inhabitants and listening to them talk to one another. But this natural confinement made me dream of ailleurs, another place. I always felt myself torn between the attachment I felt to my homeland and the desire to go farther afield.

Bartholomew: Does this sense of confinement hold true for Takeru, who has come from a very literally confining place in the city to this small fishing village?

Ono: It is Wakako, Takeru’s mother, who feels deeply this sense of confinement. I suppose Takeru felt himself confined when he was in a big city with his mother and his elder brother, but it’s no longer the case once he moves to the fishing village.

Bartholomew: Tell me a little bit about your fascination with water—it’s a motif that has appeared throughout many of your works.

Ono: I don’t know why. I’m not a good swimmer. I remember almost drowning in the sea when I was around ten years old. My friend and I thought that an approaching typhoon was still quite far off. The sky was clear. The sea appeared calm. But . . .

Bartholomew: I’ve noticed that many of the adults are described as stooped over or having hunched backs. Was that simply a physical description that accompanies living out in the country, or were you deliberately trying to hint at a burden these characters were carrying?

Ono: I hadn’t noticed that myself, but perhaps it’s because I have a tendency to stoop myself (in Japanese we refer to this as having a cat’s back). But your interpretation is very interesting.

Bartholomew: There is a great deal of focus on physicality in general when describing people. The only character that we get much of a look into the internal world of is our Takeru, and he is often as confused about the inner worlds of others as we are.

Ono: I agree with you. For Takeru, the boundary between real and unreal, inner world and outer world, remains ambiguous. He seems to be haunted by an unconscious desire to eliminate the distance between him and his elder brother.

Bartholomew: Takeru always seems to be at the mercy of someone else, and, thankfully, there is always somebody compassionate enough to stretch out a hand in the darkest of times. That said, every one of those characters ends up having to leave. Is compassion just a brief respite from the pain of life, or is it something more to you?

Ono: Well, I hope those hands form a chain even if each of them is being given only momentarily to those who suffer. Don’t you think the fact that someone thinks of you even for a brief moment is in itself something encouraging and delightful? Compassion, a tender attention to others, is a sort of prayer for others.

Bartholomew: Throughout the novel, there are a lot of references to what Takeru calls “the big thing,” which seems to link everyone together. In some cases, it appears to be a religious element, but at other times it seems like something more natural and innate within people. Could you elaborate a little more on the significance of this “big thing”?

Ono: I think it is a sort of wholeness that envelops all of us along with all other forms of existence in this universe. It can certainly include a religious dimension. I’m wondering if it may be like a wholeness we feel when we listen to the music of Bach: this music is of course religious, but what we are given always goes beyond. Takeru doesn’t have enough words to describe what he feels or what he is exposed to. For him, it is nothing more than “the big thing.”

January 2018

Reid Bartholomew is a WLT intern studying writing and Japanese at the University of Oklahoma. When he isn’t writing, he finds himself catching up on his mile-long reading list or working with the staff of The Aster Review, a student arts publication at OU.
A Periodic Table of Books

by Alberto Chimal

{CR}
Chromium books that are all shiny surface.

{FE}
Iron books, extremely heavy, which resist being read and are left to rust, little by little.

{H}
Hydrogen books that explode just by opening them.

{ZN}
Zinc books: humble, useful, with a moderate gloss.

{NA}
Sodium books, which are everywhere but often ignored and react violently to humid glances.

{CS}
Cesium books, with a precise pulse, reliable, whose titles are seldom remembered.

{P}
Phosphorus books: luminous, leaving traces in the deepest parts of the body.

{S}
Sulfur books, which cause everyone to turn up their nose but at the same time are indispensable.

{SB}
Antimony books: always in the company of others, always neglected and misplaced, rarely opened.
Mexican writer Alberto Chimal (b. 1970) is the author of the short-story collections Los atacantes, Grey, and Manda fuego (Colima Prize 2014) and the novel La torre y el jardín, which was a finalist for the Rómulo Gallegos Prize in 2013. His most recent book is the children’s story El juego más antiguo (2017). He blogs at lashistorias.com.mx.

Translation from the Spanish
By George Henson

Oxygen books: indispensable but never to be read in full, in their pure state, because they go to your head.

Uranium books, which remain forever in your flesh and burn slowly.

Lead books, extremely heavy, which claim to protect but kill instead.

Strontium books, which look yellow but glow burning red.

Calcium books, which form deposits and settle in inaccessible folds.

Potassium books: soft, so they say, but be careful when touching them.

Iodine books: scarce and essential; those who don't read them are a bit dumber, even if they don't realize it.

Books made of ytterbium, erbium, terbium, yttrium books: their readers always feel like someone who arrives to an unknown city.

Ruthenium books, which harden us, are difficult to find, and rarely discussed.

Barium books, which we always find with someone else, who treats them almost like diamonds.

Praseodymium books, which think they are merely useful and practical but conceal a double: a green or metallic mystery.

Rubidium books: almost always thought useless yet inspire vivid dreams of brilliant red.

Arsenic books, like the one Napoleon read for years, they say, with such fervor that it became part of him.

Platinum books, which can serve as mere decoration, or can be nutritious, or even explosive.

Cadmium books, which drive readers hopelessly mad, and without the possibility of appeal.

Silver books, which fix images, cure warts, bring rain, open the skin, and threaten to disappear.

Silicon books: abundant, simple, capable of fixing the memory of both words and light.

Titanium books, which everyone competes for and for petty reasons.

Germanium books, which are very expensive and always expect to be replaced by others.

Gold books: beautiful, brilliant, but pass through us without causing harm or benefit.

Argon, xenon, radon books: inert.

Mercury books, beautiful in appearance but slippery; they slide away, disappear.

Carbon books: those who feel as if they were part of their life since before: forever.
A Dedication Poem

by Mohamed Metwalli

To an ordinary man
Who couldn’t care less
About disasters befalling him,
To some modest happiness
That this man finds in a bar in wintertime
Without a fight,
To a tax-free beer bottle,
To a woman who does not intend to ditch me
in the next five minutes,
To a joke strong enough to lift our dusty coats
To the inside of a tavern,
To a dream, free of guilt
As if it were a tax collector,
To a glistening poem
Like the surface of a lake
That won’t be scratched by a pebble
Thrown by a playful child,
To a moment of silence and exchanged looks,
To a fragile soul like glass
cracking in this silence
Because of a reproachful look,

To a previous relationship
That doesn’t cause a current headache,
To a bruise in my ribs
That I sheltered as if it were a dead embryo,
To my past life,
Which would not, probably, cause harm to
anyone now,
To a woman who snatched me out of depression
without anything in return,
To an old train line
That everyone has forgotten on purpose,
To a wooden stool
Falling on the head of an ordinary man
– Who was talking to me five minutes ago –
And killed him,
To opera singers
With fat bottoms and narrow horizons,
To feminists who will blame me
For not mentioning a woman
As an active element in the poem,
To a blank sheet and a pencil
And the freedom of a child to narrate the scene,
To a dream of an ordinary man of fishing
Under a clear sky
In a lake whose surface will never be scratched by
a pebble,
To coastal cities that forgot baby sharks,
Octopuses, and fishing poets,
To the cats of the rocks, punctured straw baskets,
And historic fortresses
When they merge with seaweeds,
To a fisherman who broke free from having
a sweetheart
And hence became ordinary
Making it possible now for a stool in the tavern to
smash his head,
To a coastal cook who found a love letter
On a disintegrating yellow paper
Dated 1912,
Cooked its ingredients in oyster broth
And fed it to his customers who came
From faraway towns,
To his spices that changed thoughts and beliefs,
To the sand and its other buried letters,
To leaning against her arm
When I had a bruised rib
Refusing to acknowledge weakness,
To her nobility, not showing power
One sunny morning on our way to the sea,
To those who died in another dark sea
Before uttering their last words,
To their dreams that drowned at the outset of the
last century –
Of not missing a single moment of pleasure in life,
To their souls that will keep haunting their stranglers,
To the Titanic, when splitting,
To whoever likes this poem!

*Translation from the Arabic
By Gretchen McCullough & Mohamed Metwalli*
Two Poems

by Lamia Makaddem

Poetry was created to solve family problems

Let me just say:
this is why poetry was created
to solve family problems when needed
and sometimes to wash the dishes and polish the glasses . . .
I'm tired,
That's all.
"Whores" have the right to get tired
to close their legs for a while,
to assess the damage and measure the distance between
their ass cheeks and life
and the customer just has to wait until
the hole has mended and the edges have dried out.

Do you know what hurts the most?
My ears.
They were completely ruined by the screaming
the screaming of rain outside
and the wind in the locks, whenever my door is slammed by one of them
like you, who didn't pay a single penny
so in return I asked you to recite a poem while entering me.
"The poet whore!"
is that what you told yourself?
Yes, this is me at my weakest
but can you deny that you were on the verge of tears
when you finished?
You put your head between your hands and cried like children do.
I also remember what you said before you left: I love you.
All this happened in less than an hour
while the wind was howling outside like a pack of dogs
and wolves far away echoed the howls.


Lamia Makaddem is a Tunisian poet and translator living in the Netherlands. The author of two books of poetry, her verse has been translated into English, French, Dutch, and Kurdish. In 2000 she was awarded the El Hizja prize for literature. She translated the award-winning Dutch novel Jij zegt het (You said it), by Connie Palmen, and is currently working on the Arabic translation of Malva, by Hagar Peeters.

Let me just say
for this – and this alone – was poetry created:
to wipe fingerprints from our bodies,
to straighten the sheets and pillows
and to open the door at the end and say . . . goodbye.

✴

Let me just say
for this – and this alone – was poetry created:
to wipe fingerprints from our bodies,
to straighten the sheets and pillows
and to open the door at the end and say . . . goodbye.
Love makes woman a man and man a woman

It is not enough for you to touch me with your hand
love is touching me with everything, with woman and distance
and a bunch of grapes.
It is not enough that you take me under you and on top of you
you have to drag me by feet and into nightmares as well.
Love is not a relationship between two individuals like they told us
but rather two universes melting, a mixture of water with water.
It is to love women as if I were you, to lust after their breasts
to be riven seeing their naked flesh
to gasp when a woman lifts her hair with her hand to put it behind her
and just as your heart weakens when you see a hanging fruit
my heart weakens for the same reason.
Without air between us we are breathless
without the sun rising above me and above you we are eyeless.
The idea: love makes woman a man and man a woman
and makes water into love
and love into life.
I incarnate in you like I incarnate in light and soil
and you incarnate in me like life and death.
I assembled you only because I collected you from here and there:
some of your heart I brought from a train station
some of your eyes from glasses in bars
some of your skin from a cemetery
meanwhile you are here
and not here.

Translations from the Arabic
By Miled Faiza & Karen McNeil
When Edwidge Danticat was composing “A Wall of Fire Rising” in her 1995 short-story collection *Krik? Krak!*, internally she heard her characters speaking Haitian Creole, Danticat’s childhood language. A distressed married couple talks about whether to consign their young son to work at a sugar mill where for months, the husband has been turned away. In his pain, he dreams of escaping Haiti in a hot-air balloon lying idle beside the mill. His wife tells him that “if God wanted people to fly, he would have given us wings on our backs.” He replies, “You’re right, Lili, you’re right. But look what he gave us instead. He gave us reasons to want to fly. He gave us the air, the birds, our son.”

Danticat wrote these lines and the rest of *Krik? Krak!* in English over ten years after leaving Haiti for New York at age twelve. English had become her dominant language and the medium of her writer self, while Creole preserved life’s underlying roots.

In a recent interview Danticat told me how years after writing “A Wall of Fire Rising” she returned to those roots, adapting the story into Creole for a Haitian radio broadcast. “I felt closer to how I felt the story as a child,” she said. She was elaborating on a reflection about the story in her essay collection *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (2011), in which she says, “It was as if the voice in which I write, the voice in which people speak Creole that comes out English on paper, had been released, and finally I was writing for people like my Tante Ilyana . . . ”

Danticat’s dance between languages, and between selves, illustrates the creative artistic and identity flow...
many bilingual writers experience. I spoke with Dan-
ticat and seven other bilingual writers now living in
the United States to discover how each crafts between
languages. The others included Sandra Cisneros, Junot
Díaz, Daniel Alarcón, Julia Alvarez, and Esmeralda
Santiago (Spanish), Ha Jin (Chinese), and Gary Shteyn-
gart (Russian). Each engages in a distinctive artistic
process. Santiago, for example, composes simultane-
ously in Spanish and English. Shteyngart sprinkles in
Russian when drawing from childhood memories. Jin
inflicts English with a slightly alien tone to remind
readers his characters are actually speaking Chinese.
But while the crafting processes differ, the search for
personal identity is often quite similar. Like Danticat,
many of these writers have found their work to be a
powerful means for navigating identities along the inti-
mate boundary between a childhood of one tongue and
an adulthood of another. Traveling back and forth can
be a journey of both reconciliation and conflict.

In living this duality, these writers voice the daily
experience of many bilingual immigrants around the
world who are cooking breakfast, attending staff meet-
ings, posing questions in class, and buying the week’s
groceries. Collectively, bilingual writers play a forma-
tive cultural role in the United States, reflecting the lives
of a growing community. In 2015, 37 million people or
12 percent of the population spoke two languages, an
increase of 11 million since 2000. The greatest number
by far speak Spanish, followed by Chinese and Tagalog
(census.gov).

These writers’ voices are especially vital now because
they counter the current anti-immigrant backlash. While
the Trump administration does not explicitly
negate non-English languages, it targets them implicitly
through the proposed Mexican border wall, revocation
of DACA, and travel restrictions against eight coun-
tries with non-English primary languages. It has even
removed the White House Spanish website.

Many of these writers are immigrants who arrived
as children young enough to make English their domi-
ant language, except for Jin, who left China for
Boston at twenty-nine, and Cisneros, who grew up
bilingual in Chicago. Alarcón came from Peru at three,
Díaz from the Dominican Republic at six, Shteyngart
from Russia at seven, Alvarez from the Dominican
Republic at ten, and Santiago from Puerto Rico at
thirteen. Other bilingual writers have had a similar
history, such as Khaled Hosseini (Farsi), Laila Lalami
(Arabic), Andrew Lam (Vietnamese), Kao Kalia Lang
(Hmong), and Elif Shafak (Turkish). Still others, such
as Viet Thanh Nguyen (Vietnamese), Chang-rae Lee
(Korean), and Jhumpa Lahiri (Bengali) have had more
indirect connection to the second language, not speaking
it regularly as children.

For those who work directly between languages, the
process sometimes begins unconsciously, without even
transferring visibly to the page. Cisneros told me that
while she wrote her lyrical coming-of-age novella The
House on Mango Street, she was not aware of the sub-
surface presence of Spanish. “I was thinking in Spanish
and writing in English,” she said. “It was there under-
neath like an archaeology.” Over the years she brought
Spanish more consciously into her process, telling me
that now “I always feel like I’m on a borderland.”

For Shytengart, Díaz, and Santiago, the play of
languages in sleep emerges to inform how characters
speak in story. “If the people in my dream are Spanish-
speakers,” Díaz said, “they speak to me in Spanish. As
with my dreams, my writing. English and Spanish exist
in me side-by-side, twin rivers of different size, mostly
separate but sometimes confluent.” Díaz comfortably
transfers his immigrant childhood experience lived in
Spanish into English. “I didn’t know English when I
first moved to New Jersey,” he said, “but that didn’t stop
me from bearing witness to those terrible first years,
which I now recount in a language that at the time I
did not possess.”

To get an angle on Díaz, I trained a lens on his
expletives because they are such a potent element of his
dialogue. What does it mean if a character says mierda
rather than shit, cabrón instead of asshole? Because his
texts are almost entirely in English, when a Spanish
word or phrase appears, it can highlight and intensify
a moment, often with playful sexuality. In the short-
story collection This Is How You Lose Her, the narrator
Yunior’s brother tries to justify having an affair, saying
to their mother, “Se metió por mis ojos” (She took me
through my eyes). The mother responds wryly, “Por
mis ojos my ass. Tu te metiste por su culo” (Through my
eyes, my ass. You took her through her ass). This salac-
ious bilingual wordplay creates a loose intimacy that
accents the conflicted family bond. Similarly, in anoth-
er family moment, Yunior’s brother, feeling judged
for his womanizing, tells Yunior, “Cállate la fucking
For those who work directly between languages, the process sometimes begins unconsciously, without even transferring visibly to the page.

For those who work directly between languages, the process sometimes begins unconsciously, without even transferring visibly to the page.

boca” (Shut your fucking mouth). Here, the Spanglish could be read as either casualizing fraternal repartee or accentuating the angry edge.

While Díaz displays Spanish and English interweaving, Jin explained how English and Chinese for him operate almost through separate channels. “I think in English, but I hear in Chinese,” he said. Though twenty-nine when he immigrated, Jin chose to write his novels and stories in English and attended the Boston University MFA program, which he now directs. While he has a well-attuned ear for English idioms, he told me that in his novels and short stories he wants his Chinese-speaking characters to sound slightly dissonant so the reader senses they’re not speaking English. Sometimes he does this by translating Chinese figurative language literally. He gave an example from his 2016 novel The Boat Rocker, where a character uses the common Chinese expression “A lie the size of heaven.” On the other hand, working with the complex connotations of poetry, Jin said he usually prefers to write in his native Chinese. “I need to feel the full weight of the language,” he said. “With Chinese, I still can have this feeling, which has gradually been shifting to English.”

While Jin is the only one of the writers who regularly composes in two languages, Santiago is the only one who actually writes bilingually in the moment. “It’s spontaneous,” she explained. “Early drafts of all my books are a mélange of English and Spanish, with whole pages in Spanish then translated to English toward the final drafts. I go from English to Spanish in midsentence when drafting. It feels as if that mixture is my real language.”

Alarcón, in contrast, is the only writer working out loud in one language and compositionally in the other. A journalist as well as fiction writer, he researches and immerses himself in Spanish, spending long periods in Lima, directing a Spanish-language podcast, Radio Ambulante, and publishing nonfiction pieces in a Peruvian magazine he co-edits. But Alarcón chooses not to splice Spanish into his English texts. He contrasted himself with Díaz. “It didn’t make sense for me to approach Spanish in the way he did. He’s writing about a lived bilingual experience.”

Alarcón, however, incorporates translated Peruvian vernacular. “If I’m writing a conversation between a father and a son about love, sex, travel, money, or whatever, I’m translating from Peruvian Spanish. How you translate is so situational. In English, you’re not going to translate something into deep Brooklyness.” He had two translations done of his novel City of Clowns, one in Peruvian Spanish for a Peruvian audience, and the second in a neuter Spanish for a US audience. He said the latter is bland and unrooted to any particular community but necessary for the multinational Spanish population in the US.

When the writers dip into the well of their childhood languages, the vocabulary in context feels anything but neutral. It is deeply immersed in the personal phrasings of family intimacy, whether harmonious or conflicted. Like Díaz, Danticat builds tension around family interaction using slivers of the second language. In her 2017 short story “Sunrise, Sunset,” for example, she sparingly employs three Creole words to intensify two mother-daughter moments. In the first, an Alzheimer’s-stricken grandmother dangles her granddaughter over a balcony, while the mother, Jeanne, beseeches her to pull the baby back. Jeanne pleads with two separate words for please: souple and then tanpri. At the end, they have a second strained moment when Jeanne tells her mother, now being carted away on a gurney, “Mesi” (thank you), less in gratitude than in farewell.

Danticat depicts another poignant mother-daughter moment in her children’s picture book Mama’s Nightingale. The young narrator, Saya, misses her mother who has been jailed as an undocumented immigrant. Late at night when everyone is asleep, Saya listens to her mother’s outgoing voicemail message. “Tangri kite bon ti nouvél pou nou!” the voice says in Creole. “Please, leave us good news!” The reader can feel Saya’s spirits momentarily lift.

The way that bits of Creole, Spanish, or, in Shteyngart’s case, Russian, invoke early life emotions is what Cisneros calls “the spell of words spoken in the language of our childhood.” Like Danticat writing a Creole that awakens the spirit of her Tante Ilyana in Haiti, Shteyngart finds Russian animating memories of living with his father in Moscow. He told me he usually thinks
in English while writing, but for his memoir *Little Failure*, he often thought in Russian. Russian carries both the pain and joy of Shteyngart’s turbulent relationships with his parents. His childhood nicknames included *Solnyshko* (Little Sun), *Soplyak* (Snotty), and the titular *Failurchka* (Little Failure). At one point, the father declares a sadistic Russian wisdom: “*Tot kto byot, tot ne lyubit,* my father likes to say. He who doesn’t hit, doesn’t love.”

In a course he teaches at Columbia University, Shteyngart traces the development of immigrant literature, perhaps the core subcategory of bilingual writing. He said the kind of inner cultural tension he shows in *Little Failure* is a relatively recent literary theme. “Earlier American immigrant literature was about the American dream and assimilation,” he said. “Now it’s more about loss and ambivalence.” Early in his course he teaches Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Pnin*, which satirically portrays a Russian college professor enchanted by American life. Toward the end of the course, students transition to Díaz’s short-story collection *Drowned*, in which Yunior also appears as narrator, coping with the strains of his family’s immigration from Santo Domingo.

Shteyngart, Santiago, and Alvarez all use bilingual strategies to express the tensions and growing pains of assimilation in which English becomes a complex source of disorientation, shame, fascination, and power. In *Little Failure*, Shteyngart recounts the shame of being demoted a grade because of his poor English and, when he later becomes interested in girls, fears that saying “‘Oh, hi there’ in his Russian accent will sound like "Okht Hyzer."

In her memoir *Almost a Woman*, Santiago inserts a question in Spanish, recounting how on her third day in Brooklyn after arriving from Puerto Rico, a young girl skips rope to her side and asks, “*Tu eres hispana?*” (Are you Hispanic?). Though the words are Spanish, it’s an English-derived racial designation that Santiago has never heard before. She suddenly feels her Puerto Rican self invisible, absorbed into a vague collective identity. “She redefined who I thought I was,” Santiago reflected, “by suggesting the process of flying across the

The Special Case of Jamaican Patois

by Erik Gleibermann

Marlon James’s use of Jamaican Patois in his 2015 Booker Prize–winning novel *A Brief History of Seven Killings* extends the concept of literary bilingualism. Patois, the first language of most Jamaicans, is based in English but, like other Caribbean creoles, is classifiable as a separate tongue with distinct grammar and vocabulary. On the page, it’s only semi-decipherable for a non-Jamaican English speaker.

The novel features over a dozen narrators, weaving a cross-decade account built around a plot to assassinate a fictionalized Bob Marley. Some of the most compelling voices are the gang lords and petty thugs bound to the Kingston streets who speak a stylized, slang-laced Patois that James paraphrases into English while retaining Patois grammar and rhythm.

Using his stream-of-consciousness style, James can make even sexual violence or a backroom freebase overdose sound lyrical. In one scene, gang member Demus describes attempting to defend himself against a police officer who assaults him as he bathes.

“Officer you no see that is bathe me a bathe and he come right over and kiss me mouth hard with the rifle butt. Don’t come tell me no fuckery, nasty man, he say. A play with yourself and love up yourself like some bloodcloth sodomite.”

This is largely English, but “A play,” for example, uses the Patois connector word “a” that precedes verbs, while “bloodcloth,” properly pronounced *bloodclaat*, is slang for sanitary towel and as common in Patois as the word fuck is in English. James enriches the hybrid style with striking figurative expressions, such as this excerpt’s ironic rifle-butt kiss.

For the first time since Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay published the Patois collection *Songs of Jamaica* in 1912, James leads readers into the sensory tones of the island’s dusty alleyways and simmering kitchens.

With, as language consultant, Harvard University doctoral student Patois instructor Khytie Brown
ocean had transformed me into someone else. That had profound implications for my developing sense of self.”

In her poetry collection The Woman I Kept to Myself, Alvarez explores how she embraced English and disowned Spanish to assimilate. In “All-American Girl,” she writes, “I practiced foreign faces, Anglo grins, / repressing a native Latin fluency / for the cooler mask of English ironies. / I wanted the world and words to match again / as when I had lived solely in Spanish.”

Even today, some of the writers seem vulnerable, still caught between tongues, English remaining slightly alien even as it has been a primary voice. In our conversations, Alvarez and Danticat independently cited the epigraph to Drown that Díaz quotes from Cuban American writer Gustavo Pérez Firmat: “The fact that I am writing to you in English already falsifies what I wanted to tell you. My subject: I don’t belong to English, though I belong nowhere else.” In Create Dangerously, Danticat simply calls English “This language that is not mine.”

Alvarez said that she cannot fully own her native tongue, a painful loss. “It really hurts sometimes when I’m in the Dominican Republic,” she said, “It’s a yearning for something lost. I can play in English in a way I’ve lost in Spanish.” In her memoir Something to Declare, she recounts feeling inarticulate with a first boyfriend on a summer trip back to the island. She points out the Big Dipper to him and the only words she can think of translate as “the big spoon,” a seemingly small vocabulary gap, but one that for Alvarez signifies diminished intimacy. She referred to a similar emotional distance in Cisneros’s Spanglish short story “Bien Pretty,” whose narrator longs to make love in a Spanish she feels unable to embody.

One could read Alvarez’s novel How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents as a narrative wish to reclaim her childhood Spanish voice because the story is told in reverse chronological order, beginning with four sisters after they have lived their adulthood speaking English in New York, then tracing them back to their Dominican childhood.

When they attended MFA programs (all eight have MFA degrees), the writers were often not encouraged to draw from their childhood language, and the reading lists generally lacked bilingual models. Alvarez was pointed. “I was silenced,” she told me about her early writing. “One writer read my first book, Homecoming, and didn’t even know I was Latina. I’d written the word ‘mother’ throughout, so I changed them all to mami. I didn’t know you could do that.” But even as Alvarez eventually worked to reclaim Spanish, she has talked about being judged in the Dominican Republic for writing only in English. In Something to Declare, she describes how at a conference in Santo Domingo a renowned Dominican writer said publicly, “It doesn’t seem possible that a Dominican should write in English. Come back to your country, to your language.”

According to Danticat, that choice to write in English can bring severe judgment. “I think people pathologize it,” she said, suggesting critics see the exclusive use of English as a kind of self-negation. She said it can become a double bind when writers like her selectively integrate non-English vocabulary. Then “people will accuse you of exoticizing or flavoring.”

Danticat said that growing into bilingual maturity is both a personal healing and an artistic process in which “we have to start with our own acceptance of our own language.”

The writers often model this process for each other. “I learned a lot from Julia and Sandra,” Danticat said, “how they used Spanish. I learned from them the rhythms of another language. They taught me how not to censor myself.” Though they may have grown up living different languages, often there is a kinship among bilingual writers. In reference to Danticat’s first novel and their shared Dominican–Haitian border, Alvarez said, “reading Breath, Eyes, Memory was so meaningful for me. It was the other side of the island and she was the sister I’d never known.”

At the end of our conversation I asked Alvarez what the extended family of bilingual writers might offer a young protégé just finding her voice. “I’d give her everyone’s stories,” she said. “I’d say this is the big circle and you’re invited. You’ll realize there’s only one story.”

San Francisco
The Power of Normal
Exploring the Notion of Story Structure

by Nii Ayikwei Parkes

As readers, we all carry prejudices, but acknowledging a wider range of normals makes the difference between “I don’t understand your normal” and “I refuse to recognize your normal.”

As another year gathers speed it strikes me that I have been teaching creative writing in some form or other for over a decade. In that time, I have encountered numerous theories on story structure and narrative conventions; from Gustav Freytag’s Pyramid, to Three-Act structure, to the Hollywood-adored The Writer’s Journey, by Christopher Vogler, which was itself derived from Joseph Campbell’s The Hero with a Thousand Faces, to Christopher Booker’s The Seven Basic Plots. In my own practice, I avoid teaching these analyses as guide models. Each time I refer to one of them, I make it a point to stress to my students they are not universally true and should always be challenged.

My discomfort with these 3–5–7 models (as I like to call them) is not just from the absurdity of trying to distill the complexity of the world’s eternally evolving heritage of stories into single models, which invariably are littered with caveats and exceptions. No. My bigger concern is that the 3–5–7 models have largely also become foundations for exclusion of certain stories—and the focus on models is somewhat akin to the way in which global economists spend years arguing about which capitalist models work better, without giving any attention to the fact that all successful capitalist nations were built on inhumane exploitation of serfs, women, occupied lands, slaves, children—and in more recent success stories like Singapore and South Korea,
underpaid labor and suppression of civil liberties. Just as it is within the world of fiction, focusing on the economic models and not the historic biases and nuances is misleading.

What the 3–5–7s share is the notion of the normal; the starting point and, often, the conclusion of stories are deemed as normal—what happens in-between is upheaval, the drama. Strangely, nobody seems to question the normal, but writers and storytellers from the margins will have been affected by it without the word ever being mentioned. They will have been told that their stories aren’t relatable, compelling, structured, of high enough quality, etc. And while these things may be true sometimes, often what gatekeepers, fully schooled in the 3–5–7s but not the prejudices underlying them, are saying is, “I don’t recognize your normal;” or, more authoritatively, “I refuse to recognize your normal.” So, essentially, what much of the world does is to learn the dominant normal and judge stories by that capitalized Normal. That way the focus shifts to Vogler versus Booker, or the relevance of newer perspectives from the likes of John Yorke, a former producer for the cult British soap EastEnders, whose book, Into the Woods, purports to answer the why of storytelling, and Dan Harmon’s story embryo, on which his successful TV series Community is based, that argues for eight stages: (1) a normal world, (2) a desired object, (3) entry into a new world to acquire the desired object, (4) adaptation to the new world, (5) reaching the desired object, (6) paying the price for it, and (7) returning to the normal world having (8) changed.

These are all useful perspectives, but the question of What is Normal? remains unasked. It lurks in the background like any other kind of institutionalized prejudice. We all carry prejudices, but acknowledging a wider range of normals makes the difference between I don’t understand your normal and I refuse to recognize your normal.

If I count my work from school magazines in Ghana, I have worked as an editor for thirty years, but in every week of those years I have encountered new variations of normal. Particularly memorable was an incident when I was working in-residence at California State University, Los Angeles. I was reading a collection of stories by a Chinese writer, Mu Xin, called An Empty Room. The writing was evocative, competent, and poetic, but I felt distant from it. Luckily the translator of the collection, Jun Liu, a Faulkner scholar, also worked at Cal State LA; I spoke to him and he explained the influence of sanwen—a Chinese genre that blends elements of essay, poetry, and fiction—on the work of Mu Xin. Suddenly, with the context of another normal, my reading of the stories changed; An Empty Room became a book I could love, the author’s craft a masterful thing to admire.

What’s interesting in that scenario is that the book was already published. However, if I were the editor it was submitted to for consideration, my notes would have been interesting—to say the least—simply because the age-old sanwen was not within my vocabulary of normals. What’s crucial is that my vocabulary of normals works both ways—affecting what I accept and what I question.

What’s crucial is that my vocabulary of normals works both ways—affecting what I accept and what I question. Thus the dominant Normal can potentially impoverish readers. For example, in many parts of Latin America and Africa, a big family is a nonstory, one of many ways in which people exist, but in the world of Normal, it is exotic and its use is “accepted.” This makes something that is just one of many possibilities a marker of authenticity for an entire region, something that provokes questions when it is absent. It is the same approach that gave birth to the epidemic of poverty porn from Africa.

Therefore, the power of transformation in storytelling, for me, is in the construction of Normal—and, on a sociopolitical level, it is interesting to observe who is allowed to shift Normal. It is no coincidence that there was a growth of interest in Hong Kong cinema after the emergence of Quentin Tarantino. As a white American male, his work normalizes stylized graphic violence, adding it to the vocabulary of the dominant Normal. That shift opens the door for several US remakes but...
If your normal is not present within the lexicon of dominant Normal, whatever world you create is subject to question, your normal can be refused, and you are left on the periphery.

also original Hong Kong films to become successful, their quality suddenly self-evident.

Where the marker of convention sits on the scale of the dominant Normal determines what is considered realist, magical realist (you’ll find many writers labeled as such reject the idea), romance (based on what is accepted as a happy ending), gangster (where vengeance is normal), etc. If your normal is not present within the lexicon of dominant Normal, whatever world you create is subject to question, your normal can be refused, and you are left on the periphery. This is how the American novel was considered inferior to the British novel in the nineteenth century, because Great Britain at the time was the center, the arbiter of taste; G. K. Chesterton jibes in one of his Father Brown narratives, “One of his hobbies was to wait for the American Shakespeare—a hobby more patient than angling,” and Sydney Smith asks in a January 1820 issue of the Edinburgh Review, “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” Novels from America were largely dismissed by British critics as sentimental and lacking in literary quality; Russian works of fiction were seen as curiosities.

As the center has expanded, America and Russia have become part of the larger Normal and have thus qualified to be spoken of in the realm of quality. I was actually told in one class how to read a Russian novel, and, of course, Vladimir Nabokov famously published Lectures on Russian Literature in 1980. Until your normal enters the grand hall of the dominant Normals, however, you are subject to some editor saying your well-researched, meticulously crafted work, which anyone who knows anything about your normal thinks is extraordinary, is just not relatable, compelling, structured, of high enough quality... You are an Aborigine, you are a rural Nicaraguan, you are any number of minorities. You are outside the gates and neither Vogler nor Booker nor Yorke can save you. That is the power of Normal.

Editor’s Pick: Summer Reads

Based in landlocked Oklahoma, Editor in Chief Daniel Simon looks to coastal waters and beyond the continental US for his summer reads.

Luljeta Lleshanaku
Negative Space
Trans. Ani Gjika | New Directions

In the translator’s statement discussing her 2016 NEA Literature Translation Fellowship, Ani Gjika contends that the concept of “negative space” in the work of poet Luljeta Lleshanaku enables the author to “look back at the reality of her Albanian past, giving voice to those who have historically failed to speak up for themselves.” In a postcommunist era marked by a “new code of sanctification,” the poet speaks for herself as well, moving beyond the bunker mentalities of the twentieth century.

Tracy K. Smith
Wade in the Water
Graywolf

I first heard Tracy K. Smith recite “Wade in the Water” on the PBS NewsHour, then read it in the New Yorker, and now look forward to reading it again as the title poem in her newest verse collection. Dedicated to the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters, the poem calls the speaker to a baptismal moment that simultaneously evokes the “troubled waters” of the Middle Passage: “I love you in the water / Where they pretended to wade, / Singing that old blood-deep song / That dragged us to those banks / And cast us in.”

Mark Polizzotti
Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto
MIT Press

With more than fifty translated books to his credit, Polizzotti brings that prolific praxis to bear in this translator’s apologia. According to the publisher, the author “shows us how to read not only translations but also the act of translation itself, treating it not as a problem to be solved but as an achievement to be celebrated.” If, as David Damrosch has argued, world literature is literature that “gains in translation,” readers of WLT will find much here to deepen their appreciation for the art and craft of literary translation.
I can’t free myself from my boredom
always completing circles
swallowing myself
like the serpent
swallows its tail.
I’m scarcely a dream
of some trivial
poet
a flying carpet
that discovers trails
then loses them.
I am the voice that calls me
and I don’t decipher
the flame
that ignites
and lies hidden
my mandala covers me
drifts away
returns
you are at the center
holding a sword
and a flower
surrounded by drawings
that trouble me
spider webs

entwined
pizpizigaña
juguemos la araña*
mandrakes
fireflies
sirens
unicorns
poems that start
but don’t end
the poem,
the poem
I’ll never finish
it catches up
and abandons me
hides in debris
Ali Baba’s caves
blurred faces
scattered numbers –
the one that reigns is the five
petals that one day
will dance on my grave
you will be my juggler
and always were
you sang my sadness
our love

the joy
and drew your singing
with crests of words
opening in colors
the coarse beauty
of stones
that convert to flames
and get inside me
and I rejoice
even though they burn me
I sing
and sing.
I oppose those
who think love is docile
it appears as it wishes
without being called
and rises and falls
and transforms itself
and dies
and resurrects sometimes
and doesn’t die.
Love is pain
joy
the ego altered
surrender

* juguemos la araña: let’s play the spider
possession
enjoyment
and yoke
mystery
and battle
prison horror
desire to escape
vigil
and dream
a challenge to life
and death.

What's wrong with my love?
It's turned to violet:
an inescapable
interlude.

Passions rule me
I don't reason
reason
confuses me
and I sing
and sing,
“What's your name?
Matarilililili.”

I go on
among scorpions
wounds
and silhouettes
herds of giraffes
trying to reach
the stars.
I light my lamp again
light the caves
that guard my mandala
my mandala a challenge
a hideout
I don't understand it
an infinite
puzzle
my whole life there
all my I
the caves hold dreams
that burst
into my dreams
I feel like the character
of an impersonal tale
who searches
and searches
but never finds anything
not even

her name
Matarilililili.

Was the she-wolf mocking?
April is the cruellest month
Was her gaze one of mockery
and not love?
I've always been fearful
prophesying deceits
and disasters
believed by no one.
I'm Cassandra
suddenly
silent
I'm the she-wolf Cassandra
and just howl
amazed by the world
that worsens day by day.
How do I sing this
my minstrel?
I don't want you to sing it
your lips will wrinkle
become white
the horror and rage
will move you away from me.
My mandala envelops me –
I discovered recently –
the sun was crimson.
When did you arrive?
You are the center
what matters is the search
and that leap toward the search
challenges us.
Navigating between light
and dark
there are floating memories:
Izalco,
Momotombo
Machu Picchu
those are my riches
the memories that float
and never die
they cover me
reveal me
I have seen my mandala
at last I've seen you
you ignore my questions
but I know you are me
my compass
my map
the gypsy
the obsessive traces

of my earthly
wandering.
I'm exiled
in this threshold
my sense of smell revives
my ghosts
the city of my childhood
its markets –
no rumor subdues
its rumors,
no aroma
its aromas.
Don't say anything
free the heart
to travel
and travel
to ask death,
who is alive,
for that final kiss
it craves.
Let it drink the air
drink the green
that surrounds it.
My life flickers
I burn with desire
explore new worlds
see them with my ear
savoring their skin
with the febrile tips
of my fingers.
I want to liberate the heart
from lament
images
vestiges
so it plunges naked
into the void
so it goes mad
whistles
hurls its accumulated love
at the spheres.

Translation from the Spanish
By George Evans & Daisy Zamora

* pizpizigaña / juguemos la araña: A rhyme
from the Central American children's game
Pizpizigaña.
+ What's your name? / Matarilililili: A
fragment of song dialogue from the Central
American children's game Matarilililili.
In Memoriam Claribel Alegría: *Amor sin fin*

by George Evans & Daisy Zamora

Claribel Alegría (1924–2018) was born in Estelí, Nicaragua, and raised in Santa Ana, El Salvador. Her father, Dr. Daniel Alegría Rodríguez, a Nicaraguan medical doctor, was a Las Segovias liberal who fought in Benjamín Zeledón’s army as a boy, detested the US Marine occupation of Nicaragua, criticized the Somocista repression of peasants and dissidents, and voiced support for the revolutionary struggle of Augusto Sandino, which resulted in persecution by the occupying US troops that forced the family into exile while Claribel was still a baby, an exile that would last for her father until his death forty years later. Her mother, Ana Maria Vides Segui, was Salvadoran, so they moved to El Salvador, and Claribel was raised as a native of two countries, though she was always a citizen of the world.

She met and married journalist Darwin J. (Bud) Flakoll (1923–1995) in the late 1940s while both were studying at George Washington University in Washington, DC. Beginning in 1951, she traveled extensively with Bud and their four children—Maya, Patricia, Karen, and Erik—living in Mexico, Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina, publishing books of poetry in each country. In 1963 the family moved to Paris for several years, then to Mallorca where she lived with Bud until 1979. That year they traveled to Managua to collaborate on a book about the Sandinista revolution, which had recently overthrown the murderous Somoza dynasty, and remained there permanently.

Among her many awards and prizes (including a beloved Neustadt Prize in 2006), her latest honor was the 2017 Queen Sofía Iberoamerican Poetry Prize, which took her to Spain and, among other formalities and events, included a private audience with Queen Sofia. During their meeting, Claribel explained in an anecdote, she forgot herself and went on with the queen as if with an old friend, being her usual lively, loquacious, affectionate self, using informal language, telling tales and filling the air with laughter. When she suddenly realized she was talking with a queen, she stopped herself and apologized. “Oh, please,” said the queen, “just go on. I’m having a great time—I never get to talk with people this way, and if you lived here in Madrid we would be friends.” So they shared a laugh and went on.

She was disarming, vivacious, by turns hilarious and profound, charming, learned, and judicious but never bored by life or people (though certainly anything but a Pollyanna), and ever prepared to expand or adjust her perspective on any subject. Her last major work was the unexpected book-length poem *Amor sin fin* (Visor, 2016),
which, with an urgency we didn't fully grasp at the time, she wanted us to translate into English the moment it was finished, and we did, as *Forever Love*, a section of which is excerpted here.

The larger work is a searching philosophical poem with mythological references, a questioning of God and the self, observing the abyss that seems to await us all. It is a death poem, an incantation, a force not unlike a Navajo Night Chant (a tradition from our hemisphere), and a prayer exploring life beyond life and death. It's a moment of peering into infinity to consider its potential horror without turning away. It's not the typical lyric expectation one has from such a vivid, lively poet, but if you look at the expanse of her work from the beginning to the present, it's not really surprising she would take on topics of such gravity, especially as a nonagenarian facing the ultimate fate, which even in her darkest observations she embraces completely.

By turns focused and elusive, in places the sequence brings to mind the understated passions and muted sensuality of certain jazz ballads but mixed with the sharp wit and linguistic beauty reminiscent of, say, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Ezra Pound, and Dante (incorporating the mysterious descent and ascent of the latter's masterpiece), and even, in the excerpt at hand (“La mandala”/“The Mandala”), the actual first line of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* laid into the text. But the work is no collage, and Claribel Alegría no collagist. Like many Latin American authors (contemporary and otherwise), she presumes her readers' knowledge of original sources and echoes, but in a style that allows for that not to be the case, with never a moment of condescension or intentional obscurantism. Allusions to classical and modern poetry abound throughout the whole book-length poem, for the most part invisibly woven into the text so they don't interrupt the flow, and the same might be said for her use of mythology and elements of popular culture.

The very title of the poem, *Amor sin fin* / *Forever Love*, reflects a fact always central to the last twenty-two years of her life: her love for her late husband, Bud (Darwin J. Flakoll), the love of her life, her inseparable partner for fifty years. Even after death his spiritual presence was always evident in her work. The love that sustains this poem is one that conquers all (*Amor vincit omnia*), the love that transcends time and death. It's a rare kind of love in our time, indeed, a time when the ever-banal self is center stage, a time without time or disposition to listen to anyone because we are so busy with ourselves and the noise around us until the only voice we hear and pay attention to is our own. So, it might seem to us that love of such magnitude as Claribel's has already ceased to exist, but her work demonstrates the contrary. She herself was the living proof of it, maintaining a constant disposition for love throughout her life. In her final poem, it’s no surprise the main subject is love, a love that involves infinite compassion, that understands, forgives, sees everything and listens to everything, and, therefore, ends with an overall comprehension of life and death, of a life lived for love and for the love of poetry. Claribel once said that her mentor, Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez, told her that whatever she did in life, to never commodify poetry, and that concept shines through all of her work, from beginning to end.

*San Francisco*

For more by Alegría, read “The Sword of Poetry,” her acceptance speech for the 2006 Neustadt International Prize for Literature, on worldlit.org.

**Daisy Zamora**’s poetry collections in Spanish have been published in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Spain. Most recently, her selected poems were published in Madrid: *La violenta espuma* (Visor, 2017). Bilingual collections of her work have been published in England and the US, including *The Violent Foam*, translated by George Evans.

**George Evans**’s poetry collections have been published in the UK, US, and Costa Rica, including *The New World, Sudden Dreams*, and the bilingual *Espejo de la tierra / Earth’s Mirror*, translated by Daisy Zamora. He has also published two volumes of translations: *The Time Tree*, by Vietnamese poet Huu Thinh, and *The Violent Foam*, by Daisy Zamora.

**Editorial note:** Excerpt from *Amor sin fin* (Forever Love) translated by permission of the author.
“The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty: not knowing what comes next.”

—Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*
The House

by Pierrette Fleutiaux

A mother inside, a daughter outside. Has her mother shrunk, or has she always been a rectangle?

With age, she has shrunk. Her head has drawn back between her shoulders, her shoulders themselves shifted forward, so much so that now she resembles a narrow rectangle, as flat on top as on the bottom, hardly wider than the space between a pair of double doors ajar.

This fragility worries me. And so I am overjoyed to learn that she is having a house built in her old age. I paid her a visit while it was still under construction. A whole wall was missing on one side. It was spring, and the air came rushing in through this vast opening. Cornered at the far end of the room, she complained about the slowness of construction, the excessive light, the din from birds and workers, the cold. With each of these complaints, I turned for a better look at the cause of the disturbance. In the end, I didn’t see much of her that visit. Mostly I recall that big, exposed space opening on yard and sky.

Seized with remorse at this negligence, I go back and see her a bit later. Surprise! The house is finished. I look around front for the way in and can’t find it. I go around the side and can’t find it there either. Then I hear her exasperated voice from far away, as if at the end of a tunnel, saying, “Can’t you see the door? Will you come in already, you’re late as it is!”

I head back around front and spot a sort of overhang, a bit like on a doghouse. I bend over and shout through the narrow opening, “I can’t find the way in!”

“What are you talking about?” she replies, ever more exasperated. “You’re standing right in front of it!”

Cornered at the far end of the room, she complained about the slowness of construction, the excessive light, the din from birds and workers, the cold.

And just then, I see the door. She’d opened it already and was waiting for me in the hallway behind. I don’t like making her wait, and I rarely question her assertions. She’s so often right.

I bend over to go in but wind up bumping my head on the lintel.

“Look,” I say. “I can’t fit.”

“Just bow down,” she says, as if speaking to a child. I’d bend over backward for her. So I bow down, I even squat down, I even get on all fours. But my head still won’t fit.

“Look,” I say, “my head keeps hitting the top.”

She is not happy. I can tell she suspects me of not really trying. So I try again; my head smacks the stone lintel. Neither she nor it is willing to give. Abruptly, she loses her temper.

“I always said you were hardheaded, that it would be your downfall! Young people are such ingrates. As if only visiting once a year weren’t bad enough, they come lugging the filthy humps on their backs along with them! Just tuck your head in already!”

Pierrette Fleutiaux’s (b. 1941) 1984 collection, Les Métamorphoses de la reine, won the Prix Goncourt for short stories. The first story from this collection, “The Ogre’s Wife,” was selected for inclusion in The Year’s Best Fantasy and Horror 1992 and also adapted into an opera. In 1990 Fleutiaux won the Prix Femina for her novel We Are Eternal (trans. Jeremy Leggatt).
I’m past the age when my head’s malleable as rubber. No, mine has hardened from contact with life, and I can’t mold it to fit every opening that comes my way anymore.

Her animosity goes to her head, and now she even adds, “Or throw it away already, just toss it on the leaf pile!”

Meanwhile, it’s starting to rain—an icy rain, it’s winter. I’d like very much to go inside and be warm with her. But I’m past the age when my head’s malleable as rubber. No, mine has hardened from contact with life, and I can’t mold it to fit every opening that comes my way anymore. I switch tactics and turn sideways, hoping what I gain width-wise will help me pass height-wise. No dice. Now my breasts are scraping up against the rock, and if from compassion I flatten them a little, then my butt sticks out. If only I could get rid of these curves? It’d take days of depriving myself and arduous abstinence. That’s not my thing anymore either.

The afternoon’s half over now. I twist, wriggle, writhe—nothing works. Night falls, and anger overtakes me.

"Why did you make the entrance so narrow? You weren’t thinking of me at all, as usual!” I start yelling.

“What? I wasn’t thinking about you?” Her voice reaches me, truly revolted. "I made this house for you, but you won’t bow to convention like everyone else. You just pigheadedly do as you please. For shame!”

For an hour, we howl at each other though the slot like dogs. After all, I can’t ask her to come out to the yard in this icy downpour. Besides, she’s already retreated to the depths of the dwelling, and her voice reaches me only faintly.

Nevertheless, I come back next time. Alas, my head is still my head, and all the rest. I make do with talking to her through the slot. The interaction is lacking in closeness. Each time finds her a bit farther down the hall, since she suffers from the cold. Soon I can’t see her anymore. When she falls ill, she’s stuck so far back I can’t even reach her with my hand to comfort her. Her reproaches are the hardest part. She keeps saying I’m not in compliance with the doorway, and what can I say? She’s not wrong.

And so, year after year, I watch her waste away in the depths of a corridor I cannot enter.

And so, year after year, I watch her waste away in the depths of a corridor I cannot enter. It poisons my life; no joy I feel is whole. And yet whenever it's time again, I come and station myself right in front of that rectangular slot. I do it more for me than her, since she can’t hear me anymore.

Once, while stationed there, I started asking myself a few questions. Such as: has she ever in fact had a head, a butt, or breasts? Has she really shrunk, or has she always been that narrow rectangle? All things considered, I’ve never known her any other way.

Suddenly my past sufferings make sense. Alas, none of this keeps me from suffering now, stationed alone before the house she cannot leave and I cannot enter.

Translation from the French

Edward Gauvin’s work has won the John Dryden Translation prize and the Science Fiction and Fantasy Translation Award and been nominated for the French-American Foundation and Oxford Weidenfeld Translation prizes. The translator of more than 250 graphic novels, he is a contributing editor for comics at Words Without Borders and has written on the francophone fantastic at Weird Fiction Review.
The Tenants
by Anne Richter

After refusing to sell his large house or rent out any of its many rooms, a man begins to notice he's not alone.

The old man lived in a vast, dark house, windows blind with frosted glass, door adorned with a heavy bronze knocker.

At one time or another, all five of his children had urged the old man to sell the house, even tear it down and put up an apartment building in its place, modern and profitable. This advice was always met with stubborn silence, childish obstinacy.

"At least rent out a few rooms! What are you doing all alone, letting more than twenty rooms go to waste?"

He would turn his back on them, muttering something unintelligible. He had taken refuge in the large front room where he ate, burped, slept, slept, ate, and burped in hostile, almost total solitude.

One fall morning, he met a man in the stairwell. The man was moving at a brisk pace but paused on the landing to look him brusquely up and down.

"Where's my mail, then?" he said sharply. "What do you do with your tenants' mail around here, anyway?"

His shrill voice hit the old man like a blow to the throat. "But—"

"I've been waiting for a very urgent letter for a week now," said the man, every syllable crisp. He let them drop one by one, as if loath to let them go, scatter them, waste them.

"My mind was running wild with assumptions, each one more dreadful than the last, when what should I find in the bathroom this morning, soiled and torn?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," the old man protested, recoiling despite himself. "Who are you?"

"Who am I?" said the man, tapping his chest with a finger. "You must be joking. I've been renting a room
A closed book lay on a table covered by a cloth. He shivered. Terrible things had happened in those rooms.

for a month now—at quite a price, I might add, given that there's no central heating and the toilet's down the hall—I see you every morning on the stairs, and you have the gall to pretend you don't know who I am?"

“That’s not . . . what I said,” the old man murmured.

“I’m sorry, but it is,” the man declared. “No use denying it now. And no sense trying to talk your way out of it. What’s said is said. Just hope it doesn’t happen again!”

Brandishing the letter over his head, he tore down the steps two at a time and vanished through the front door, which was ajar.

“What was that all about?” the old man grumbled, bending to collect the morning’s milk delivery.

It was Friday, and Mrs. Place had come by to do the cleaning. She had drawn the blinds against the sun and was dusting various knickknacks that cluttered his bedroom. He stood stock-still for a moment in the doorway, watching.

“You’re not going to just stand there, are you?” said the cleaning lady. “At your age you should stay off your feet when you can.”

“How long have you been working here, Mrs. Place?” he inquired timidly.

She turned, gave him a look of surprise, shrugged, and made no reply.

“Please don’t be offended, Mrs. Place,” he said. “We’ve known each other too long to argue, haven’t we?” He set the bottle of milk down on the table. “I just wanted to know. . . . This house is so big for a lonely old man like me. Have I mentioned renting out a few rooms lately?”

The housekeeper turned to face him, fists on her hips. “Are you serious?” she said angrily. “Do you really want some stranger sleeping in your wife’s bed, rumpling her pretty brocade coverlet, or rifling through the armoires in your daughter’s bedroom—the ones the young miss hasn’t seen, poor girl, ever since she moved so far away? The day we have to suffer an indignity like that, I’ll be the first one out the door, let me tell you!”

“Oh, please don’t worry, my dear Mrs. Place,” he said. “Calm down. Mere conjecture, and not very plausible at that, I’ll admit. But do we ever know really what’s going through our heads? I think I’ve been losing my memory a bit lately. These days I’m alone day and night, and some things, the silliest things, just come to mind. Don’t you think a big house like this might arouse a certain covetousness? There are so many people out there hopelessly seeking somewhere to live. Leave the door unlocked, and well, next thing you know, they’ve slipped upstairs right under your nose. What do you think of that, Mrs. Place?”

“I’ll ready your infusion,” Mrs. Place sighed. “And some nice light broth for lunch. After that it’s nap time for you; you’re not getting enough rest.”

He finished his soup and began nodding off in his rocking chair. Back and forth, back and forth it went, to the rhythm of his reveries, and his old knees were warm beneath the blanket Mrs. Place had tucked round his stomach. His head sank into a cushion and his feet rested on the plain woolen rug. A persistent headache made him frown. The sun was shining through the blinds; through eyelids half-shut he could make out the presence of familiar objects. The broth had left a pleasant aftertaste; he’d almost forgotten the vulgar individual in the stairwell. . . . A faint sound woke him, like crumpling paper. He opened his eyes wide, confused. He must have slept several hours: the blinds were a dark screen, the red curtains looked almost black, and the room was sunk in shadow.

Before his old mahogany secretary stood a boy of ten or so, his back turned. The boy had opened several drawers, and papers lay scattered on the desktop. He was holding a paperweight, a brass housefly with a hollow for tiny objects: tacks, erasers, pencil stubs.

“What are you doing there, boy?” said the old man, trying to get up.

The boy gave a start and pivoted; as they struck each other, the fly’s wings clacked like teeth. The boy stared at him with small, terrified eyes.

“Come here,” said the old man, but the child made no answer. He kept staring in silence, clutching the brass fly in one hand. Suddenly he let out a brief cry and darted into the hallway, then up the stairs.

I have to get to the bottom of this, thought the old man, and struggled to his feet. Sleep had left his head heavy and his mouth furry. He headed for the door, unsteady.
“Do I even remember how many rooms are up there?” he whimpered in a low voice as he slowly climbed the steps. “I haven’t been there in years. Oh, things like this would never be happening if the children had stayed close. Who goes and travels the world, leaving a poor old man in a great big lonely house? Children are so ungrateful. Ever since their mother died, not one of the five has come to see me, not one! Where has that damned brat gotten to, anyway?”

Little by little, he discovered all these people: a chance encounter in a hallway, or peeking through a keyhole. Where they’d come from, and how they’d gotten here, he’d given up trying to figure out.

He bent to peer through the keyholes along the hallways, muttering the whole time. But though he inspected all three floors through the pale holes, he found nothing but cold gray rooms with armchairs draped in sheets and stripped beds. He passed by the rooms of his wife and daughter; a leafless tree stood out in a corner of one window. A closed book lay on a table covered by a cloth. He shivered. Terrible things had happened in those rooms. Night, well and truly fallen now, found him still muttering in the dark, one hand on the banister, distraught at the absolute silence that reigned from floor to rafter.

From that day on, undesirable tenants never ceased to fill the house, and he knew no rest. He was never sure exactly how many there were. In fact, it seemed to vary. Some never left the rooms where they had taken up, while others, only passing through, stayed a few days at most. Among these was the man with the letter, who has no doubt gone to seek refuge elsewhere, since the old man never saw him again. Others were more tenacious, especially a young couple who were always arguing and slapping their swarm of bawling, unruly rascals. A woman of a certain age also entrenched herself; she dressed in black and mauve, wore too much makeup, and smoked short cigars whose odor blended in the halls with that of her insistent perfume. Sometimes, she had very young visitors, girls who slipped upstairs with a shameless air and slunk away pressed to the walls. There was also a prematurely bald young man who likely seldom ate his fill and could be found playing various instruments at all hours, especially the violin. The most discreet of the lot was a thin woman of whom the old man knew nothing, except that a very young child accompanied her, and that she made no noise at all.

Little by little, he discovered all these people: a chance encounter in a hallway, or peeking through a keyhole. Where they’d come from, and how they’d gotten here, he’d given up trying to figure out.
Nor did he dare go whining to Mrs. Place, who would have asked after the cause of his apprehension. Without any real reason for doing so, he adamantly refused to reveal the presence of the tenants to her and had no trouble keeping his secret: his housekeeper, whom usually nothing escaped, seemed worlds away from suspecting the existence of his inopportune guests. Shouts, slamming doors, even the strangest noises left her totally indifferent, and one day when the young couple was having a particularly heated argument, the old man could not help but burst out, “Listen!” To which Mrs. Place replied, “Are you joking? To what?” and shrugged. He had to face facts: she couldn't hear them. This phenomenon might have worried him, but instead it reassured. In fact, he maintained unique relationships with his tenants, and his feelings about them were quite mixed. Sometimes—during his afternoon nap, for example—silence seemed to take back the rooms and corridors, abruptly delivered from their shadows. All life, however furtive, deserted the dwelling; not so much as a single floorboard squeaked above. Instead of providing any relief, this emptiness oppressed him; he grew pale, terrified. He pricked up his ears, anxiously awaiting a rustle, a sigh, giving a start when a child's cry suddenly rang out somewhere, yet finding in it some true measure of deliverance.

Some days he would have liked to get to know them better, every last one, silently admitting that he'd find the house uninhabitable should they all leave one day as they had come, without a sound. He shivered at the thought of such a defection. At such times he did not hesitate to abase himself abjectly before his guests to curry their favor, going so far as to serve them like a valet. They seemed to be able to divine this state of mind and exploited it ruthlessly. One night, finding pairs of dirty shoes before the shut doors, he surreptitiously collected them all and polished them in the kitchen. Buckets of trash were often set out in the halls, and every night he dragged them with great effort out into the street. Household utensils and little knickknacks disappeared from his rooms. Though he thought he knew who was behind these pilferings, he never questioned his suspects. But was such leniency really to his credit, since he wouldn't have known how to go about asking for his things back anyway?

His worries, the physical chores he set himself—these fatigued him so greatly that he began taking to his bed for entire mornings at a time. The letters to his daughter grew fewer. His attention was wholly occupied by the lives on the upper floors. Little by little, he began to realize he no longer needed to track the actions and movements of his guests: he could guess at their thoughts from a distance, just as they could read his own. He discovered that he had a profound and intimate knowledge of them that predated their time in the house. More precisely, he recognized them: he understood they had always been part of his own life. Rummaging through his memories, he found surprising coincidences.

Only the young woman with the child remained a stranger. He'd caught a glimpse of her from the yard one day while watering flowers in the window box. She had a newborn in her arms. It was sunny out. The baby began waving its hands about, and the mother sang to him in a low voice. She did not remind him of anyone he'd known before, but she appealed to him more than all the others, and he would have given a great deal—years of his life, even—to see her up close and speak to her, if only for a few minutes.

And yet, as he grew weaker, the tenants' attitude toward him changed. They no longer hid their hostility. If by chance the old man lost his way upstairs, the young father would unashamedly display his contempt, even spitting on the floor before him. The musician he ran into one day on the doorstep made a show of looking away. The old man hung his head and hunched forward. He rarely dared leave his room anymore. His illness soon left him bedridden. From deep beneath his covers, he racked his brains so hard that his migraines came back, more painful than ever.
Little by little, he began to realize he no longer needed to track the actions and movements of his guests: he could guess at their thoughts from a distance, just as they could read his own.

One night he closed his eyes, defeated. Perhaps they’re right, after all, he thought. By what right am I the owner of this house? The sudden desire overtook him to slip quietly from his home and flee through the cold night to await death on a bench somewhere. He had a premonition he’d never see his daughter again and wrote asking her to visit one last time. “I’m not long for this world, Mrs. Place,” he told his housekeeper, silently adding, if only they’d just let me die in peace.

But he wasn’t done with his tenants yet. One winter’s night, while he lay deep in bed as usual with the snow falling outside and fever burning at his temples, he saw the door to his room open gently. A young boy, whom he recognized, came in. The boy approached the bed and gazed upon the sick man hesitantly.

“Ah, there you are, boy,” said the old man. His hand beckoned the boy closer. “So, what did you do with the fly?”

“I don’t have it anymore, Mister,” said the boy, and fell silent.

“You want something else?” said the old man worriedly. “Thumbtacks, a penknife, a ballpoint pen?”

“I don’t want anything, Mister,” said the boy, but he did not move. The old man was covered in sweat.

“Then why have you come?” he asked, his voice trembling.

“They sent me to tell you,” the child said, “that they’re all waiting for you upstairs.”

The old man paled and let his head fall back on the pillow. So that was what they were up to. He knew well that there was no escaping this confrontation. He tossed back the covers, then leaned on the child’s shoulder.

“Very well,” he said. “Lead on.”

They went up the stairs. To the old man, the ascent seemed very long; he had to stop several times to mop his dripping brow and catch his breath. He was afraid but didn’t want the child to see.

“Well? Where to?” he asked when they’d reached the top floor but noticed that the child was no longer beside him. He had vanished. The old man thought he heard a slight murmur from behind a wall. He leaned toward the keyhole. On either side of a long rectangular table, the tenants were gathered, their faces somber. All anger was gone from their features, and it seemed the lady with the makeup was less colorful. At the far end sat the young woman with the child, a dreamy air about her. A great silence reigned in the room.

What do they want? thought the old man. To evict me, probably.

But he opened the door and walked in. A woman’s voice uttered his name out loud.

In the room below, his body rested on the bed, stiff and cold.

Translation from the French
By Edward Gauvin


Anne Richter (b. 1939) is a prominent Belgian author, editor, and scholar of the fantastic. Her first collection, Le fourmi a fait le coup, was written at the age of fifteen and translated as The Blue Dog by Alice B. Toklas. She is known for her twice-reprinted international anthology of female fantastical writers, whose introductory essay she expanded into a study of the genre. Her four collections have won her such Belgian honors as the Prix Franz De Wever, the Prix Félix Denayer, the Prix du Parlement, and the Prix Robert Duterme.
A Perfect Wife

by Angélica Gorodischer

Anything might happen beyond a door opened by a perfect wife.

to the memory of María Varela Osorio

If you should meet her on the street, cross quickly to the other side and pick up your pace: she is a dangerous woman. Between forty-five and fifty years old, with a married daughter and a son who works in San Nicolás; her husband works in a body shop. She gets up very early, sweeps the walk, says goodbye to her husband, washes the clothes, does the shopping, cooks. After lunch, she watches television, she knits or sews, she irons twice a week, and at night she goes to bed late. On Saturdays she does a thorough cleaning and washes the windows and waxes the floors. On Sunday mornings she washes the clothes her son brings home, his name is Néstor Eduardo, and she fixes noodles or ravioli, and in the evening her sister-in-law comes to visit or she goes to her daughter’s house. She hasn’t been to the movies in a long time, but she reads Radiolandia and the police blotter in the newspaper. She has dark eyes and rough hands and she is starting to go gray. She catches cold often and keeps a photograph album in a bureau drawer along with a black crepe dress with lace collar and sleeves.

Her mother never beat her. But when she was six, her mother gave her a whipping one day for drawing on a door with colored
She threw the razor to the ground and rinsed her hands in the warm water of the tub.

Amalia Gladhart is the translator of Trafalgar (2013), by Angélica Gorodischer, and of two novels by Alicia Yáñez Cossío. Her short fiction has appeared in Saranac Review, The Fantasist, Atticus Review, and elsewhere. Recipient of an NEA Translation Fellowship, she is Professor of Spanish at the University of Oregon.
warm water of the tub. She turned around when she went out into the clinic hallway and caught sight of a girl going in through the bathroom's other door. Her daughter looked at her.

“You’re back awfully fast.”

“...The toilet didn’t work,” she answered.

Only a few days later, she slit the throat of another man at night in a blue tent. That man and a woman were sleeping, barely covered with the blankets of a very large, very low bed, and the wind strained the tent and bent the flames in the oil lamps. Further on there would be an encampment, soldiers, animals, sweat; manure, weapons, and commands. But there inside, there was a sword among the clothing of leather and metal. She cut off the head of the bearded man with it and the sleeping woman moved and opened her eyes as she went through the door and returned to the patio she had just finished washing down.

On Mondays and Thursdays, when she irons shirt collars in the afternoon, she thinks about the slit throats and the blood and she waits. If it is summer, after putting the clothes away she goes out to walk for a bit until her husband gets home. If it is winter, she sits in the kitchen and knits. But she doesn’t always encounter sleeping men or open-eyed cadavers. On a rainy morning, when she was twenty years old, she was in a prison and mocked the prisoners in chains; one night when the kids were little and everyone in the house was asleep, she saw a disheveled woman on a plaza, looking at a revolver without daring to take it out of her open purse; she walked over to her, she put the revolver in her hand, and she stayed until a car parked on the corner, until the woman saw the man in gray who got out and looked for the keys in his pocket, until the woman aimed and shot; and another night, while she was doing the sixth-grade geography homework, she went to get colored pencils from her room and she was beside a man crying on a balcony. The balcony was so high, so high above the street, she was tempted to push him so as to hear the bump down there below, but she remembered the orographic map of South America. She was on the point of going back, but since the man hadn’t seen her, she pushed him and then ran out to color in the map, so she didn’t hear the bump, but she did hear his cry. And on an empty stage she made a bonfire under the velvet curtains, and during a riot she raised the cover of a cellar, and in a house, sitting on the floor of a study, she destroyed a two-thousand-page manuscript, and in a clearing in a forest, she buried the weapons of the men who slept, and in a river, she opened the sluice gates of a dam.

The daughter is named Laura Inés, and the son has a girlfriend in San Nicolás and has promised to bring her next Sunday so she and her husband can meet her. She has to remember to ask her sister-in-law for the recipe for orange cake, and on Friday they’re showing the first chapter of a new telenovela. She passes the iron over the front of the shirt once again and remembers the other side of the doors that are always carefully closed in her house, that other side where the things that happen are far less abhorrent than those that are experienced on this side, as you will understand.

Translation from the Spanish
By Amalia Gladhart

Editorial note: First published under the title “La perfecta casada” in the collection Mala noche y parir hembra (Buenos Aires: Hector Dinsmann Editor, 1983; revised edition 1997).

Angélica Gorodischer (b. 1928, Buenos Aires) has lived most of her life in Rosario, Argentina. The recipient of numerous awards, she is the author of some thirty books. Three of her novels have appeared in English: Kalpa Imperial, translated by Ursula K. Le Guin (2003); Trafalgar, translated by Amalia Gladhart (2013); and Prodigies, translated by Sue Burke (2015).
Annus Mirabilis (Anus Horribilis)

by Aleksey Lukyanov

Outside the Special Instrument Factory, protesters rally against war, corruption, and the latest in protective head gear: the Ex-Box.

Procrustes-1 was the model name. The design was child’s play: screw four pulleys into a camp cot and link them up with each other, then stick a winch on the middle leg and run it through a reduction gear to wind the cable through the pulleys, and you got yourself a rack.

The only bummer about the product was its bulk. The way it was constructed, the pulleys kept it from folding in half. But the clients didn’t need the rack to be collapsible, they needed it to be compact. This isn’t one of your Ikea bookshelves that you have to assemble yourself, checking the instructions every two seconds to see where to screw this or nail that. The Special Instrument Factory’s products are delivered ready-to-use.

Special Instrument made a lot of different things: garrotes, Spanish boots, iron maidens, the Speak the Truth basic torture set and the Speak the Truth II deluxe torture set; collapsible gallows for one, three, or five persons; a portable guillotine; and all kinds of pokers, brands, hooks, and pliers. The Procrustes-1 was supposed to introduce a new product line. The factory had no competition, unless you count a similar manufacturing plant in China, but because that one...
It wasn’t too pleasant knowing you were making stocks for prison camp inmates or testing the Kutuzov or Homer eye-punches (on mannequins, of course). Next thing you know, they’d be inventing a portable wall for executions.

was so far away, its products cost half again as much with no difference in quality.

Semyonov was applying for the position of assembly fitter. The assessment task they gave him was to make the Procrustes-1 more compact. He did it by slightly adjusting the angle at which the pulleys were attached. His operations director grunted, signed the official work order, and sent Semyonov to get the medical exam. After the exam, he got his work uniform, did his training, and went to his work station.

“If you fine-tune a model’s design, you get a monthly bonus on top of your salary,” the director explained to Semyonov. “If you invent a unit that goes into production, then you get a cut of the sales. Before you we had this guy, when he was here we were releasing up to seven new products a month.”

“So where is he now?”

“Fired for sabotage.”

“Come again?”

“You saw the security camera installed in your workroom? Well, he didn’t. He deliberately ruined equipment and test models.”

“What for?”

“Cause he’s an idiot. And he stopped getting his cut, after he was fired. Although he’d already managed to build himself a house and buy a car.”

This explanation made total sense to Semyonov. Only an idiot would be so moronic as to lose a job at a dynamic, flourishing production facility. The salary wasn’t exactly the highest he’d ever seen, but it let him keep his head above water and pay down his credit cards. The first thing he had to do was learn all the technological stages of the production process, from cutting out blanks to packaging the finished product.

As the operations director explained, Semyonov had to do this so that when he was developing a prototype, he’d know whether the factory had the necessary manufacturing capacity to put it into production.

Drill presses, trimming machines, press brakes; the different rolling mills; model and series names, their specs, mass and size, and required accessories, and even the color range: Semyonov had to know all of it by the end of his month-long probation. He studied all of it, intently, although almost every workspace had a copy of the “wraps”—printouts of the specifications—hanging around, and he didn’t even need to memorize everything.

He worked a while at each machine, got to know all the workers, and considered himself lucky to have landed a good job. As long as he didn’t pay too much attention to what Special Instrument made. Most of the people there managed that. When you’re bending a thousand hooks on a bending machine, you don’t really get to thinking about how they’ll be batched out later for cats’ nine tails, and at the drill press you don’t have time to wonder what the holes in the blanks of the Phalanges unit are for (it’s a finger-breaking device). Every so often Semyonov had to sub a shift with the welders, or the bending machine operators, or even with the packagers, and, to tell the truth, he liked that a lot more. It wasn’t too pleasant knowing you were making stocks for prison camp inmates or testing the Kutuzov or Homer eye-punches (on mannequins, of course). Next thing you know, they’d be inventing a portable wall for executions.

So that’s why, anytime his friends asked what he did at work, Semyonov would reply: “I make folding beds, hangers . . . mass-market stuff, basically.”

As a rule, everyone lost interest quickly. But Semyonov suffered from the knowledge that his work was so . . . hmm . . . base? He even tried to talk about his anxiety with his wife, but she didn’t really know what kind of factory her husband worked at, either, so she’d say, “There’s no such thing as shameful work. What’s shameful is not working and living off your wife.”

She was right, of course. For some time he was able to renounce these fastidious views and continue assembling test models. But eventually he started feeling low again. He tossed and turned all night and barely lifted a finger at work. His sense of guilt left him so worn out that he was about ready to duplicate his predecessor’s mistake. Semyonov’s knowledge of the factory was such that he could’ve caused severe damage to the production process without it ever being pinned on him. But sabotage

Aleksey Lukyanov
(b. 1976) lives in Solikamsk, a city near Perm, Russia. He has been publishing in Russia since 1998. Two of his stories have appeared in English: “High Pressure” (trans. Marian Schwartz) and “Entwives” (trans. Veronica Muskheli & José Alaniz).
went against his nature. He thought of himself as a creator, not a destroyer. Any fool can break something, but just you try and make something.

Then, all of a sudden, he understood what was really bothering him.

Up until this point Semyonov’s main task had been simplification and the ensuing reduction in production cost. He accomplished this with enviable regularity. He introduced dozens of process optimizations, enabling the factory to significantly increase production volume while conserving both materials and time. The only thing Semyonov couldn’t do was innovate. Of the dozens of blueprints that passed through his hands, some were actually pretty clever from an engineering standpoint, and he was able to find something to improve in almost all of them. But he couldn’t invent anything new himself.

He gradually grew more and more agitated, but not at the people who invented instruments for executioners at his own idea.

Semyonov sketched it out on a scrap of paper and showed it to the operations director, who scratched his chin and said, “Might could work. Can you have the prototype in a week?”

Semyonov knocked it together in half a shift. They sent a test batch to Moscow, and a week later they’d already gotten not only extremely positive reviews but, even better, an order for another lot, twice as big as the first.

It was a very strange item for the factory, not least because it wasn’t meant for any kind of harmful application. It was just a box, with fasteners to keep it on your head. The front wall was see-through, the others weren’t. The only other thing was an opening in the rear wall with an M12 metric thread, literally just a couple of threads deep. The specifications read: “Ex-Box Helmet/Headgear/Cubical.” The opening in the rear wall was plugged by a plastic cap, so people could screw anything they wanted into it, from a video camera to a souvenir plaque with a registration number.

As he worked to perfect his design, Semyonov was so inspired that his wife fell in love with him a second time. His life acquired meaning; his days became rich and full. Special Instrument’s next lot of 500,000 Ex-Boxes sold like hotcakes. After that came an order for 1.5 million units, and the factory had to increase its production capacity. Even then they might not have completed the order on schedule if Semyonov hadn’t developed a technological process that brought the time spent on helmet assembly down to under a minute.

The biggest client was the MIA, the Ministry of Internal Affairs. And at first it really was just the police going around in them. It looked funny, but evidently the constructs protected the head perfectly well, so ads for Ex-Boxes started showing up everywhere. Bikers, cyclists, skaters, and in-line skaters all cruised around in their flashy Ex-Boxes.

Soon Ex-Boxes were made mandatory for schools and universities, and then for everyone, period. Clinical trials proved that the boxes did shield the brain from the harmful radiation of cell phone towers, microwaves, solar radiation, and wireless Internet. So people wore them. All the more reason to, since there was nothing bad about these Ex-Box things, and they really did protect you from rain, cold, noise, and dust. Orders for Ex-Boxes started coming in from abroad. Semyonov’s wife and boss wore Ex-Boxes, as did he (his Ex-Box was covered in gold leaf). The entire factory pretty much doted on him.

All the same, Semyonov didn’t achieve true victory until the day the Ex-Box was used for its intended purpose.

This occurred right in front of Special Instrument’s main entrance.

Ever since anybody could remember, random weirdos with signs had been promenading back and forth by the factory gates, in protest. They used to be bare-headed, but now they also had boxes over their heads. Wearing an Ex-Box was mandatory for participation in all public gatherings, whether they were rock concerts or meet-and-greets for singles over thirty. The protesters rallied against Ex-Boxes, war, and corruption. Everyone at Special Instrument had already gotten used to these demonstrations and could tell all the protesters apart by the graffiti on the walls of their helmets. Nobody was the least bit put out by them. Why get mad at an idiot? And anyway, there was always a police patrol stationed nearby.

This time, though, the police didn’t stand around and watch. Right in front of the workers (it’d been half an hour since the shift ended, and many workers had
already made it out the front entrance), some beefy guys in gray uniforms and square helmets (special order for the MIA) wrenched the protesters’ hands behind their backs and slammed them on their knees in a row along the edge of the factory parking lot. A man in sergeant’s stripes spent a few minutes going down the row screwing something into the back wall of each detainee’s Ex-Box; it was some kind of little cartridge that looked like a single-shot powder load for a stud driver, the kind you’d see at any construction site. Several muted pops went off, one after the other, and the detainees sprawled face-first onto the ground. Their bodies, along with the protest signs, were briskly piled onto a flatbed truck and carted off somewhere.

The workers were shocked by what they saw. In a frenzy, one of them even started trying to rip his Ex-Box off. But come on: where do you think you’re going to go outside the factory grounds with an uncovered head? Especially now that you know that the helmet’s purpose is not to protect the head, but to contain the splattering of the head’s contents?

Semyonov had observed these events from a distance and grunted, gratified. Inventing a way for everyone to carry around their own personal execution walls had been a flash of true genius. Now that

Now that was real sabotage for you: not preventing people from doing things but forcing them to dig their own pits and pitch into them face-first.

He paused for a good minute at the gatehouse, then walked slowly to the nearest home improvement retailer. He checked and rechecked before he was satisfied that he could easily screw the load in himself, and that there would be no misfire.

Translation from the Russian
By Anne O. Fisher

Translator’s note: Anus horribilis is not a scatological play on the phrase annus horribilis; it is a gesture toward the Russian phrase polnaya zhopa (“total ass”), a colloquial phrase indicating any very bad situation. By way of metonymy,anus horribilis has been appropriated by the common parlance to mean the same as polnaya zhopa.
Rodrigo Fresán (b. 1963, Buenos Aires) is the author of *Historia argentina*, *Vidas de santos*, *Trabajos manuales*, *Esperanto*, *La velocidad de las cosas*, and more. Translations into English include *Kensington Gardens* (Natasha Wimmer, FSG), *The Bottom of the Sky* (Will Vanderhyden, Open Letter), and *The Invented Part* (Vanderhyden, Open Letter).

Cecilia Weddell is an editorial assistant at *Harvard Review* and a doctoral student at the Boston University Editorial Institute, where she is editing and translating the essays of Rosario Castellanos. Her translations and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Colorado Review*, *Latin American Literature Today*, and elsewhere.

*ABOVE* Blood War, 2016, by Jia How Lee. The concept art is based on the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire.
Years ago the man got married and years ago the man became unhappy in his marriage. The man lives in Buenos Aires and he passes his time, or tries to make time pass, thinking about the Aztec Empire. The man is obsessed with the Aztec Empire, ever since his teacher, long, long ago, told him all about it. The man comes to the conclusion that it is easier to save the Aztec Empire than it is to save his marriage, and so he decides to save the Aztec Empire. The man sits in his favorite chair, in front of a window from which he can see the lion cage in the zoo across the street, he falls asleep, and he awakes in the middle of a jungle in the Yucatán Peninsula. The man has traveled back in time, and it does not take him long to find an Aztec who, after falling to his knees, shows him the way to Tenochtitlán.

The man discovers that he speaks the Aztec language pretty well and that his blond beard makes him look like Quetzalcóatl, the god whose arrival the Aztecs have been awaiting for centuries. The man discovers that he has arrived in Mexico ten years before Cortés. And so a way to save the Aztec Empire occurs to him. The man becomes friends with Moctezuma, he teaches him Spanish, he makes him memorize the Spanish royal genealogy, and he explains to him that, when Cortés arrives, he should say that he is Catholic and that the practice of public human sacrifice has been abolished. Moctezuma agrees to do so. When Cortés lands on the beaches of Mexico, the Aztec emperor asks him in perfect Spanish how the queen is doing and compliments the elegance of the purebred Spanish horses that the conquistador has brought from across the ocean. Cortés is enraged, burns down his ships, and destroys the Aztec Empire. The man understands that the past cannot be changed, he returns to his age, he gets divorced, and the rest is history, ancient history.

Translation from the Spanish
By Cecilia Weddell

© Rodrigo Fresán


Berit Ellingsen, *Vessel and Solsvart* (Snuggly Books, 2017)

John M. Keller, *The Box and the Briefcase, the Moleque and the Old Man and the First Coming of the Second Son of God* (Dr. Cicero Books, 2014)


Ken Liu, *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* (Saga Press, 2016)


Michelle Pretorius, *The Monster’s Daughter* (Melville House, 2016)

Del Samatar & Sofia Samatar, *Monster Portraits* (Rose Metal Press, 2018)
Johanna Sinisalo, *The Core of the Sun*, trans. Lola Rogers (Black Cat, 2016)


ANTHOLOGIES

*Iraq + 100: Stories from a Century after the Invasion*, ed. Hassan Blasim (Comma Press, 2016)


*Latin@ Rising: An Anthology of Latin@ Science Fiction and Fantasy*, ed. Matthew David Goodwin (Wings Press, 2017)


Neustadt Prize winner Dubravka Ugrešić’s latest historiographic metafiction bears her trademark erudition, wit, and nuanced cultural critiques. The fox—trickster, boundary-crosser, siren, and thus “the writer’s totem”—pervades its pages, but as Ugrešić highlights our struggle to survive, fox becomes “everyone’s totem.”

The narrator shares Ugrešić’s essay voice and much of her biography. Braiding fiction and history, she raises familiar questions: What is narrative? How do history and fiction differ as narratives (or do they)? How does high art relate to low, world to text, margins to centers? What makes us who we are?

Like Borges’s forking paths, the narrator’s tale meanders, its six parts marked by digression, disruption, and footnotes. Conflating the real and the imagined to problematize both, drawing epigraphs from Brodsky, Bulgakov, Nabokov, a fictional author, a Hollywood movie, and a Bulgarian folk song, Ugrešić’s globe-trotting novel investigates many of her trademark issues: the migrant’s plight, cultural commodification, the curse of nationalism, and the whitewashing of history.

In several sections marginal characters become central. The title of part 1, Pilnyak’s “A Story about How Stories Come to Be Written,” signals a major theme, while a
treatise by I. Ferris, the imaginary widowed daughter of writer Doivber Levin, a real, but minor, Russian avant-gardist, supplies its epigraph, “The Magnificent Art of Translating Life into a Story and Vice Versa.” Drawn from the autobiography of a Russian bride whose Japanese husband transforms her life into art, Pilnyak’s actual tale masquerades as history. But the narrator’s research reveals that he “fills in” details and that literary historians don’t know if his characters existed, disrupting the categories of literature and history. Again, when part 2’s Widow shapes an imagined writer’s legacy, “a monument to him in which she inserted herself,” the narrator notes that “history, especially literary history,” creates illusions, like literature.

At the heart of Ugrešić’s labyrinth, the longest section, “The Devil’s Garden” (part 3), counters the intellectual riddles that come before and after the immediacy of story. Longing for home, the narrator claims an inheritance in Croatia, a pretty cottage whose garden houses a fox. A male “intruder,” Bojan, has maintained the home and tried to tame the fox. From shared values and fresh-cooked eggs, “a deep metaphor for home,” an intimacy develops. After their first lovemaking, the narrator thinks: “home.”

But Bojan’s history literalizes Croatia’s lethal buried past. Ostracized for antinationalism, he de-mines in “The Devil’s Garden.” The two grow closer until Bojan, walking in a “safe” area, detonates a mine. The narrator then ponders the “trite metaphors” that convert life to art, declaring “our story . . . on the verge of soap opera.” Yet leaving the village for Europe after his death, she reflects, “In Kuruzovac—I now felt—I’d spent a goodly portion of my life yet I’d been there barely three weeks. . . . The world is a minefield and that’s the only home there is.”

Returning to puzzles, part 4 again juxtaposes fictive and real. Tracing the potential existence of a last novel by Doivber Levin—as his possible daughter, I. Ferris, claims in her imaginary treatise—the presumably reliable narrator finds evidence for this novel only in the memoirs of peers. She writes a footnote questioning witness reliability and, after Ferris’s reported death, deems her text, “whether real or fictional,” a “monument,” “a tombstone,” beneath which Ferris “buried herself.”

With its epigraph from Lolita, part 5, “Little Miss Footnote,” intensifies Ugrešić’s theme: “Human life is but a series of footnotes to a vast obscure unfinished manuscript.” Here we learn how librarian Dorothy Leuthold, who chauffeured the Nabokovs to California, “became an essential footnote to the history of modern literature,” the butterfly Nabokov named for her “her entry ticket to eternity.” In part 6, the narrator lectures at Scuola Holden, a real institution where students apparently learn that all texts are equal and everyone can tell stories. Mourning the “theatricalization of everything,” censuring the marriage of art and capitalism, new generic labels like creative nonfiction and twitterature, and devices like Rory’s Story Cube, she demands “some higher ‘truthfulness’” and reasserts the magic of literature.

As Fox convincingly demonstrates, “We are all footnotes, all of us in an unrelenting and desperate struggle . . . against vacuity.” In part 3, the narrator invokes Scheherazade, a fox whose stories bought her time, to underscore how narrative, comprised of fact and fiction, helps us resist the void. In her story about how stories come to be written, Ugrešić, another fox, has shaped a “truthfulness” that embodies the power of art.

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Kazim Ali
Inquisition
Wesleyan University Press

Kazim Ali’s collection of eclectic poems examines the many facets of identity expected to arise during such a reflective eponymous activity. Both deeply evocative and widely varied in style, the pieces lend themselves to deep investment and engagement, taking the reader through the twists and turns of navigating today’s world.

A. M. Bakalar
Children of Our Age
Jantar

Children of Our Age is centered on the Polish community of London. The book is filled with a wide variety of characters, with different threads leading back to their pasts in Poland and tying them to their present lives in London. They become connected as their lives converge and their desires come into conflict. A thrilling story of exploitation and deceit, Children of Our Age is a powerful look at the immigrant experience.
The first entry in a planned trilogy, Mia Couto’s *Woman of the Ashes* is a beautiful and grotesque force interweaving history with myth. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Gaza province of Mozambique is drowned by a torrent of war. Imani, a fifteen-year-old girl, struggles with her cultural identity as she is torn between her VaChopi roots and the occupying Portuguese. Her life grows further fractured as her family is broken amid the conflict. Germano, a sergeant wrestling with guilt and grandeur, recalls his attempts to subdue one of the last African kingdoms while losing himself to an infectious madness.

Couto’s prose carries the weight of a creation story in nearly every passage. Bounding between the perspective of Imani and the correspondence of Germano, the former does seem to outweigh the latter in terms of intrigue, but both adequately build toward a narrative whole. Germano’s segments are compelling, illustrating the cascade from prestige to desperation to feverish visions. Imani’s sections, however, interweave spirituality with the plight of her family, injecting a cosmic relevance into a personal tale.

The characterization of Imani’s family is consistently the text’s most arresting aspect. For instance, the abrupt departure of the girl’s grandfather, Tsangatelo, to a distant mine spurs a legend that further animates the beliefs of her kin. Germano’s letters often provide a realistic frame to the prior passages but do so clinically to emphasize the sergeant’s distance. Couto is careful not to deflate or trivialize the rationale of Imani’s family in these chapters, though periodically Germano’s assessments come close to feeling unnecessary. Fortunately, the latter half of the character’s correspondence forgoes this trend, instead favoring his growing albeit tumultuous sympathy for the VaChopi.
Nota Bene

Woman of the Ashes is a strong, independent piece, building a world on the verge of a cataclysmic transition. The tug-of-war between both Imani’s past and future lives is in constant flux and proves itself the catalyst for most of the novel’s action. The novel is just as concerned with cultural longevity as it is mortality, and the battle of both never strays far from the discourse itself. However, the nature of such a subject is both timeless and universal. The upheaval and assimilation of VaChopi parallels both the Syrian refugee crisis and the ongoing waves of urban decay spurred by gentrification within the US.

Couto has ensured the staying power of his imminent saga with Woman of the Ashes. Though the young heroine endures a myriad of challenges, the text’s independent strength is careful not to compromise anticipation for the subsequent episode and leaves room for Imani’s growth amid a new and twisted landscape.

Daniel Bokemper
Oklahoma City

Eugene Vodolazkin
The Aviator


Eugene Vodolazkin’s engaging new novel opens with a mystery. The main character—Innokenty Petrovich Platonov—wakes up in a hospital ward in 1999 with no memory of who he is or how he came to be there. “Was he in an accident?” he asks. “One might say that,” the doctor answers carefully in response. Told that he must remember everything except his name and encouraged to use a journal to record the knowledge of his personal past that he recovers, Platonov begins a journey of self-discovery. Memories of the summer cottage life that defined his childhood, the death of his father, deprivation, arrests, and a terrible place of confinement in the far north return to him jumbled and out of sequence. Although he looks no more than thirty, he is, he gradually understands, as old as the century, a real Robinson Crusoe, cast ashore in a strange modern world that he does not understand and, as a result, feels fundamentally isolated from. And yet how exactly did he arrive in the post-Soviet era, transported apparently straight from the 1920s?

Those familiar with twentieth-century Russian history will delight in the swirl of memories that emerge over the course of the narrative. We clearly see places and moments in time that matter profoundly in Russian cultural memory, including Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary Petrograd and the Soviet Union’s most notorious early labor camp, Solovki. Platonov’s unique, temporally fractured biography gives him a broad perspective on Russian life: just as an aviator might survey an expanse from above, his memory arcs from

Ishaq Imruh Bakari
Without Passport or Apology
Smokestack Books

Drawing on experiences of migration and African diaspora, Caribbean-born writer and filmmaker Ishaq Imruh Bakari unfolds his new book of poetry across many places, invoking figures like Marcus Garvey and Stuart Hall along the way. Bakari’s tight, multivo-cal verse makes frequent use of physical shape and space, the boundary-less flow of text hinting at the “new forms” that come from migration “without passport or apology.”

Bessora & Barroux
Alpha: Abidjan to Paris
Trans. Sarah Ardizzone
Bellevue Literary Press

Bessora’s prose and Barroux’s illustrations join to illuminate the heart-wrenching journey of a West African refugee on a quest to reunite with his family in Paris. The reader is drawn into the refugee’s experience and shares his agonizing odyssey via the graphic novel’s blunt yet poetic language.
the early Soviet period to the end of the twentieth century.

At its heart, The Aviator is a work of memory and forgetting that is about the hard work of knitting together and understanding a century in Russian history that seems in so many ways broken in its awfulness. What, the novel seems to ask us, is the connection between individual and collective memory? What matters more in our understanding of the past: major historical events or the small details of daily life such as sounds and smells that are so evocative of our personal experiences?

The Aviator has been ably translated by Lisa Hayden. The novel will hold special appeal for those with an interest in Russian history and for fans of literary mysteries.

Emily Johnson
University of Oklahoma

Nora Ikstena
Soviet Milk


Every so often, you come across a book so beautiful that you ration the pages to extend it. Nora Ikstena’s Soviet Milk is most certainly one of these.

Set in Soviet-occupied Latvia, we encounter the two memorable voices of a nameless mother and her daughter. They tell their story in a simple language that elegantly reveals their conflicted emotions and frustrated ambitions. The mother is a promising gynecologist who, due to an unfortunate incident with an old soldier in St. Petersburg, has been banished to run an ambulatory center in rural Latvia. She is accompanied to the countryside by her daughter, who suffers the separation from her grandparents in the capital and, from a young age, assumes responsibility for her workaholic and sometimes suicidal mother. The pair meet other outcasts, such as the devout Russian Orthodox Christian, the hermaphrodite, and the dissident teacher, all of whom influence the women’s perception of the world they inhabit.

The atmospheric narrative infused with evocative imagery reflects both the physical state of Latvia under Soviet rule and the mental states of the protagonists. Bambi the hamster, whom the daughter keeps at her grandparents’ flat, looms like a premonition in the background throughout.

Trapped in his cage, Bambi yearns for freedom, eats his own children, and ultimately gives up on life. The daughter’s relationship with her mother can be summed up in her astute realization, “My presence meant Bambi’s freedom.”

As the title suggests, milk emerges as an underpinning theme. The mother goes missing for several days immediately after her daughter’s birth for fear of poisoning her by breastfeeding. As a result, the daughter is unable to drink the milk provided to each child at school, symbolizing her fractured relationship with both her mother and the state. Unsurprisingly, she feels most at home with her grandparents, who remember and dream of a sovereign Latvia.

Nora Ikstena’s autofictional tale, courtesy of Magita Gailitis’s smooth and sensitive translation, allows us into the minds of two women for whom we feel an almost instant empathy and who will remain with us for a long time. Soviet Milk is the first in Peirene’s Home in Exile series; two additional titles are set to be released later this year.

Catherine Venner
Durham, UK

Dag Solstad
Armand V


Prolific Norwegian author Dag Solstad redesigns fiction in Armand V, his fourth English translation. The original subtitle, Footnotes to an Unexcavated Novel, foreshadowed Solstad’s intent, for the timeless story is indeed rendered only in footnotes.

Via these annotations to a nonexistential text, Solstad follows his protagonist,
Armand V, an ambassador in Norway's foreign service: Oslo, Cairo, Jordan, Budapest, Madrid, and, finally, London—his career pinnacle. This diplomat had “a way with words” that allowed him to “master the game” for the “small country he served.”

Supporting roles go to childhood friends, college classmates, other diplomats, two wives (N and her twin sister), a daughter (unnamed), a son (Are), and the son’s landlady. The ultimate focus, however, is on the father/son relationship between Armand and Are.

Armand’s profession dictates that he publicly support his country’s involvement in foreign wars, yet privately he scorns combat, having lived through the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and the still-running War in Afghanistan (on which Solstad had based *Armand V* in 2006). Throughout, the ambassador frames the United States with disdain in an unrelenting barrage of deferential diplomacy: “the world’s mightiest superpower,” “the most powerful nation in the world,” “the world’s one and only Superpower,” “the superpower US.”

No surprise then that Armand is shocked when Are enlists, ending up on a murky mission “serving with a superior Western military power in impoverished Asia.”

Solstad hints at mythology, modernizing the ancient lore of conflict. Consider the Norse god Odin and his sons, Thor and Höd (half-brothers), reflected in Armand and his son, Are. Odin hungered for wisdom, trading one eye for it, while Armand yearns for esteem, exchanging his ethical standards for it.

Armand’s son exhibits elements of both Thor (god of thunder and war, who traveled to the enemy realm of the giants) and Höd (the blind “warrior” god). Are journeys to a faraway land, fighting alongside the giants (“the world’s one and only superpower”), and loses his sight. Solstad evokes Thor when a lightning bolt nearly strikes Armand and Are as they hike.

All the while, Solstad chats merrily away with himself. Readers eavesdrop as the author toys with his emerging “us vs. them” tale, departing at times from the storyline to mosey around on other topics. His intellectual maneuvering is often hilarious.

Already renowned in Scandinavian literature, Solstad once again brilliantly defies categories, this time in English.

Lanie Tankard
Austin, Texas

Négar Djavadi
*Disoriental*


*Disoriental* is the first novel of Négar Djavadi, a screenwriter based in Paris. It travels to Djavadi’s birthplace, Iran, to tell the saga of the Sadr family and, through them, that of Iran. The narrator of the novel, Kimiä, one of the three daughters of Sara...
Tadjamol and Darius Sadr, starts her story in Paris, at a doctor’s office where she is to get the test results for an in vitro fertilization. While waiting, she takes us, nonchronologically, to many places and moments in her recent and distant past. Her stories go all the way to the northern province of Mazandaran, to her great-grandfather, and to the birth of her grandmother, Nour, who plays an important role in Kimiâ’s destiny, even though the two never really meet.

Growing up with parents who are intellectuals and forces of opposition to both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic, Kimiâ, who adores her father, and her sisters go through a lot. Kimiâ becomes a complex character, struggling with history and identity, with opinions she doesn’t shy away from sharing with her audience. By directly addressing her French-speaking and, through Tina Kover’s fluid translation, an English-speaking, non-Iranian audience, she gives herself the freedom to bring characters and events to life by going into the details of the complex national history of Iran—explaining, whenever needed, cultural differences and discussing the hardships of immigration and exile.

The book is divided into two sections, Side A and Side B, with two different narrative modes. In Side A, Kimiâ constantly moves back and forth between the present and past as well as different places and subjects. This is a great stylistic choice, reflecting how one’s memory works, especially at emotionally charged moments; at some point, however, it begins to feel too forced, making you wish she could just pause in each moment and go along with the narrative a bit longer, just a bit longer. In Side A, Kimiâ also relies heavily on suspense as one of her main tropes. During the ensuing Wars of Liberation, genetically engineered animals, insects, and plants, endowed with language and enhanced intelligence, all but wiped out the human species. Afterward, technology further enables “the greatest diversification of the total terrestrial gene pool since the Cambrian Explosion.”

Now, hundreds of years later, Cyrus, “the Lion that was once a man,” rules the Three Cities, the political and social locus of the Gente. Preoccupied with court and personal intrigues, Cyrus, his court, and the denizens of the cities are only dimly aware that, across the ocean in the jungle near Brasilia, a new life-form has gestated: a machine intelligence “composed of [its] logical premises.” Once embodied, this entity “devoured, digested, excreted, and transformed, launching new waves of life.” These creations, the Ceramicans, will soon swarm across the planet absorbing its biomass and threatening the survival of the Gente.
The second half of the novel jumps more than a thousand years ahead and moves off Earth to the newly terraformed planets of Venus and Mars, now home to the descendants of the surviving Gente. Here Dath's concerns about identity, morality, politics, and evolution merge dynamically as further genetic self-sculpting spawns a new fusion of human, animal, and cyborg.

The Abolition of Species is essentially a philosophical inquiry into evolution and identity, enmeshed in a plot that partakes of (and sometimes subverts) many story types: political thriller, war novel, quest narrative, tale of speculative future science—even coming-of-age story. Dath's elaborate plot, populated by a mélange of posthuman life forms, explores an urgent concern: what will happen to the meaning of “human” once technology can enable evolutionary powers heretofore reserved to nature? This novel demands sustained attention; immersion in its philosophical, scientific, aesthetic, and political concerns; and no small amount of persistence. But don't let that put you off. In Samuel P. Willcocks's masterful translation, The Abolition of Species is a transgressive revelation, a worthy philosophical successor to Wells's generative novel.

Michael A. Morrison
University of Oklahoma

Masatsugu Ono

Lion Cross Point


Lion Cross Point is about a young boy named Takeru, vacillating between his traumatic past and present and coming uncomfortably close to the pain he hasn't been able to reconcile. The story centers on his time in the city with his mother and older brother and the ways in which that experience follows him all the way to the small fishing village where a relative takes him in.

The phenomenon of place plays a powerful role in shaping the story. Of course, the environment influences the characters in the novel, but it becomes something more. Setting is so prominent that it seems to be another character at times, with its own motivations and personality. The characters don't just interact with the settings; rather, the settings exert their own influence, alternately trapping Takeru and rehabilitating him depending on the place.

One of the most powerful aspects of the story is how Masatsugu Ono captures his protagonist's voice. Takeru is a young boy struggling with his past, and while Ono does not write the story from Takeru's first-person perspective, the narrative inhabits the boy's mind, getting as close to his suffering as possible. Takeru's internal workings display his childlike understanding of the world, including the gaps in that understanding. Takeru is constantly trying to make sense of the situations to which he

Linda LeGarde Grover

Onigamiising: Seasons of an Ojibwe Year

University of Minnesota Press

In this collection of essays, Native American writer Linda LeGarde Grover follows the Ojibwe over the course of a year and explores the ways they harmonize their lifestyle with the cycle of the four seasons. Grover’s well-researched, reflective, and descriptive storytelling captures the essence of Ojibwe culture amid the chaos of a rapidly changing modern society.

Anneli Furmark

Red Winter

Trans. Hanna Strömberg
Drawn & Quarterly

Swedish graphic novelist Anneli Furmark brings 1970s Sweden to life by intertwining the fierce political atmosphere with a forbidden love affair. Furmark’s raw, crude language nestles into the illustrations of a rugged, wintry backdrop, pulling the reader into the harsh realities and nuances of northern Sweden.
finds himself subjected, which highlights these gaps and results in a tension within himself that underlies the story.

Takeru’s unique relationship to the world around him allows for Ono to play around with slight tinges of the fantastical. The past and present seem to meld together at times, and Takeru even begins to experience the presence of a young boy who vanished from the village years ago. Without the assumptions that color the perceptions of adults, Ono’s character can investigate aspects of the world in a different way, creating a unique experience for readers that blurs the lines of reality.

Lion Cross Point is marked by a dichotomy between the inevitability of suffering and the potential for compassion within those moments. Being a child, Takeru is constantly at the mercy of others, and, time and time again, their decisions place him in painful situations. Every step of the way, though, there is someone to help carry him through it, creating a book that is equal parts heart-wrenching and heartwarming.

(Editorial note: Turn to page 20 to read an interview with Ono.)

Reid Bartholomew
University of Oklahoma

Mieko Kawakami
Ms Ice Sandwich


Ms Ice Sandwich is a delightful novella by Akutagawa Prize winner Mieko Kawakami (b. 1976) that asks us to join an unnamed narrator, with an obsessive interest in a sandwich vendor, as he tries to navigate the uncertain currents in his young life that have brought him to our attention.

Kawakami’s dialogue, fluidly rendered into English by Louise Heal Kawai, captures beautifully and with great humor the eager dynamism of a child’s mind, guided by chance association and whimsy, as the fourth-grade narrator tugs the reader into his world. From pocket money to school lunch to his mother embezzling funds from her bedridden mother-in-law to farts, his mind leaps hither and yon. Yet this light banter resolves itself, slowly, into a poignant consideration of relationships and their fragility. The underlying sense of transience harkens back to classical Japanese literature, to be sure, but this is no derivative work resting on the laurels of past greats. Neither is the narrator preternaturally aware, nor the vessel for some Kierkegaardian philosopher shoehorned into a boy’s consciousness; yet from the mouth of this babe—or, more appropriately, from the mouth of his female friend, Tutti—come tender, insightful observations on the pain of loss and the necessity of living an authentic life.

The narrator does not, of course, articulate it this way. He grapples with his deep concern about the gossip targeted at his obsession by talking to his dying, mute grandmother. This is the only refuge he has, for his emotionally distant mother, a medium, evinces little interest in his problems. His nonnormative home life, within which his tribulations seem only amplified, finds a gentle, liberating resonance with Tutti’s equally unusual home life focused on films. His blossoming relationship with Tutti, borne of the trust he develops as he comes to understand their shared situation, allows him, finally, to live honestly. The struggle to achieve this liberation is the novella’s dénouement, and Kawakami handles it well, tying together loose threads while remaining faithful to the characterization of the young boy we have come to know. His life moves on, and he, for the moment, seems happy.

Erik R. Lofgren
Bucknell University

Carmen Boullosa
Heavens on Earth


“This book is composed of three different narratives. For reasons that I do not understand, it was given to me to turn into a novel.” These words of a fictitious author open Carmen Boullosa’s 1997 novel Heavens on Earth. Published five years after the quincentenary of Columbus’s “discovery” of Nueva-España, its main voice is that of Hernando, a sixteenth-century Franciscan monk during the early years of the Spanish invasion of his native Mexico. His memoirs are then rediscovered in present-day Mexico and translated from Latin into Spanish by Estela Learo, the last of the three, an archaeologist. Living in a postapocalyptic future, he discovers Estela’s translations.

Boullosa’s ambitious, many-layered construct follows clear themes. All three narrators are translators and chroniclers or historians, all facing the imminent destruction of their world. Hernando is witness
to the slow death of his pre-Columbian culture and people. Estela, much like Boullosa, seems to sense a “beat of a destructive violence . . . in the air,” a sense that will ultimately culminate in the disintegration of her world into the dystopian future of Learo, who himself lives only to see the few other remaining humans abandon language and rapidly devolve into beasts.

Despite—or perhaps because of—all this structure (not even having mentioned the abundance of literary quotes, the author’s use of names—such as Lear or Ulises—pregnant with meaning, or the
Esperanto opening and closing lines of each chapter), Boullosa’s book comes with one severe shortcoming: it finds little plot to cover its elaborate scaffolding. Through the inclusion of Estela, Boullosa ties the bleak realities of the other two worlds back to her own present. It is ironic that the author is at her best when she lets this minor voice recount what must be largely her own memories. The two actual protagonists, in contrast, remain less vivid. This is particularly true for Learo, who witnesses what might be the end of mankind purely from the outside. Living mostly through Hernando’s memoirs, Learo’s narrative takes up too many of the book’s almost four hundred pages, developing little momentum of its own. While Hernando’s memoirs do feature interesting individual passages, they never really connect to a plot that would make us truly care about their author.

Neither Learo’s repetitious outsider accounts of his fellow men nor Hernando’s somewhat scattered memories keep the promise of Boullosa’s ambitious structure and form. In a good novel, the author disappears behind her story. In Heavens on Earth, the framing too often reveals itself beneath the novel’s thin layer of plot.

Felix Haas
Zurich, Switzerland

Yvan Alagbé
Yellow Negroes and Other Imaginary Creatures


Comics have the unique capacity to create meaning between the verbal and visual as illustrations challenge and surprise the reader, but few comics capture the politics of the body and race as poignantly as Yvan Alagbé’s Yellow Negroes and Other Imaginary Creatures.

A collection of Alagbé’s comics from 2004 to 2011, this is his first publication in English, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Rendered in all black-and-white brushwork, the dynamic narrative is emphasized and complicated through the illustrations, starting with the cover depicting a black man being choked by disembodied white hands. Many of the illustrations resemble deep woodcuts. Others are highly detailed historic scenes and cityscapes. All are hypnotically beautiful while often upsetting.

In the titular “Yellow Negroes,” an older white Algerian man, Mario, grows desperately attached to a younger black African man, Alain. Alain works to secure papers so he can work legally in France, and Mario holds this over his head in a perverse attempt to force his love. Mario’s behavior is inappropriate and unethical, but Alagbé allows for pity for Mario as he is consumed by guilt and loneliness borne of his nefarious role in the African colonial wars. Alain, in spite of everything, is also conflicted in his feelings, saying, “I sleep alongside him. My breath the breath of the victims. Loving or hating him, what does it matter? Pity tortures horror. Goodwill is attached to disgust like a rose climbing up my leg.” Alagbé deftly and articulately intertwines the body with the narrative, as colonialism continues to choke those trying to escape.

Alagbé captures the discomforting reality of the body, as it is simultaneously comforting and painful, familiar and alienating. As immigrants, black men and women, and refugees are persecuted and killed, Alagbé assumes the personal responsibility of not only remembering them but giving them a voice to accompany the body that allows them to live but evokes such hate.

Alagbé concludes his work by saying, “Telling tales is the business of survivors. . . . Removed from myself, I remain alone on my lips. The lightness I once had I have no more. Can the world hold all of the woes of the world? Can my love?”

Claire Burrows
Austin, Texas
Paolo Maurensig
*Theory of Shadows*

Paolo Maurensig’s *Theory of Shadows* uses the game of chess as a vehicle to meditate on the Holocaust. Its central character is the infamous Alexandrovich Alekhine, a grand master who collaborated with the Nazis. This novel of ideas opens in spring 1946, with Alekhine living at the Hotel do Parque in Estoril, Portugal, just as the Nuremberg trials in Germany have issued their first warrants. In his tense and fact-based mystery, Maurensig returns to his fascination with the relationship between chess and war he first explored in his celebrated *The Luneberg Variation* (1997).

In his framing prologue and epilogue, the author recounts his obsessive investigation of Alekhine’s death in April 1946. Traveling to Estoril to reconstruct Alekhine’s final days, Maurensig writes, “I like to think I am retracing his footsteps.” A waiter at the Hotel do Parque during the war claims there is an official version that leaves many questions still unanswered. No one even knows for certain where Alekhine is buried.

By presenting the story from Alekhine’s point of view, Maurensig allows readers to discover the many layers of his self-deception, including that chess is not political: “My adversary was on the chessboard, not in life.” He thinks his art exempts him from moral judgment. Only when he feels endangered does he confront his evasions, his impostures. He ignores the persecution of the Jews and does nothing to stop the violence. He attacks Jewish players in print and does not protect Jewish grand masters when he has the chance. Photographs of him with Josef Goebbels and Hans Frank surface. His dreams contain evil portents; he imagines interrogations. One night, in the middle of dinner, a stranger stares at him, drawing her index finger across her throat. In the brilliant darkness of his story, Maurensig investigates the cost of complicity with evil.

*Elizabeth Fifer*
Center Valley, Pennsylvania

Javier Marías
*Berta Isla*

In his latest novel, *Berta Isla*, Spanish writer Javier Marías delivers an intense, emotionally charged story based on what, at first sight, could be labeled as a story of love and espionage. Set between Madrid and London, the novel tells the story of Berta, a Spanish woman who for twenty-one years (more precisely, between 1969 and 1990) awaits the return home of Tomás (or Tom) Nevinson, her Spanish-British husband. Both characters first fall in love as youngsters while in high school, but once they are

*Tehmina Khan*
*Things She Could Never Have*
Mawenzi House

Through her short stories, Khan takes us into the complexities of the lives of modern Pakistanis, writing through lenses of class, race, gender, and sexuality. Charmingly modern language surrounds readers, soaking them in the culture of her world while demonstrating the subtleties of an often-misrepresented Muslim society.

*Maria Laina*
*Rose Fear*
Trans. Sarah McCann
World Poetry Books

*Rose Fear* is the first English collection from Greek poet Maria Laina, elegantly captured here in a dual translation that carries us through enchanting yet unsettling sections on “Time,” “Witches,” and “Travel.” Like a grim fairytale, Laina’s silvery lullaby lyricism morphs into beautifully dark chants and hanging, haikulike scenes as it moves between voices and scraps of stories, complicating and recoloring the feeling of fear itself.
married, Tomás's schooling will take him to Oxford for a doctoral degree in foreign languages. A stellar student, whose learning of Spanish and English began naturally at home in Madrid, Tomás soon becomes an admired polyglot by his professors at Oxford. Upon graduation, because of his great ability to speak many languages and imitate many accents, he is recruited by the British secret service and thus begins his life as an underground agent.

As is the case with many of Marías’s protagonists, Tomás, or Tom, is an individual of many identities. Truly multicultural and multilingual, he can claim more than one place of belonging while also being perfectly capable of feeling at ease in more than one cultural setting. Such a trait proves to be useful for his job, although he is never free to reveal his many identities or his whereabouts to his wife; instead, he is forced to create many masks for himself in order to justify his long periods away from home. As a result, identity and deceit take center stage in this narrative along with other recurring topics in Marías's fiction.

Case in point are the trials and tribulations of love and marriage and, more importantly, the hidden secrets each individual carries during his or her lifetime. At the same time, Berta Isla is a subtle reflection on the nature of fiction and the novel's ability to serve as a tool to explore the many nuances of human nature. Marías's intense, sentimentally charged narrative seems to underscore that only the art of the novel is capable of making visible facets of the human condition that seem invisible to the common eye. Moreover, literature is the only tool available for unveiling what lies dormant in our most hidden emotions and our many masks and desires.

An ambitious work filled with mysterious and sublime moments, Berta Isla is a rich and complex novel and can be regarded as some of Javier Marías’s best storytelling to date.

César Ferreira
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

Kamel Daoud

Zabor ou Les psaumes


"Writing is the only effective ruse against death. People have tried prayer, drugs, magic, endlessly repeated verses, or immobility, but I believe I am the only one who found an answer: writing." Thus begins Kamel Daoud’s second novel, Zabor ou Les psaumes, in which a social outcast in an isolated village finds his purpose in life by staving off other people's deaths through his writing. After years of being shunned by his father and his half-brothers, Zabor finds himself at the center of a family drama when his father is sick and dying. Should he try to save the father who long ago repudiated his mother and banished Zabor to an isolated house? Should he use his skill as a writer to help those who despise him and the texts he produces? This allegorical novel draws on several sources, including One Thousand and One Nights, with storytelling as both a framing device and a temporary respite from decay and death.

Throughout the narrative, numerous flashbacks allow Zabor, the pathetic and strangely misshapen son, who brought only shame to his father, to tell both his story and that of his family: his father the prosperous butcher, with his flocks of sheep; his repudiated (and now dead) mother; the unmarried aunt who shares his status as an outcast; and his half-brothers, who long to take over the dying father’s business. Zabor mostly spends his days sleeping and his nights roaming the village. Occasionally, he is called upon by neighbors who normally avoid him to write a story that will delay the death of a family member. Useless as a worker, unable to marry and have children, Zabor’s only interests seem to be collecting books and writing texts that are incomprehensible to most of the villagers. Normally, they only treat Zabor with pity or disgust, unless of course they need his seemingly magical writing skills, which have prolonged the lives of many.

Kamel Daoud’s debut novel, Meursault, contre-enquête (Actes Sud, 2014), has a fascinating intertextual relationship with Albert Camus’s classic, L’Étranger (1942). In his literary “counter-investigation,” Daoud gave a voice and an identity to the anonymous “l’Arabe” assassinated by Meursault in Camus’s novel. Daoud’s second novel confirms his status as one of the most important currently active francophone

Edward Ousselin
Western Washington University

**Banthology: Stories from Unwanted Nations**


In 2017 President Trump made the contentious decision to institute a travel ban that effectively barred individuals from seven different countries from entering the United States. As a response, Comma Press decided to publish *Banthology: Stories from Unwanted Nations*, which features seven different stories, each by an author from a “banned” nation.

The stories, while cohesive, are not so similar that reading them feels monotonous. Rather, utilizing uniquely different styles, each author manages to capture and fully develop a different perspective on the same overarching themes of immigration and xenophobia. Rania Mamoun, in “Birds of Paradise,” tells of a woman waiting in an airport, longing to fly like a bird, but instead finding herself stuck on the ground, unable to leave. Zaher Omareen chronicles a young man’s hectic journey across Europe as a refugee. “Phantom Limb,” by Fereshteh Molavi, illustrates the life of an undocumented worker living in the US while his family waits in his home country.

Works by Wajdi al-Ahdal, Najwa Binshatwan, and Anoud are the anthology’s strongest works. They each tell a unique story with captivating energy. Al-Ahdal’s “The Slow Man” reads like a fable, full of warning and wisdom. Incorporating the story of Yusuf, he effectively illustrates how a small action can have ramifications thousands of years into the future. Anoud’s “Storyteller” centers on a woman telling her story in a London restaurant, chronicling her life as a child in Iraq during the sanctions and her experience as an immigrant in London. “Return Ticket,” by Binshatwan, is an energetic tale of a woman’s journey to and from her peculiar home village of Schrödinger. It takes the form of a letter written by a grandmother to a grandson she may never know.

As a whole, the anthology is a short but effective act of resistance to the 2017 ban, with ideas transcending customs and borders. Reading it was like stepping into seven different lives in seven different places. For those who want to ban entire countries, this anthology sends the clear message that ideas can never be shut out by borders and invites readers to see that individuals from these nations are not enemies but neighbors.

Claire Riggs
University of Oklahoma

Liu Zhenyun
*Someone to Talk To*
Trans. Howard Goldblatt & Sylvia Li-chun Lin
Duke University Press

Originally published in 2009, this novel won the prestigious Mao Dun Literary Prize. Translated into English for the first time, it tells the story of tofu peddler Yang Baishun, his kidnapped stepdaughter Qiaoling, and a man named Niu Aiguo, all connected through a mysterious bond. Liu meditates on loneliness and the importance of family through a third-person close narrator, allowing readers to walk a mile in another man’s shoes.

Luljeta Lleshanaku
*Negative Space*
Trans. Ani Gjika
New Directions

The peculiar magic of the almost unseen and the inner “negative spaces” in which both “rest” and “ruin” are born are just a few of the themes Albanian-born poet Luljeta Lleshanaku approaches in this scene-rich collection. Kicking off her poems with bold, declarative lines, Lleshanaku discloses autobiographical cut-scenes in cohesive stanzas that allow her to dip into raw political and historical content without losing a moment of personal vividness.
Alessandro Barbero
*The Athenian Women*


In his novel *Athenian Women*, newly translated from the Italian, Alessandro Barbero attempts to give us a view of daily life in ancient Athens during the tumultuous year of 411 BC. Thrasyllus and Polemon, two old veterans of the Peloponnesian Wars, are neighbors trying to squeeze out a bare subsistence by farming their land in the Athenian countryside. Both men are widowers and both have a single daughter, old enough to marry, and feel pressure to find a suitor wealthy enough to allow their daughters to live in better comfort.

Eubulus, in contrast to Thrasyllus and Polemon, is a resident of the Athenian countryside who can afford a lavish lifestyle that involves drinking parties and orgies. The licentious behavior of this rich man is overdone in the book as his sexual exploits with prostitutes and his slaves is described in detail. It is unclear whether this exaggeration is done for comic effect or to enhance the economic contrast with his much poorer, more modest neighbors. But whatever the reason, it was unnecessary to the plot.

One day while Thrasyllus and Polemon are at the Theater of Dionysus watching a production of Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata*, Eubulus’s son, Cimon, invites Charis and Glycera, the neighbors’ daughters, over to his house to buy some figs. Cimon is portrayed as a crass, spoiled, and abusive young man who is always used to getting what he wants. Despite his stated intentions, what Cimon really wants is to exploit them sexually and humiliate them.

Barbero alternates his chapters between descriptions of the *Lysistrata* that is being staged in Athens and descriptions of the horrible abuse that Charis and Glycera suffer at the hands of Cimon and his friends. The scenes of beatings and fear that the women suffer are extremely difficult to read, and they highlight the abuse that women have had to endure for centuries. The book is described as a “romantic comedy,” but scenes of violence and degradation against women, even though they end up highlighting Cimon’s impotence, do not make the tone of this book feel either romantic or comic.

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Sergio Chejfec
*Baroni: A Journey*


Works of fiction are sometimes excerpted in literary magazines ahead of their publication. *Baroni: A Journey*, Sergio Chejfec’s eighth book and his fourth to be translated into English, debuted at the third Kochi-Muziris Biennale in 2016. Portions of it were pasted on the walls of Kochi, in the southern Indian state of Kerala, to form the artwork *Dissemination of a Novel*. Originally published in 2007 in Buenos Aires (Chejfec’s hometown), *Baroni* is Almost Island’s first incursion in non-Indian territory and a remarkable choice of both author and book.

The Baroni of the title is Rafaela Baroni, a Venezuelan folk artist born in 1935 and living (as of March 2018) in her anagrammatically named house museum, “El Paraíso de Aleafar,” some 370 miles southwest of Caracas. Like many folk artists, Baroni is a complex and many-sided cultural mediator whose work blurs the boundaries between creative and healing powers. Known for her wooden sculptures of local saints and virgins, brightly colored and fantastically adorned, she is also an original performance artist.

Chejfec tells us how occasionally “Baroni performs her own funeral: she dresses in the appropriate attire, a blue dress, which she put together for that purpose, and she lies down in the coffin, homemade as well, where she remains motionless for a long time.” At the heart of this enactment is what Chejfec calls a “double gaze,” enabling the artist to see “herself through the eyes of those who have stayed alive, and [to offer] to the living the lesson of seeing her dead.” By the same double perspective, the funeral performance is Baroni’s way to look simultaneously backward, to her own experiences of death as a result of cataleptic attacks, and forward, to the real event that, although irreversible, she will have rehearsed too many times to go wrong.

Chejfec has a unique and compelling way of exploring the inner and outer
worlds of an artist who, thanks to his own peculiar (multiple) gaze, emerges as far more sophisticated and intriguing than the categories of “folk,” “popular,” or “religious art” may suggest. His allusive, engagingly manneristic style hints parodically at the fact that he could have written an essay on Baroni’s art; or a novel inspired by her life; or even a travelogue focused on Venezuelan folk art. Instead, he has given us a book that is much richer, deeper, and more fascinating than any of these three genres would have allowed, given their scope and limitations. A book that thralls and delights the common reader but should also engage the critic and the scholar, especially if concerned with folk art (or, for that matter, art in general).

Graziano Krätli
North Haven, Connecticut
Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir

Stormwarning


Kristín Svava Tómasdóttir has done the seemingly impossible: taken our contemporary capitalist culture, suffused with moralism as well as not-so-hidden prejudice, glorying in its achievements while squandering its wealth, and submitted it to critique while making us laugh at the whole thing.

Not all these poems are funny, but the most strikingly original ones often are. Her type of humor is not a common type: it is accessible but not juvenile, humble but not trivial. The speaker of these poems is not afraid to invite us to laugh at her as well. Perhaps this has something to do with gender—women who live and work in a male-dominated world (in other words, in our world) learn irony and comedic self-effacement as coping mechanisms. The light touch that Tómasdóttir brings to her humor prevents it from becoming heavy, overwhelming, or inaccessible to her readers. She never places herself above us but develops a relationship of trust and friendship throughout her poems.

At times, this is the explicit subject of Tómasdóttir’s verse: in the poem “My Flu,” the speaker points out, in an isolated stanza, that “someone else’s flu / is a flu of little consequence.” The world has more important matters to contemplate. But how does this change when we are the sick ones? “Then she comes for you,” writes the poet in another hilariously isolated stanza. And so our perspective shifts: now, our “dignity is lost forever” as we suffer the illness ourselves, leading to the understated conclusion that yes, there is a world of difference between our own flu and another person’s. Thus the endlessly complex matter of empathy and individual suffering finds a beautifully simple illustration. Alexander Pope’s quotable phrase about what oft was thought but never so well expressed comes to mind.

Here we need to add that Tómasdóttir’s means of expression are also so comprehensible as to enact part of the process they call for: just as she asks for a broadening of perspective and an attention to the workings of human empathy, so her poems reach out to us with just such an inclusive, empathetic spirit. It is a pleasure to accept their invitation.

Magdalena Kay
University of Victoria
Galway Kinnell
Collected Poems


At nearly six hundred pages, this beautifully produced book is comprised of eleven sections of poetry (Galway Kinnell’s ten books and a section of his last finished poems not previously published in book form), an insightful nineteen-page introduction by Edward Hirsch that connects Kinnell’s evolving poetic style with developments in the poet’s thought and life, a biographical afterword, notes, and an index. One additional lovely feature is the inclusion of a photograph at the head of each section that is contemporaneous with the time of the original book publication.

As did his friend and fellow poet, James Wright, Kinnell began by writing poetry in traditional accentual-syllabic lines, often with end-rhyme, but in time (as did Wright) he permitted himself to write in rhythmic free verse, influenced by Walt Whitman. To read this collection from the start is to experience the evolution of Kinnell’s understanding of poetic form but also to witness his unique voice and sensibility, essentially present from the earliest years.

Free-verse rhythms, however, were not the only influence of Whitman; Kinnell also sings the “body electric,” and he knows that the metaphysical is and must be experienced with—if not actually through—the physical. In many of his poems, we may feel that we are fully immersed in a description of something material (sometimes sexual), only to find ourselves pivoting in a moment to an instance of great emotional depth. Open this book to nearly any page and an instance will present itself.

This recognition of the importance of the body extends to the bodies of words themselves—namely, their existence in sound. In his midcareer, when he gave guest lectures on the music of poetry, Kinnell would bring a recording he had made of the sounds of various animals—crickets, frogs, birds, whales, wolves—and he would remark that all species with voices used rhythm to communicate with one another, along with other aspects of song. Kinnell loved the bodies of words, not just their denotations. In “Blackberry Eating,” we read: “the ripest berries / fall almost unbidden to my tongue, / as words sometimes do, certain peculiar words / like strengths or squinched, / many-lettered, one-syllable lumps, / which I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well.”

Yet this is not the only side to Kinnell: he is equally fond of humor and wordplay, which too can suddenly pivot to the serious and emotionally resonant. If the material, the body, is the home of the spiritual, the body is not in itself that which is ultimately sought, though celebrated. In one poem of consolation, we read: “Forget about being emaciated. Think of the wren / and how little flesh is needed to make a
song.” In other words, in poem after poem, even the ones seemingly abandoned to the sensual, we find a poet of remarkable depth and originality who finds in the corporeal world that which animates it and gives it meaning.

Kinnell is also importantly influenced by Rilke, especially his Duino Elegies, and like Rilke he bears witness to a world that wants to be seen by us and arise again in song. Of all the poets of his generation, Kinnell is likely the most sanguine and sane, the one most exuberantly in love with life—all of it, and he embraces it all to rise again in his poems. A brief quotation of Whitman serves as an epigram to his final book: “Tenderly—be not impatient, / (Strong is your hold O mortal flesh, / Strong is your hold O love.)” In the late poem “The Stone Table,” from his last book, Strong Is Your Hold, Kinnell writes: “I, who so often used to wish to float free / of earth, now with all my being want to stay,” and I suspect that he will stay, an undefeated spirit in the enduring body of his collected words.

Fred Dings
University of South Carolina

Kevin Hart

Barefoot


In Kevin Hart’s eighth book of poetry, he uses poetry to talk to the absent or, rather, the ambiguously present: his late father, God, past lovers, and versions of himself.

Barefoot begins with elegies for the poet’s father (see WLT, Nov. 2017, 61). Hart movingly explores the way that his father, unknowable now in death, was unknowable in life. Death highlights the inscrutability of our parents. “I hear the silence of two crows // Then look down at my arm: / Not even your shadow’s there to touch,” he writes in “Little Book of Mourning.” In “Eclipse,” he asks, “Where are you, father, in these ragged hours?” This sense of distance, however, doesn’t preclude tenderness, as in the title poem, in which the poet creates an inversion of Dylan Thomas’s famous plea: “Don’t sleep tonight, dear father, darkness eats // Shadows and men alive, just walk barefoot / Into that other world.” Many of the volume’s most striking lines are from this emotionally charged section of the book. In “Again,” he speaks of “mosquito gangs / Falsettoing in hot, dark rooms at night.” The vivid images and imaginative phrasing are a testimony to the authenticity of feeling.

As is often the case, everything Hart says about his earthly father seems to apply also to his Heavenly Father. Beginning with the opening villanelle and continuing throughout, Hart addresses God as “Dark One,” a phrase that evokes the tradition of “negative theology,” which has roots deep in the Christian tradition and thinks about God in terms of what He is not, emphasizing the mysterious, the unknowable nature of the divine. In “Little Songbook of the Dark One,” Hart writes, “All afternoon, my scalene heart, Dark One, / My mind runs / and clutters after you, / And then all night / the wild track of your love.”

Like many mystics before him, Hart often speaks of the divine in erotic terms. In the same poem he says, “Yet when I watch the rain, Dark One, I’m home, / And when we touch, I also touch the rain.” “It’s not too late, Dark One,” he later pleads in a poem called “Prayer,” “For you to come / And hold me close / And stay / an hour or two[.].” Later, when the book turns to frankly erotic earthbound love poems, the holiness of the erotic mysticism is carried over, creating engagingly sacramental love poems.

Benjamin Myers
Oklahoma Baptist University

Fady Joudah

Footnotes in the Order of Disappearance


Footnotes in the Order of Disappearance progresses through gradual inoculation. Bit by bit, the reader becomes accustomed to the irony and paradox with which Palestinian American poet, translator, and physician Fady Joudah works. Joudah writes with a “fever,” crafting a dense lyricism that forces the reader to become a “footnoter,” inking the margins with glosses to his medical metaphors. Tracing the smoke trails of philological, global, and personal themes across the book’s three main sections reveals that Joudah’s own lines are, as the title quietly hints, the antithesis of footnotes, working not to explain or unpack but to convolute.
Joudah exploits the fuzziness of language from the outset, toying with false chiasms and faux epigrams like “the falafel of truth / and the truth of falafel.” Bathetic, ironic, and obscure by turns, the book’s first section complicates the “common” with roundabout epithets like “the grackle, common, / indigo, icteric-eyed New World // passerine.” Associations that hinge on sonic rather than semiotic connections (“not chasm but chiasm”) and moments of ambiguous syntax foreground words as words, functioning originally in their “status as feeling.” The question of origins, too, recurs throughout Footnotes. What begets what? “Do cucumbers bear / the stars of their flowers?” By the final, title poem, the speaker, lapsing in and out of fever, appears to both sublimate and revert to a state of pure materiality, leaving that question

Nota Bene

Lidia Ostałowska
*Watercolours: A Story from Auschwitz*
Trans. Sean Gasper Bye
Zubaan

Journalist Lidia Ostałowska reconstructs the story of artist Dina Gottliebova-Babbitt’s time at Auschwitz in a haunting character study translated from Polish. SS doctor Josef Mengele takes a special interest in Dina, allowing readers to delve into the somber horrors of the concentration camp. Ostałowska writes in a way that is stark but compelling, and her matter-of-factness honors Dina’s legacy with poignant reflections on racism, history, and the way we’re all tied together.

Carl Phillips
*Wild Is the Wind*
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

The fourteenth book of poetry from Carl Phillips, *Wild Is the Wind* takes its title as well as its indelible note of longing and persistence from the jazz standard. Phillips’s capacious verse suggests at times the fluid movement of prose as he embarks upon a progressive meditation on memory, weeping, and the impossibility of forgetting, his poems leaving behind a distinctly redemptive residue as they wash over the reader.
The enticing middle section of Footnotes is written in conjunction with the Syrian Kurdish poet Golan Haji (see WLT, Jan. 2018, 20–21). While poems like “After No Language” venture into the metatextual deep end, Haji’s wry narrative voice, when mixed with Joudah’s, provides a lucid respite from the denser lyric poems that precede it. Alongside moments of intimacy, scenes of death and despair are handled with a quintessential blend of irony and transparency as the speaker encounters “hordes of refugees in riot control formation without the gear” or sees again the face of the “woman who awakened your first lust when you were a kid . . . killed in the morning while talking to her sister on the phone.”

While Haji and Joudah intentionally efface the lines of authorship in their collaboration, meaning remains hermetic. The primary content of all of these poems, these “footnotes,” is hidden away somewhere in the poet’s (or poets’) private mental library. The lines in this book are simply the scraps that, somehow, escaped into the outside world, tasking us with summoning the excitement of an archaeologist sorting through ostraka—an arcane path to the ordinary. Perhaps we owe the absent fragments to one of Joudah’s most powerful paradoxes: “I call the finding of certain things loss.” And the losing of certain things?

Grant Schatzman
University of Oklahoma

Nausheen Eusuf
Not Elegy, But Eros


Trauma and grief tend to control one’s life once they have interjected themselves, and yet we continue to write about them as strangers—a carousel of sobriety and somberness. Perhaps, even, the wonderment at what could have been done differently. In Nausheen Eusuf’s debut poetry collection, Not Elegy, But Eros, we learn that though we must “honor the spirits / who step lightly through / the garden of our disgrace,” the sorrow eventually transfigures. Eusuf teaches us that recovering from grief or trauma might be the longest lesson...
no absence of lament in this collection, however, as the introductory poem “The sorrows of the dead” teaches us. In the world, according to Eusuf’s speaker, we carry the sadness of loved ones through the continuum of our own mortal lives. We “tend to them the way [we] water the plants.” A poet’s job is to translate emotion, and Eusuf recognizes the nature of the grief process: it includes a litany of what-ifs and should-have-dones, “the way regret unsettles like a feather / on the windshield that turns, stalls, lies still, / and disappears.” This poem, as many of the poems in this collection do, asks to be read slowly, and the words turn over just so. The imagery and use of language invites us to celebrate each complex moment, especially those that are strange and difficult.

In the penultimate section of the book, some of the poems bounce around like child’s play. Poems like “Ode to Apostrophe” and “Overall” announce themselves in such a way that one might imagine Dr. Seuss-esque drawings in accompaniment. The use of language is playful and quick in these poems, as in the lines “A jigger, a poker / a poker-faced joker, / a two-timing stoker / of fire and smoke” in the poem “Ode to a Joke.” On first read, the insertion of such levity within the necessary lamentations felt almost chaotic. To feel the spread of deep pain that somehow leads into giddy wordplay is almost like being in a mirrored fun house. What I learn from Eusuf’s lesson is that the ecstasy and delight of this frolic in language is part of recovering oneself. We are as much silly as we are somber, and when we finally embrace emotional transitions, we will begin to grow from our traumas and accept the sum of all our experiences.

Sarah Warren
University of North Texas

Sophia Naz walks a tightrope between two languages, English and Urdu, and her new collection of poems, Pointillism, is a pointer to that. Point is an English word and tillism an Urdu one denoting a talisman. “It signifies poetry as holding a magic power to both evoke and transcend linear time and perceived reality,” she says. But later we read in the poem “Pointillism” about an actual Point, which is an Indian military pellet gun pointed at the people of Kashmir, and a tillism to ward off the pellets in the form of voodoo words “to impale at penpoint the lifelong timelines of lies.” The poem, thus, marks an ongoing real struggle as a clash of two languages.

Naz’s poems are well-crafted pieces that cleverly hide within them this dichotomy

Mercedes Roffé
Ghost Opera
Trans. Judith Filc
co•im•press

Moving through scenes as ethereal as the title suggests, the logic of Ghost Opera seems to straddle two worlds, music and dreams seeping in at its edges. This book of poems from Argentine author Mercedes Roffé, presented here in dual translation, is typographically striking: Roffé’s poems become material as they skip across the page, sometimes facing off with their English translations in suggestive yet elusive patterns.

Moriel Rothman-Zecher
Sadness Is a White Bird
Atria Books

Seventeen-year-old Jonathan moves back to Israel, excited to join the army and have a place in his family’s tradition of securing and defending the Jewish state. He isn’t without his concerns, however, and after befriending a pair of Palestinian twins, he finds himself questioning his loyalty and his place in the historical conflict. Filled with poignant and lyrical prose, this book is a brilliant coming-of-age tale.
of language and culture. “Names of birds” never uses English names for them and ends with these intriguing lines: “Hamsa/Soham / Repeat this / Until the bird / And its meanings / Are merged as One.” In Vedic literature, this combination of two words, Soham and Hamsa, is interpreted as “I myself am the Swan,” the swan symbolizing the supreme state of being.

In a poem addressed to another poet, Agha Shahid Ali, she asks, “Shahid, you said / never to write that / word ‘soul’ so, how to explain / porous anatomy, that atomic stinging?” Naz deals with words in this metaphysical way and makes the lack of a clear-cut center or a well-defined home a constant refrain. Thus, even with a mundane object like an onion, she is able to say “lunar onions are just home-less tears waiting for the eyes to take them in.” Elsewhere she reflects, “Are we not all thumbnails / Filed away and forgotten / Under Time’s thumb?”

In “Chappan Churri” (Fifty six stabs), the word churri (knife) is autocorrected to cherry, Cheri, and “occasionally, chai.” “When I type / churri, autocorrect is also / a stab at language.” Thus, she considers herself stabbed fifty-six times like the woman in the story stabbed by her jilted lover.

But “each wound gives her a new mouth,” and that’s Sophia Naz’s strength. 
Ravi Shanker N. 
Palakkad, India

Gershom Scholem

Greetings from Angelus: Poems


When Richard Sieburth published the first translations of Gershom Scholem’s poetry in Bomb magazine in 2002, it was a great revelation to Scholem’s dedicated reader-

ship. Scholem had not written his poetry with publication in mind—these were private poems, sent in letters to friends or hidden in his diaries for his eyes alone.

Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), born Gerhard Scholem, came from an urban German-Jewish family in Berlin. Among German philosophers there has been a long tradition of writing private poetry, sent to friends in letters but not written for publication. Walter Benjamin—Scholem’s friend to whom most of the poems in Sieburth’s translation of Greetings from Angelus were sent or dedicated to—also wrote epistolary verse, as did the great German philosopher Martin Heidegger to his muse and lover, the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt.

The friendship between Scholem and Benjamin was a deep and passionate intellectual communion that had begun when Scholem was seventeen and Benjamin twenty-three, and only ended in 1941 with Benjamin’s suicide (or murder) on the border of Spain in his flight from Nazi-occupied France. Most of the poems that Scholem wrote before Benjamin’s death are private conversations, exchanges, responses, and interpretations centering on Benjamin and his ideas and works. There is a love poem in Greetings from Angelus that Scholem wrote to Grete Bauer, but even here Benjamin is doubly present—the poem’s erudite title, “Paraphrase of the Prose of the Diary,” has the subtitle “after Walter Benjamin” and the postscript “on first reading [Benjamin’s] “The Metaphysics of Youth.”” As Steven M. Wasserstrom, the editor of this volume, remarks in an endnote, Scholem confessed in a letter to Grete Bauer that she was—with Walter Benjamin—the “midpoint” of his life (Grete was to reject Scholem’s advances).

Scholem was primarily a critic and commentator on the Kabbala and on other literary and philosophical texts, which is very apparent in the poetry in Greetings from Angelus. As a critic, he expressed his creativity through interpreting his philosophical and literary idols and, most importantly, God himself. In writing poetry, however, Scholem has chosen a platform in which poets traditionally speak in their own creative voices, espousing their own ideas, feelings, and judgments.

Scholem’s voice is strong, and what surprises in his poetry is that the poems are in fact highly distilled critical responses to, and interpretations of, ideas and texts. The subject of his poetry is mostly focused on other people, specifically the literary figures and intellectual circles around which his career as a critic revolved. He used writing about others to communicate his own ideas, while nominally appearing to stay absent from his poetry. We see a great analytical mind at work, and as Wasserstrom points out in his introduction, Scholem was a poet who insisted on traditional forms and an early twentieth-century German who was not distorted by Third Reich ideologies and neologisms. Richard Sieburth’s deep understanding of Scholem’s thought, and his masterful re-creation of Scholem’s rhythms and rhymes, reflect the
inner workings of these original German poems. Sieburth’s translations offer a fascinating insight into the thoughts and literary sensibility of one of the great minds of the twentieth century.

Peter Constantine
University of Connecticut

Ko Hyeong-Ryeol
Grasshoppers’ Eyes


In the short introduction to Grasshoppers’ Eyes, the book’s translators assert a “Buddhist influence underlying [Ko’s] vision of existence. [These are poems] located at the intersection of being and non-being, illusion and reality,” where that which is inchoate can be at least partly revealed. Addressing a passing cricket, Ko avows, “I want to see, want to touch your name,” while elsewhere gazing uncannily at the “strange man in the mirror.” These poems stake out places at once familiar and meditatively defamiliarized, but this poet who claims to have been “born into this world innumerable times” also understands a phenomenological role for poetry, in which linguistic inventions can open new vistas where “Word was not word till now.”

In spaces where the poet can spend “a night in an aeon” and “starlight melt[s] like ice,” Ko poses a question that perhaps defines his poetics: “might I be able to say / whether it’s imagination or not?” The same rhetorical question seems imbricated in the texture of each poem within Grasshoppers’ Eyes, and the anthropomorphized mountains, waterfalls, birds, bees, grasses, seas, etc. are predisposed to talk together throughout this book, engaging the poet directly in their conversations. An evening “visits the sky,” and together “they gossip about the bellflower’s love affairs” as if the intersubjective chatter springs beyond that which human language can know, beyond the always-already social strictures and codified structures of “the human flower” and into confabulatory spheres where “another kind of existence” is witnessed.

From these vantage points, the poet casts a glance and asks, impossibly, “Blue mountain, what is man and what is living?” In places where Ko walks “with a painless, clear head in the morning shadow of a Seoul skyscraper” before revealing (perhaps associatively) a cicada “crying inside a tooth,” the poet demonstrates a style that essentially “mock[s] and refuse[s] the conventional beauties of lyric verse.” At the heart of this book there lies a probing ostranenie, Ko’s oeuvre releasing readers from the confines of merely human logic. The inventions and epiphanies within Grasshoppers’ Eyes are partly surreal, partly mystical, and wholly a reimagining of the possibilities of human apprehension.

Dan Disney
Sogang University

Del and Sofia Samatar, a pair of Somali American siblings, combine their talents for drawing and writing, respectively, to create an examination of another world that, while strange, helps inform understanding of our own. Fantastical and grotesque, this mixing of text and sketches stokes the imagination.

Zain al-Khayyal is a university student in Damascus who sets out to get an illicit abortion behind her husband’s back, a journey that leads her to exile in a bordering country. Translated from the Arabic, Samman’s words brim with humor and pain as they explore issues faced by women around the world.
In 2014 Daesh militants launched an assault on Sinjar in northern Iraq, home to hundreds of thousands of Yazidis—a religious minority whose belief system is linked to ancient Mesopotamian religions and combines aspects of Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The Salafist militant group known as Daesh, ISIS, or ISIL considers them “devil worshippers” and murdered over three thousand and kidnapped around six thousand more—mainly women and children—to be trained as Daesh soldiers or sold as sex slaves.

The Beekeeper, by Iraqi poet and journalist Dunya Mikhail, offers a window into the almost unthinkable experiences of those persecuted by Daesh either for religious belief or refusal to submit to their rule (see WLT, Jan. 2018, 48–52). The book is a collection of transcribed survivor testimonies, interviews, and research into these crimes, which, combined, stand as a stark and vital work of testimony. The seamless fusion of statements with Mikhail’s almost haiku-like poems and phone conversations with the eponymous beekeeper, Abdullah, make this book a riveting work of narrative nonfiction. Characters disappear only to reemerge as the family member of another missing woman, or patron of a survivor, and the reader learns in slowly increasing horror the tragedies inflicted by Daesh.

Testimonies are kept immediate by use of the first person, keeping our proximity to their suffering almost too close to bear. Accounts of rape, torture, murder, and suicide attempts are told matter-of-factly, but rather than turning away one feels compelled to bear witness, out of respect, or perhaps duty to the survivors. As the
“vessel” of their stories, Mikhail seems to use her poems to process the assimilation of these women’s experiences into her own personal trauma as a survivor and refugee, and the resulting combination conveys something of Iraq’s decades of conflict and tragedy.

While Mikhail’s focus is on the escape attempts of kidnapped Yazidis, and though these accounts are harrowing, what is most striking is the love, hope, and compassion that permeate their stories. These qualities are most apparent in the utterly remarkable strength of the survivors and the enormous kindness and support shown by the friends, families, and strangers—like the beekeeper—who risked their lives to help these women. The capacity of all people to defy oppressive doctrine to save lives serves as a reminder of our innate goodness, buried as it may be under dogma or xenophobia.

Rosie Clarke
New York

Umberto Eco
Chronicles of a Liquid Society

When Umberto Eco died in early 2016, he had just finished putting together a collection of essays entitled Pape Satán Aleppe: Croniche di una società liquida. The English translator, Richard Dixon, dropped Dante’s phrase from the title, perhaps for fear that American readers would fail to make the connection, and kept the subtitle. Yet “Pape Satán Aleppe” is infamous for its elusive meaning, which ties in wonderfully with Eco’s theme in the book—one of exploring, at least in part, just how difficult it is to discover any meaning, let alone an absolute meaning, in contemporary society.

Chronicles of a Liquid Society is Eco’s final gift to his readers. Made up of previously published essays from his long-standing column in L’Espresso, titled “La bustina di Minerva,” this collection takes as its point of departure Zygmunt Bauman’s conceptualization of a liquid society, specifically as outlined in his book Liquid Modernity, published in 2000, followed by several more books on the subject. In his opening essay, “The Liquid Society,” Eco claims that the “crisis of grand narratives,” perhaps first heralded by Jean-François Lyotard in his work The Postmodern Condition, led to the ripple effect, or after-shocks, that we are now experiencing in society. Each age experiences a certain degree of uncertainty, but contemporary society, with its collapse of ideologies, signals an age where uncertainty may be the latest manifestation of a grand narrative to emerge in the twenty-first century. Thus, Eco’s original title. This is not to say that

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Nota Bene

Maria McFarland Sánchez-Moreno
There Are No Dead Here
Nation Books

There Are No Dead Here follows the three Colombians—a human rights activist, a prosecutor, and a journalist—who worked to expose the political corruption of collusion between the Colombian government and paramilitary forces. Maria McFarland Sánchez-Moreno deftly guides the reader through the related events with a thorough and engaging hand.

Gábor Schein
The Book of Mordechai and Lazarus
Trans. Adam Z. Levy & Ottilie Mulzet
Seagull Books

In this two-volume collection, Hungarian writer Gábor Schein melds family drama and biblical teachings with Hungarian history by examining the significant moments of the Holocaust, World War II, and Communist rule. Schein’s fluid narrative style employs descriptive and probing language to capture the search for identity in a convoluted society marred by the unhealed pain of the past.
the English title is insufficient or robs the book of its identity, but the Italian title provides readers with a slightly different and complicated take on Eco’s overall theme.

Chronicles of a Liquid Society presents Umberto Eco at his most playful and piercing. Exploring everything from the future of the European Union to Twitter, Eco demonstrates once again just how smart and thoughtful he can be. The essays collected here present us with a mind as sharp as it was in youth but with the wisdom to discern the subtleties of things from the vantage point of age. This collection also presents us with Eco the curmudgeon, the one who deliberately bumps into people who are talking on cell phones while standing on a street. Largely absent is the younger, self-deprecating man who struggled to eat peas on an airplane.

Eco had more than just a general knowledge about the world and our place in it; he was one of contemporary society’s most resonant and gifted public intellectuals. We should be thankful that Eco’s parting form is the essay and not an academic book or a novel. Certainly, Eco was highly skilled at all three forms, but the essayist in Eco is, I suspect, closest to showing us who he was as a reader, which is really where his spirit resided in its truest form.

Andrew Martino
Southern New Hampshire University

Crossing Borders: Stories and Essays about Translation


“We have just said that we have our own words in English for the same things,” Lydia Davis intones within the carefully calibrated paragraphs of her story “French Lesson I: Le meurtre.” “It is in fact just the opposite—there is only one word for many things, and usually even that word, when it is a noun, is too general.” When readers mistrust translation, they often do so because of this lack of isometry between languages, a disconnect that gives many of the texts within Crossing Borders: Stories and Essays about Translation their narrative impetus. Every attempt to translate well is compounded not only by endless asymmetries but also by distractions, by quarrels, by mundane realities. “Nobody understands translation isn’t an act of convenience,” the subtitler narrating Susan Daitch’s “Asylum” fumes. “Every company wants their job toot-sweet.”

Davis’s and Daitch’s contributions are joined by those of Joyce Carol Oates, Michelle Herman, and other authors. Translators themselves share their insights as well: Michael Scammell on Englishing Nabokov; Harry Mathews on the devirity of Oulipian constraints in a new language. Even Primo Levi provides his own perspective on the process. Lynne Sharon Schwartz, who has translated into English such luminaries as Natalia Ginzburg, bookends this collection with her factual introduction and her fictional story. After the recent wave of essayistic books around translation, from Kate Briggs’s This Little Art and Mireille Gansel’s Translation as Transhumance all the way to Karen Emmrich’s Literary Translation and the Making of Originals, it comes as a surprise that only five of the eighteen pieces gathered within this volume are essays. The other thirteen texts imaginatively give flesh to the metaphorical “kind of alchemy” Schwartz describes in her introduction, privileging the imagery of mysticism and magic over the less rarefied idea of quotidian labor.

If translation has arisen out of a foundation of difference and incompatibility, then the translator’s work is to reconcile these contraries and create a new reality. In Lucy Ferriss’s “The Difficulty of Translation,” her protagonist can “be with someone who thought in another language, but not with someone who thought in no language at all.” In Michelle Herman’s “Auslander,” a translator finds herself able to reunite a couple at war.

As uneven as the anthology may be, a deep-rooted belief in the possibility of setting the world to rights still sustains these various pieces: these are stories of encounters and relationships occasioned by the need to bring together different spheres of existence. No matter that the gaps revealed in translation may sometimes—as in Lydia Davis’s story—cache outright murders, translation turns out to be less alchemy and more adhesive, taking languages or peoples or individual texts that had been separate and binding them together.

Jeffrey Zuckerman
New York
David Bowles
*Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky: Myths of Mexico*


We are always revisiting our myths. In Europe and America, attention to myth has historically bolstered claims to national and (white) racial greatness by drawing on the heritage of the robust mythic and folkloric traditions of Ireland, Scandinavia, France, Germany, Russia, and others transmitted orally and written down in epics and sagas, or penned by the fairy-tale collectors of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Today, a vast field spanning both popular and literary fiction attends to

Nota Bene

*Short Circuits: Aphorisms, Fragments, and Literary Anomalies*
Ed. James Lough & Alex Stein
Schaffner Press

Following James Lough and Alex Stein's *Short Flights*, an anthology of short-form writing, *Short Circuits* has expanded its scope beyond that of its predecessor to include such writing as flash fiction, mini-essays, and concrete poetry. The collection strives to give readers a series of "little enlightenments" in an effort to rewire the brain for the reader’s own well-being.

Maria José Silveira
*Her Mother’s Mother’s Mother and Her Daughters*
Trans. Eric M. B. Becker
Open Letter

Translated from Portuguese, *Her Mother’s Mother’s Mother and Her Daughters* traces back five hundred years of Brazilian history and the history of a family through the women of that family, starting with a Tupiniquim warrior in 1500 and ending with a woman in 2001. While critical of the aspects of culture that oppress women, Silveira’s powerful, vivid prose details the ways in which these women are the bedrock of society.
continued retellings, pastiches, and subversions of the Euro-American myths; most recently, Neil Gaiman and Philip Pullman won acclaim for their retellings of Norse mythology and the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales. Rarely, outside of Pantheon’s uneven Fairy Tale and Folklore Library, have the mythofolkloric traditions of Africa, Asia, Australia, and the indigenous Americas been given similar treatment.

Enter David Bowles, Mexican American novelist and translator of Nahuatl and Mayan. Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky is the most recent of Bowles’s several books that bring the folktales, myths, and poetry of Mesoamerican cultures to anglophone and hispanophone readers. With Feathered Serpent, Bowles has given us a rich, vast, and complexly woven tapestry of the heritage of stories that circulated in pre-Conquest Mexico. It is a compulsively readable account of the history of the “sea-ringed world” of Mexico from the formation of the very first entity, the dual god Ometeotl, out of the eternal life force of the universe, down through the creation of the many generations of gods and the four ages of human beings (all destroyed by infighting among the gods), and to the present of the fifth age of humans molded by Feathered Serpent, Divine Mother, and the many gods from the ground bones of the humans who came before. A masterful storyteller, Bowles packs the richness of the Mesoamerican cosmos into every sentence, bringing to vivid life ancient characters who are by turns funny, heartbreaking, lovable, grotesque, and venerable.

The book divides its history of the universe into seven sections that narrate the epochs of Mexico up to the conquest. The first three are cosmogony: how the gods and the order of things came to be, including a wealth of etiologies, from ultimate concerns with the purpose of human and animal sacrifice or the sanctity behind sacred sites; to natural and animal phenomena, like animal morphologies and habits; and the ordering of time, causes of eclipses, or spots on the moon (these caused by Feathered Serpent hurling a rabbit at the moon). At the heart of the story of the gods is the conflict between Feathered Serpent, creator and protector of humankind, and his brother, Heart of Sky (Hurricane/Tezcatlipoca), a tortured, jealous deity who seeks to destroy the people of Mexico in every age.

The final four sections tell of the human world, the world after the “Reign of the Demigods” and the exploits of great heroes, like the trickster Lord Opossum, Maya twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque, Mixtec archer Yacoñooy, and Aztec warrior Huitzilopochtli. These sections narrate the rise and fall of the Toltecs, the Maya, and the Aztecs, concluding in the final portion of the book with the coming of Hernan Cortés, which Bowles recognizes as the final triumph of Heart of Sky in his battle against Feathered Serpent and Mexico’s people. Yet all is not lost; at the end of the time of myth emerge new peoples of “palimpsest souls”: Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Chicanos.

More than a compelling work of narrative art, Feathered Serpent is a project in restoring and forging a mythohistorical identity for contemporary Mexican and Mexican American peoples from whom these stories were taken by the ravages of Spanish conquest, which included the burning of nearly all manuscripts recording Mexican mythologies. Bowles’s genre-defying book translates, recovers, retells, and pastiches histories and myths largely lost in the wake of colonialism. Here is the Mexican approximate of the Greeks’ Theogony, Iliad, and Odyssey, the Malineske’s Sundiata, the Hindus’ Ramayana, the Babylonians’ Enûma Eliš—a singular work of art, yet in conversation with the many voices who, over centuries, shared the stories that Bowles sutures into one. He offers new, engaging translations and retellings of scenes from what few sources remain, including Aztec codices, the Mayan Popol Vuh and Songs of Dzitbalché, and oral and folkloric traditions from a range of Mexican cultures, producing a mythic chronicle of Mexico that draws on Cora, Huichol, Maya, Mazatec, Mixtec, Nahua, and Otomi storytelling.

Feathered Serpent is a significant work toward the recovery of a pre-Columbian episteme of Mexico, arguing for an ethical relationship between humans and the cosmos, since it is humans’ good deeds (and sacrifices) that keep Xiuhtecuhlti (time and fire god) and Nanahuatzin (the sun) in motion. The prose is artful, often playful, leading the reader through worlds and times she will want to read more of. It is a needed infusion of teoti, of vital life force, into the study and circulation of world mythologies today. Bowles’s Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky will be crucial to Mesoamerican literary and cultural studies as well as important to Mexican and Mexican American rediscoveries of effaced pasts, for many years to come. Scholars and readers of mythology and folklore: add this to the classics.

Sean Guynes-Vishniac
Michigan State University
John Porcellino

*From Lone Mountain*


“The world is very large,” John Porcellino tells us early on in *From Lone Mountain*, and we are convinced. Porcellino’s greatest gift as a cartoonist—and he has many—is his knack for telling very small, specific stories with heart and intelligence that paradoxically show us the wonders of our very large world.

When I was in training to be a commercial copywriter, again and again it was drilled into my head that the more specificity and detail you can include in your copy, the more universal it becomes to those reading, watching, or listening to it. The truth of this is revealed in such small...
moments in *From Lone Mountain* as John P. (as he is known to his legions of fans) discovering his dad saying the word “roof” in exactly the same apparently unusual way he does, and I found myself imagining the sound as I read his recounting of the incident. It probably vaguely rhymes with “hoof,” not with “goof,” as most people I know would say it. I love those sorts of regional dialect variations, and Porcellino is well traveled enough to have stockpiled hundreds.

*From Lone Mountain* is dense with haiku-like short stories in the form of comics. It also features text pieces from Porcellino’s *King-Cat Comics* series, from which the book was compiled. Some of the text pieces are typeset, others are in Porcellino’s distinctive hand lettering, and all are evocative, intimate, and moving, like handwritten letters from a faraway loved one.

That’s really Porcellino’s work in a nutshell. He offers up observations from the whimsical to the profound and every shade of emotion in between. I’ve been reading autobiographical comics for nearly forty years, and it’s the genre of comics that most appeals to me. From Harvey Pekar’s gritty, urban short stories to the magical realism of James Kochalka and the family dramas of Jason Marcy, autobio comics have given me a glimpse of the inner lives of many great cartoonists. But none are more generous, thoughtful, and mind-expanding as the deceptively simple works of John Porcellino. In *From Lone Mountain*, John P. lives his life, makes his observations, and reports back to us with honesty, humor, and insight. To me that is literally the highest achievement possible in comics.

Alan David Doane  
Whitehall, New York

*The White Chalk of Days: The Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series Anthology*  

This dense, exciting anthology brings together fifteen Ukrainian poetry and prose writers with works from the late-Soviet and, mostly, post-Soviet period of the last twenty-five years. These writers were featured in live readings in the Con-

Freed from imposed Soviet artistic strictures yet questioning also the inherited default narrative of Ukrainian nationalism—in both subject matter and style—this period has been one of immense discovery, broad experimentation, and intense debate among contemporary Ukrainian writers.

The range is great, from rock stars to children’s authors, from old-guard intelligentsia through the newest lights. There are Viktor Neborak’s Bu-Ba-Bu (burlesque-bluster-buffoonery) poems, popularized since the 1990s, Serhiy Zhadan’s funny, edgy, and strange poems, and one prose piece (“Owner of the Best Gay Bar”), and the sensual, mature prose of Sofia Andrukhovych (see WLT, Sept. 2005, 24–32).

Poet, story writer, and novelist Yuriy Vynnychuk is an example of a writer who has straddled generations. Unable to publish his earlier works directly under the Soviet regime, he managed to get many into print anyway by pretending they were “translations” from Old Irish, Old Welsh, or “Arcanumian”—a civilization he had invented. The older generation is represented also by poet Hrytsko Chubai; active in the samizdat underground, many of his poems became popular only posthumously, when set to music and performed by his son: “let the silvery bass carved out of the moon / run before you / lighting the water’s way . . . / I won’t follow at Your heels / I’ll shut my eyes like falling leaves / I will not see / when the tracks’ leaves fall / from the time-worn branches of the paths.”

In contrast, Ivan Malkovych has been hailed as a “phenomenon” of “new wave” poetics. It is from his poem “An Evening (Goose) Pastoral,” in keen translation by Michael M. Naydan, that the title of this volume derives: “it’s as though the geese / are small bundles of the white chalk of days— / God’s big bottles walking to the white . . .”

Taras Prokhashko is represented by excerpts from his publication FM Gali censorship. It consists of three-minute diary-style fragments based on the author’s experience working at a newly created Ukrainian FM radio station—a startlingly free-form project that may not even be possible anymore in today’s Ukraine.

The White Chalk of Days is notably concentrated. A generous introduction by series organizer and editor Mark Andryczyk helps situate works in recent Ukrainian literary history, and fresh translations add to the high caliber of this book. Yet to appreciate each chapter fully, one should really visit the webcast recaps of the Wilson Center online, to hear the expansive, greatly informative introductions there. Even so, far more than a record of the reading series, this book stands as a notable contribution to appreciating major currents in Ukrainian literature of the last generation—an appreciation that, for most of us, is notably overdue.

Andrew Singer
Trafika Europe

Italian author Domenico Starnone tells a poignant, witty tale of the reimagining of purpose and happiness when an isolated old man in the twilight of his life is reunited with his energetic and disarming four-year-old grandson. Starnone’s intimate, emotional, and sharp writing unpacks a domestic drama that has the power to both define and change a man’s life.

Susanna Tamaro
The Tiger and the Acrobat
Trans. Nicoleugenia Prezzavento & Vicki Satlow
Oneworld

This English translation of Susanna Tamaro’s Italian novel tells a coming-of-age story from the perspective of a young tiger wishing for independence. Her prose is soft and welcoming while still indulging in the fantastical, which illuminates and enlivens this testament to the beauty and power of nature and innocence.
Chris Arthur

*Reading Life*


Chris Arthur knows what an essay is: an attempt to reach a further, transcendent understanding through writing. Chris Arthur’s 2017 collection of essays, *Reading Life*, keeps an eye to the particular while exploring perennial questions—on the one hand, his daughter’s feet, the contents of a bookshelf, words themselves; and on the other, our human condition, the violence of his Northern Ireland homeland during the Troubles, and the vastness of time itself.

In his essay “Priests (Reading fishing and desecration),” Arthur connects his early experiences growing up near Belfast during the rising and deadly sectarian/nationalist violence to the way that the word priest has evolved for him in the years since. Originally it was a word steeped in mystery and suspicion, and while most of that was stripped away by his experiences at university, Arthur admits to some lingering apprehension. Turning over his experiences in language leads him to a “general truth,” Arthur writes, “Words can continue to carry illicit cargoes long after we’ve ceased to be complicit in their smuggling.”

These essays often take a simple object and invest it with significance, such as the way a mechanical mile-counter mounted to a youth’s bicycle stands in for the click-click-click of our own mortality. Arthur suspects the indirect, analogical nature of the essay collection is met with discomfort by readers more familiar with fiction. His closing essay “Afterword (Reading essays)” offers both a justification for the form and some useful teaching in how to read the genre.

Though essay collections rarely outshine crime novels, biographies, or histories on the best-seller lists, readers who come across a collection such as Chris Arthur’s *Reading Life* know its value. Such a reader will probably know of the essay’s origin as I did, and so it was with bemused pleasure that I thumbed open *Reading Life* for the first time to find, right under my fingers, a quote from Montaigne’s “On Solitude.” These words from centuries ago, and Arthur’s reflection on them, came to me just when most needed.

I expect this book would offer such moments to anyone.

Greg Brown
Mercyhurst University

György Konrád

*Falevelek szélben (Ásatás I)*


Although it is advertised as “the first part of György Konrád’s roman-fleuve” (regényfolyam), *Falevelek szélben (Ásatás I)* (Leaves in the Wind [Excavation I]) is not really a novel. Its genre is hard to define: a mixture of personal memories and mini-essays on a wide range of subjects from philosophy and politics to the atmosphere of the author’s weekend house at Hegymagas near Lake Balaton. This should not surprise Konrád’s readers, for out of the thirty-odd titles to his credit, all mentioned on the sleeve, very few could be defined as “pure” fiction.
Konrád’s subject matter (is this his autobiography?) may be traditional, but the technique he uses is postmodern: it starts with his birth in April 1933 and continues with reminiscences of his childhood in a small town near the Romanian border, but by page 50 we have moved to 1995, and on the next page the date of the miniessay on the nature of writing is 2008. This adds to the liveliness of the discourse but disrupts the continuity most of us would expect from an autobiography. Still, the careful reader will be able to pick up dates that really matter in Konrád’s life and will find that stories connected with those years are among the best parts of the book: 1944/45, 1956, 1969, and 1990 are all important times for the writer’s survival and continuous rebirth, though I suppose he would also regard the year of his marriage to Judit Lakner (1980) also significant. In 1944 Konrád and his older sister, born in a Jewish family, had been marked out for deportation to Auschwitz but managed to escape from the countryside to Budapest just in time. In October 1956 the writer of this review happened to recruit György (George) for the revolutionary National Guard, which meant that the author became the proud possessor of a tommy-gun for a couple of days. Though his first novel, *The Case Worker*, was published to great critical acclaim in 1969, it was only in 1990 with the collapse of the Communist regime in Hungary that he became not only publishable once again but almost popular and widely appreciated in his native country. *Falevelek szélen* contains a number of thoughtful mini-essays, among which the praise of cities (Berlin, Amsterdam, and to some extent Budapest), the investigation of Jewishness, and the deliberation on emigration and on the fate of émigrés/immigrants stand out as the most interesting. The latter take up several pages, and even if we do not always agree with Konrád’s conclusions, his views on the subject are worth considering. Though he himself decided to stay in Hungary after the suppression of the 1956 revolution by Soviet tanks, he understands those who left the country (they included his sister and two of his favorite cousins, the Zádor brothers, of whom the elder, hugely talented István, died tragically young), explaining how he became an “internal” émigré for years, an officially tolerated but partly banned writer of fiction with long periods of traveling, enjoying authorized absence from Kádár’s Communist Hungary. He also analyzes the reactions of those who willy-nilly cooperated with the regime by the simple fact of not leaving—many years later they resent the personal success of those who had fled or emigrated: “If he/she was a success, that is unforgiveable, but if he/she failed that is what he/she deserved.” The octogenarian Konrád surveying his own eventful life defines his stance as “familiar foreignness” (*otthonos idegenség*) “a dual relationship to everything that he had received and inherited, what his destiny inflicted upon him.”

In other words, György Konrád, while a part-village-dwelling local patriot, is at the same time thoroughly cosmopolitan, a proud European from a small country in central eastern Europe who finds nationalistic bragging or self-pitying lamentations truly embarrassing. 

George Gömöri
SSEES/UCL, London, UK

Roma Tearne
*Brixton Beach*
Aardvark Bureau

In the wake of a family tragedy, Alice Fonseka and her parents leave their home in Sri Lanka to live in England, where Alice finds that even as she begins to find a place for herself and her art, she is still dogged by her past. In *Brixton Beach*, Roma Tearne skillfully navigates the political and social waters of a tumultuous history.

Emmanuelle de Villepin
*The Devil’s Reward*
Trans. C. Jon Delogu
Other Press

*The Devil’s Reward* is a novel about family relationships. It explores eighty-six-year-old Christiane’s strained relationship with her daughter and granddaughter as they visit her in Paris, while weaving in stories from Christiane’s childhood with her father, a veteran of both world wars. The story’s lighthearted and approachable nature allows it to explore both the pain and joy of these connections in an honest way.
A bustling center of business and culture, New York City is host to one of the most vibrant literary scenes in America. Manhattan and its surrounding boroughs are often featured in classic novels, and Brooklyn is known worldwide as a place for thriving young artists to gather. It can be easy, however, for avid readers and writers in the city to miss some of its more avant-garde spaces amid the many sprawling bookstores and comfortable coffee shops. Located on a quaint side street in Tribeca, lower Manhattan, the Mysterious Bookshop is one such space.

Opening its doors in 1979, the Mysterious Bookshop is the oldest and largest mystery-focused bookstore in the country. It stocks choices from among the newest selections of current authors, including a large collection of imported mysteries by British writers. In addition, the shop features classics of the genre, a large collection of Sherlock Holmes literature, and many difficult-to-find books such as first editions, rare hardcovers, and signed copies.

The exterior features light gray paneling and red brick columns with large windows that allow natural light to filter in, giving passing pedestrians an enticing view. Once inside, the floor-to-ceiling polished wood bookshelves work together with soft indie and folk music to create a peaceful, library-like atmosphere. The carpet is a dark shade of green, and a poster on the wall is reminiscent of a 1940s pulp murder mystery. To reach the books occupying the tallest ledges of the shelves, it is necessary to grab one of the sliding rail-mounted ladders and climb. Near the back of the store, several rows of hardcover novels are arranged in glass display cases by the reading area. Taped to a small door on the right side is a large section of yellow police tape and a sign that reads, "Nobody shoplifts from a store that knows 3,214 ways to murder someone."

This charming little bookstore is, however, more than just a place to find a good mystery. It often hosts authors who are traveling to promote their new books, with events including readings and signings that sometimes happen multiple times per week. Joyce Carol Oates, John Hart, and Charles Salzberg are among the writers who have recently presented. In addition, the shop works with well-known writers to publish and distribute short mystery novels directly from the store. Known as Bibliomysteries, these novellas feature plots involving books and those who collect them (see WLT, Sept. 2008, 9–11).

The Mysterious Bookshop offers a wonderful opportunity to spend an afternoon browsing new and old thrillers alike, seated comfortably on the maroon couch near the vintage paperback collection. Whether you love mysteries or prefer a different genre, this shop is worth the time for any reader who appreciates the tranquil atmosphere and remarkable personality that can only be found in small, independent bookstores.

Tyler McElroy is a WLT intern majoring in English writing at the University of Oklahoma. He enjoys reading, writing, and traveling in his spare time. He intends to become an author and plans to see as much of the world as possible after graduating.
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