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Vol. 7
Fall 2019

Transference



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Department of World Languages and Literatures
College of Arts and Sciences
Western Michigan University



Transference

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2019

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Foreword

“You will be guardian and vestal virgin
of the speck of light
dispensed to your species”

—“The Shoulders and the Burden”

by Abdellatif Laâbi, translated by
Allan Johnston and Guillemette Johnston

Once again it is our privilege to offer you a unique assemblage of experiences and perspectives distilled first into one language and then carried over into English. The time span of the poems appearing here ranges from that of ancient Rome (Martial, translated by George Held) to the contemporary (Ramy Al-Asheq, translated by Levi Thompson).

In all cases, they present intriguing illustrations of translation challenges and techniques. In Nina Youkhanna’s translation of Mohamed Fouad’s “An Axe Falling on a Blind Statue,” for example, she opts to privilege the lexical values of the original text, by which process she was freed from “forcing the translation into a distinctly English mold.” Sharon Fish Mooney uses form and meter in her rendering of Jules Breton’s “Autumn.” Louise Stoehr tackles the reproduction of alliteration in her translations of Uwe Kolbe, and Elizabeth Dodd transposes syntactic repetition into sound repetition for Dieurat Clervoyant’s “The Blood of One Heart.”

It goes without saying that poetic translation is intrinsically problematic—some would say impossible—yet the English poems featured here all succeed as poems in their own right, and all demonstrate creativity, boldness, a flair for what works, and respect for the original text. We invite you to discover the grandmother with an extinguished eye (Ben Driss/Fethi); the cold cicadas of autumn (Andrew Gudel/Yao Nai), the surreal high security ward (Kathryn Kimball/Linda Maria Baros), the crow with “filthy feet” “preening like a dandy” (Erik R. Lofgren/Umezaki Haruo) and the storyteller’s vivid picture show depicting “a woman just like sake—Bursting free” (Leanne Ogasawara/Takamura Kōtarō), just to name a few of the literary excursions in these pages.

The contents here also provide a rich *mise en scène* of widely distinctive poet persona figures. Whether adolescent or aged, courtly performer or dissident, lover of Mozart or simply a lover, they share their truths with us across the boundaries of space and time. We hope you enjoy this eye-opening collection that illustrates the confluence and divergence of language intersections, the art of imagistic and sonorous representations, and the layering of meaning upon meaning.

Molly Lynde-Recchia, Editor-in-Chief

Elaine Wong
Liking Mozart

Chen Chia-tai
莫札特讚

A ride on a classical time machine
plays the drizzling sighs of Salzburg
and zooms in on a plaza of strolling pigeons.
Tuneful bells strike in a commotion,
flaunting plenty of Mozart—
where Mozart appears, darkness clears.

By a flowing creek, red flowers and white geese
nibble at the prodigy's childhood days:
the marching song, gone viral via horse carriages,
dropped him off in Vienna early on.
A personal request by the Austro-Hungarian king:
an Italian opera, which he adorns with arias.
His Turkish-style rondo puts
Oriental sentiments on loop.

Mozart appears in a violin
thick with cheers, glissando, pizzicato, saltando.
Princes and dukes bawl in astonishment,
gentlewomen laugh without restraint—
they hear Mozart move from the clarinet and bassoon
to the slurring trombone,
traveling back and forth
on his straitened journey.

A rhythm lights up the sacred flame. A theme
unveils the Apocalypse. The Black Forest goes all out
to fix a counterpoint of bird chirps.
Mozart appears in a rest—
the musicians hear the score from within.
The sadder they feel, the harder they play.
Gardens and fountains give opera endings away
as often as they display permanence and transience.

The insignificant body is
a vessel borrowed from God.
So unparalleled is a gift that soars and dives
there is no place for visionary dreams—
Mozart appears in a watermark.
Eighteenth-century aesthetics,
sometimes obscure, sometimes sheer, have never
been cut off from eternity.

A C-minor vast as the horizon,
a D-minor swelling with destiny.
Like a magic flute, the notes drive off the trends.
And now, only a half antique piano is in his hands.
Turning away from splendor,
history coughs up blood.
The definition of *genius*
takes the salute and retires—

Mozart appears as time disappears.
Frenzied singing, quiet hums; faraway wishes, lingering.
He calls on the blue sky and purple clouds,
tears burying his face like a dark rain.
The requiem draws to a close,
composed for a mysterious figure
but performed for himself.
There he is, in the toll of a bell at a misty nightfall.

At a grassy cemetery for the common folk,
sorrow and joy play a constant tug-of-war.
A flimsy back view
is in the hug of the Danube.
A flash of lightning
illuminates Mozart's profile—
that of a sad sculpture, timeless,
concealed in an ineffable, sacred glimpse.

The spirit of Salzburg makes a sound. The earth
opens its ears to Amadeus
as it does to dewdrops, smiles, happiness.
Mozart appears always—
here and there, now and then.
Mozart appears—far and near, with or without music.

Commentary

Chen Chia-tai 陳家帶 was born in Keelung, Taiwan and lives in Taipei, Taiwan. After a long career in newspaper journalism, he is currently a part-time lecturer of journalism and literature. Chen has published five poetry collections and has received a first prize of the Taipei Literary Award in modern poetry, a Golden Tripod Award in news editing, and a China Times Award in narrative poetry. A lover of classical music and classical cinema, Chen often engages these subjects in his poems.

As implied by the title, “Liking Mozart” is a reflection on Mozart with a contemporary twist. The character 讚 *zan* in the original title 莫札特讚 means “praise” or, in classical Chinese, “commendation.” In contemporary Taiwan, *zan* is a slang term meaning “awesome” (as an adjective) and is also the Chinese word for “like” (as a noun) on social media. While the Chinese title retains all of these senses, in the translation I highlighted the contemporary aspect to strengthen the poem’s relevance to our time and to anticipate the poem’s playful element. My choice was reinforced by Chen’s use of two social media-inspired expressions, the local neologism 放閃 *fang shan*, meaning “flaunt,” (line 5) and the Chinese translation of “go viral,” 瘋傳 *feng chuang* (line 9).

The poem evolves around Mozart’s lasting influences after a life of talent and misfortune. When I first read the poem, I was strongly impressed by its structural coherence. Several elements work together to create the tight structure, and the one that stands out to me most is a recurring syntactic construction that uses the Chinese locative coverb 在 (*zai*, meaning “be at/in”) to describe Mozart’s presence in figurative locations (e.g. line 15, 莫札特在一支小提琴裡 and Line 26, 莫札特在一只休止符裡). Other elements include consistent stanza lengths, the relatively short lines that are mostly self-contained phrasal units, and the use of parallelism. It turned out that recreating the structure was the biggest challenge in my translation.

The recurring pattern of the locative phrases involving 在 (*zai*) is challenging to translate because Mozart’s presences as described in the poem are abstract and felt rather than existent. I settled on the word “appear” to foreground a tangible

perception of Mozart's presence without denoting an actual existence. In addition, *zai* is at times juxtaposed with its negative form 不在 (*bu zai*) in the same line, as in 莫札特在黑暗不在的地方 (line 6), resulting in a subtle but appealing sound pattern. I tried to recreate the effect through an internal rhyme with "appear" and was pleasantly surprised by the way the internal rhyme bolstered the structural recurrence of the word.

The self-contained phrasal units in most of the lines contribute to the structural coherence in the Chinese poem, but they may not lend the same effect in English. In Chinese, contextual cues play an important role in textual understanding. For instance, optional omission of the grammatical subject is common in Chinese and the subject can usually be implied in the context. The practice of integrating implicit contextual information into textual interpretation, alongside explicit lexical and grammatical details, is pivotal in bridging topical shifts when reading Chinese, especially for texts created with formal compactness like the phrasal units in "Liking Mozart."

The first two pairs of lines in stanza 5, each making a complete semantic unit, can be an example: in the original poem, line 1 is a noun phrase, line 2 is a complement, line 3 starts with an adjective phrase without a grammatical subject, and line 4 is a complete sentence (微賤的肉身/向上帝借來的容器/崇華幽邃, 已列極品/再無高靈可托夢—). It is the context of Mozart's life that holds the lines together. Their verbal compactness is also poetically appealing. Yet translating these Chinese phrasal units into their English counterparts would make them fragmentary. To achieve an overall structural coherence in the English translation, I opted for syntactic coherence among these lines and throughout the poem. I supplied the missing syntactic categories as necessary while balancing it with an openness in meaning as would be the case with contextual cues, as well as with compactness in style.

Source text:

Chen, Chia-tai. "Mozhatezan" (莫札特讚, Liking Mozart). *China Times*, 24 July 2018, <https://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20180724000833-260115?chdtv>.

Erik R. Lofgren
Three Poems by Umezaki Haruo

Umezaki Haruo

Death Bed

死 床

On my sickbed, damp with ruination as a sponge
I sprawl listlessly
Outside the window, a night of sobbing crickets;
I hear the sound of approaching footsteps
Pushing through the dew-shrouded autumn grass

In the window, the sliding lattice panels tremble with disquiet
The pressure of the night weighing upon each single paper pane
An illusory Asian fear
My consciousness, pushed along like driftwood
I feel a fear all the stronger
I feel the soaring mercury in the thermometer
I feel the clammy residue of secretions on the surface of my skin
And then, vanquishing the mewed gloom
I hear the sound of approaching footsteps

In this room of sickness there is absolutely no one
I tremble like a sheet of paper
At death nesting in my heart, and my attachment to life

I have a vague premonition of the mountains obscuring the moon
It also seems the chirrups of the crickets have faded;
Even as I am floating on a fever high
A single ray of moonlight, the last, from the moon about to slip behind the
 mountains
Is the fantasized scenery I frantically cling to

I hear the sound of approaching footsteps
I measure my faint pulse
I stroke my four atrophied limbs
When I strive to inscribe in my head
An image of a life replete with memories
I anguish over this lonely sorrowful endeavor

Closer and closer, the sound of approaching footsteps

In the end, spreading across the entire window, shadow shadow shadow
Hallucination of a raging storm engulfing the world outside
Phantasm of a succubus oozing from the grey walls
With all my might, I clutch the sheets

Finally, finally, the shadow pushes open my window and rushes in—
In my mind, the plaster breaks off and showers down in clumps
The dismal landscape of this sickroom is wavering,
Something straddles me atop the bedding, crushing my throat
In that appalling fear
My consciousness is careening down, careening down—
In that boundless nothingness, crashing to earth like a bullet

Autumn Ballad

秋の歌

Like a secret mistress, Autumn
Comes with furtive footsteps

From the thin extremities of a cicada
From the ribs of a discarded fan—
The morning cold of a *blanc de chine* vessel
The dribble of sherbet melting in the mouth

(Cumulonimbus throughout the sky ascend waveringly; yet
the heavens are so high as to be sad and sickly)

Although she comes with furtive footsteps
Yet I know it
As if I were waiting for a woman creeping in to see me
I prick up my ears
I strain to hear
Her affectionate coming

My mother's wizened breasts
The smell of grilling corn

The children head to town with dying snakes
Hung upside down in their hands and
Wearing faded straw hats on their heads

Like a forbidden paramour
Autumn comes in secret

You are wearing that black mantle ill-suited to your body
I mean, your filthy feet are sticking out as if you have some sort of skin
disease

Why does your beak curve in such a disagreeable way

When nobody is watching
You loiter about graveyards
Furtively pecking at people's decaying flesh

You sniff out shrewdly the fetor of the dying
Preening like a dandy on their rooftops
Letting loose your repellant cry

That's why nobody wants to play with you
Occasionally facing the setting sun you launch into flight
Even if you caw with apparent sadness
"Oh. It's you, again" they all say, averting their gaze

With your doleful eyes
Where are you flying off to

Let me, too, fly off with you
Lend me your black mantle

Commentary

Umezaki Haruo (1915–1965) is not an author known for his poetry. Indeed, his efforts in that realm are minimal (there are only 16 in his published collected works) with all examples dating from the middle third of his life (age 18 to 34). The poems here span that period and begin with his first effort. After graduating from Shūyūkan Middle School in 1932, he entered the Fifth High School of Kumamoto. As a second-year student there, he became a member of the arts and literature club which put out the school literary magazine *Ryūnan*. Membership virtually assured publication of his poems—ten, as it turns out—something he had been unable to achieve the previous year. His works were in good company for this magazine provided a platform for numerous literary luminaries including Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) who had been a teacher at the school, Shimomura Kojin (1884–1955), and Kinoshita Junji (1914–2006).

Although Umezaki would later evaluate these high-school-era poems as “undeveloped and immature” (*UHZ* 7:64), the works are more notable than he allows, for they mark his entry, troubled though it may have been, into the world of literature. The remaining two poems here were published posthumously in *Bungei* (March 1966) with no date of composition indicated; however, scholars agree that they were penned prior to 1949. We can surmise that “The Crow” was written in the relatively narrow two-year window between 1947 and 1949 because of evidence in another poem published in *Bungei*. All we can say about “Autumn Ballad” is that it was penned sometime during the 14-year period between high school and Umezaki’s emergence as a member of the *après-guerre* writers soon after the end of World War Two.

Two of the poems here share a somber tone. “Death Bed” (1933), Umezaki’s earliest work of poetry, is intriguing in its role as a harbinger. The picture he paints is not a pretty one, but it is compelling, all the more so because there appears to be no evidence that Umezaki was seriously ill at the time he wrote this poem. It is, in other words, a product of his imagination, a piece of fiction, if you will. As such, it reveals a nascent literary skill that would become more broadly apparent—and remarked—in his many short stories: an incisive and unflinching look into suffering, often psychological, but with undeniable physical dimensions, as well. Where “The Crow” also seems to

evoke this inchoate sense of disquietude and discontent with its plaintive plea to carry the writer away from some unspecified tribulations, even as there is the fascination of attachment to the unseemly ways of this scavenger, “Autumn Ballad” is the outlier by virtue of its brighter tone. Its portrait of autumn’s approach as a secret innamorata is an almost whimsical reversal of the expected sense of the year slowing down into the bleak death that is winter. The contrapuntal positive and negative images occasion a sense of dynamism that invites the reader to join in the restrained excitement expressed by the poet and lend this poem a surprising poignancy.

From the perspective of translation, the primary challenge of rendering these poems into English lay not with unusual vocabulary items and idiosyncratic imagery; rather, the most exigent aspect was the lack of punctuation in the originals. With the exception of m-dashes, none of the poems has any explicit punctuation. I have, therefore, added some sparingly where I felt the juxtapositions were too awkward to survive the transition from one language to the other. Making that determination, however, involved balancing the need to trust the reader and the desire to ensure a particular reading. A secondary challenge was in determining tone and register of language. In general, the poems evince a relatively quotidian lexicon, yet there were places in which Umezaki uses words that have wildly divergent, although related, meanings. For example, the metaphorical woman of “Autumn Ballad” is a *shinobionna* (忍び女) which describes a continuum from an unlicensed harlot to a hidden mistress. The tone in which the poet describes elements of the fall argued, I felt, for the more tender end of that spectrum. In all three of the poems, then, I have tried to balance word choice with tone. Finally, although I generally strive for an approximate reproduction of the word order in an attempt to convey the progression of images, there were inevitable passages for which this produced infelicitous results. This was most noticeable at the end of the fifth stanza of “Death Bed.”

Source text:

Umezaki Haruo 梅崎春生. *Umezaki Haruo zenshū* 梅崎春生全集 [*Umezaki Haruo: Collected works*], 8 vols [UHZ]. Chūsekisha 沖積舎, 1984–88, vol. 7, pp. 19–20, 28, 29–30.

Levi Thompson

Ramy Al-Asheq

Four Untitled Prose Poems by Ramy Al-Asheq

1.

هذه القصائد مدينةٌ لقسوتك

These poems are indebted to your cruelty
sprouted in my womb
they pained me alone
and I couldn't bury them
because they were crying with my voice and your features

These poems aren't about you
you can't brag about them
or hold them close to your chest
or even sing lullabies to them
You can only...
look at them from afar
while they sing their orphanhood
and dance with neutrality in the carnival of your grief

These poems won't die
they won't return to where they came from
no one returns to where he came from
this is just a nasty joke

These poems are faithful
they don't deny the favor someone's done for their existence
they weren't created from nothing
they breathe from a lonely lung
they drink from a creek called love
where strangers toss their garbage
wash their legs
and move on to other strangers

These poems
aren't about love
or war
aren't about abandonment
or death
aren't about fear
or distance
they aren't even about life
these poems... are life.

2. مهزوماً، كأنّي لن أكتب قصيدةً بعد اليوم
Defeated, as if I won't write another poem after today
broken, as if a sad bird's stone had fallen on the glass of my eyes
bereavement eats me up, as if the world had swallowed its tongue... and died

And here you come
like an old wound
like a defeated god
coming out of your skin like a newborn
entering my skin, so I'm yet more defeated

How can you sleep while my sadness weighs down the walls of your cruelty?
My sadness tires me out
so I throw my head upon your thigh, and I forget it
I walk among people without sadness
I dance for them to songs I sing for you
I climb tall buildings without agitating my phobia
the swords cross over me
then I drown in the Mediterranean... and I don't die
this world needs bodies without heads

I open my eyes, my eyelids moisten, and I'm bleeding
I see you drowning in my blood
"I'm hungry," I tell you

and fear eats me up

O Goddess of Cold, O *Fellahah*, O Olive Tree of the Old Lands, O Door
of Unforgotten Guilt, if only Herta Müller knew you, she would deny her
mother tongue, for you are the mother of languages, and the saddest of
them all.

I close my eyes, you light up like firecrackers in the Berlin sky, and I light
up your body like a matchstick...

This world burns us up to celebrate our defeat

Your hand, drowned in the *zaatar* of my head—no one will save it
my hand, with which you washed away the tears of your sadness—no one
will wipe away its tears
your mouth, filled with perfume, poured out verses from a book composed
by no god

I don't remember what I said to you when I didn't kiss you
but I remember what I didn't say,

"I've made God in your image
a woman who eats her cold
a *fellahah* who doesn't read poetry, doesn't depend on linguistic charms
with a dialect full of music
who lifts up mountains of fire
and stretches out plains of love
she is not an individual
for she is all women
her voice the songs of the fields
her water turns dry lands green
and her skin is dirt
she kills no one but distance."

I knew that poetry had died
they all killed it
because they weren't able to treat its wounds
they threw its ashes into the Dead Sea

so it lived
poetry sleeps now under a lake
tourists seek it out, and it sticks to their bodies
the earth slurps it up and flies away
the birds carry poetry to the mountain peaks
and we all eat its flesh
we sprinkle its salt on our food
this is how the poets became cooks
and I was defeated
as if I won't write another poem after today.

3.

الشعراء

And the poets / only their sadness follows them

And the poets
only their sadness follows them

Sadness wakes up like a spark in the tips of the fingers
and sleeps
when someone wipes away
a tear
with the tips of his fingers

Sadness is born
pure
before language attacks
and names it

It comes in with the wind
and exits with the soul

Sadness grows old alone
like a hole that swallows its family

not spitting any of them back out
it sleeps in nightclothes
stays warm with memories
increases with loneliness
goes to school
gets into a relationship
lives in the bedroom
goes to work in the morning
takes vacations by the sea
draws a picture
settles down in a poem
travels without a passport

When man created sadness in his own image
he forgot to make it weeping and ephemeral

4. أشفق على أولئك الشعراء التعساء
I pity those miserable poets

I pity those miserable poets
who waste their time searching for some image or other
kill their fathers
and then go with them to the gardens
and bury them in a wooden box
that's come to be called
a bookshelf

I pity them
the ones who use letters they didn't create
paper they didn't make
pens that came to them from far off countries

made by people who don't read poetry in foreign languages
I pity them
they die one after the other
without writing the final poem

They make their living on the pain of others
and their joys
they collect laughs from here
tears from there
love stories and elegies
so they can make from them
a dry hunk of bread

I pity them
because they think they are prophets
even though they are... just normal people
they discovered the lie of prophecy
and told the lie again

I pity those poets
who grasp hold of a mother's breasts and make a cloud out of them
they open a door for tomorrow to enter, and today exits through it without
returning
they look at a tree that doesn't look at them
they write about a war that doesn't write about them
they love cities that don't love them
they break fear's hand, so it breaks their necks
they run towards everything, so everything runs from them
I pity them
so I...
one day I tried to be a poet
before making it to the poem's waist
and stabbing it.

Commentary

The four poems included here deal with poetry itself: the poem, the poet, the relationship between the two, and the relationship between the poem and the reader. Ramy Al-Asheq wrote these poems in Germany, where he has been living in exile ever since being released from prison in Syria only to be recaptured and imprisoned in Jordan. He escaped from jail and lived for two years with a fake name and passport there. During that time, he won a fellowship from the German Heinrich Böll Foundation, which allowed him to travel to Germany. While I generally try not to allow a poet's personal experiences to guide my understanding of the poetic persona in a poem, it is nearly impossible to ignore the part Al-Asheq's life story plays in these pieces.

We can see this in the first poem where the poetic persona laments that "no one returns to where he came from." And though Al-Asheq sent these to me with a description of them as "prose poems," the parallel syntax of a line like this and the one before it ("they won't return to where they came from") moves easily between Arabic and English to give the lines some poetic synergy. I therefore employed anaphora—the repetition of a word or phrase—to reflect both the repetitions of phrases throughout the poem ("these poems") and the similar syntax of lines throughout a section ("they don't"; "they weren't"; "they breathe"; etc.).

The second poem offers some more difficult issues in its inclusion of two words quite specific to the original Arabic context. The first of these is the *fellahah*, or the peasant woman, often invoked in Arabic literature as a stand-in for the nation: someone to be protected, someone to remind the reader of a pastoral idyll in danger of being lost, forgotten in the throes of modernity. Al-Asheq plays on this idea, throwing the *fellahah* in alongside memory, olive trees, and the Nobel Prize-winning German writer Herta Müller's mother tongue—Swabian German, not *Hochdeutsch*; an interesting story lies there as well.... The poetic persona's invocation of the *fellahah* teases us with these symbolic references to the "Old Lands," and the word itself is essential to the line due to its broader role in modern Arabic literature from the twentieth century until today. I thus decided

to leave it untranslated and italicized, though one could find it in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as it entered English from Arabic in the eighteenth century. The second word, *zaatar*, might be more familiar to any gourmands who have seen this mix of thyme, oregano, and other savory spices at the supermarket. Leaving this word as it sounds in Arabic serves a useful function of foreignizing the text at a crucial moment when the poetic persona situates himself as an outsider where he is now remembering the “*fellahah* who doesn’t read poetry, doesn’t depend on linguistic charms / with a dialect full of music.” Without the luxury of these explanatory notes, I might not have chosen to put these words in transliterated Arabic (which could inadvertently send the reader away from the text and off to Google). I might simply have gone with “peasant woman” and “spice.”

The poetic persona of the third and fourth poems takes up the sadness that follows poets and drives them to write (in the third) or that they exploit in their creations (in the fourth). The third poem begins with a distinct reference to the religious tradition of Islam, which I kept in mind as I translated the rest. “The poets / only their sadness follows them” is a play on a verse from the Quranic *surah* called “The Poets” which goes, “And the poets / only the deviators follow them.” In my translation, I retained the initial “And” and the ordering of the words as found in many English translations of the Quran (this version is from the *Sahih International* translation) in order to make it clear to anyone familiar with the verse that there is a similarity. Even readers who have not come across the reference might be left wondering why the poem starts with a conjunction (“And”), which indicates that something else lies before the beginning of the poem. And what does come before—or after? “Shall I inform you upon whom the devils descend? They descend upon every sinful liar. They pass on what is heard, and most of them are liars. And the poets—[only] the deviators follow them; Do you not see that in every valley they roam And that they say what they do not do (26:221-226)?” The *surah* “The Poets” tells us that poets are untrustworthy because they say what they do not do, unlike the Prophet Muhammad.

The truth in the verses of Quran he recites to the new Muslim community is thus distinguished from the lines of poetry that come out of poets’ mouths and minds. The poetic persona in Al-

Asheq's poems at first draws on this original distinction between human and Divine, extending it to the poet's inability to overcome sadness, a being of his own creation, "created [...] in his own image." Yet, unlike the perfect Quran—understood in mainstream Islamic philosophy as co-terminal with God and thus uncreated, eternal, and perfect—the poet's creation is riddled with imperfections. The poet is not omnipotent, and "he forgot to make [sadness] weeping and ephemeral," that is, true to its own form and possible to overcome. The Quranic reference in the third poem carries over into my translation of the fourth, in which I was sure to retain in English the link between the three letter Arabic root *nun – ba – wa* in "prophets" (*anbiya*) and "prophecy" (*nubuwwah*). The same poets with delusions of divine power from the previous poem are here subjects of the poetic persona's pity "because they think they are prophets / even though they are... just normal people." However, the persona adds, "they discovered the lie of prophecy / and told the lie again," thus subverting the Quranic verses quoted earlier and exposing prophecy itself as a poetic lie. So what about the Quran?

While these poems might initially strike the reader as somewhat simple to work with due to the lack of any regular form (or, we could say, an unruly form that congeals around the free-ranging conception of the prose poem), they still offer the translator a number of challenges. How can we retain the function of words specific to a local Arabic context when rendering the verse into English, a language that first came to sustained interaction with Arabic through the intermediary of the colonial and neo-colonial relationships of empire and nation states? How can we carry over the Quranic resonance that extends beyond the two lines of explicit intertextuality, or must we even do so? Is it enough to let the original poems' oblique references to Islam, poets, and prophecy speak for themselves? This is up to you.

Source texts personally provided to the translator by the author.

Allan Johnston and Guillemette Johnston Abdellatif Laâbi
The Shoulders and the Burden *Les épaules et le fardeau*

By itself
the gate gave way
The invitation is polite
and firm
A few short steps
and the world comes again
just as it is
with familiar shipwrecks
As an eyewitness
submerged to the neck
you will have to stretch yourself
even more
Will your heart hold?

Vertigo from standing
holding a vague helm
Frail is the boat
The reefs redoubtable
The prayer words forgotten
The anchor
will not be thrown
from heaven

If only an azure gap
the piercing of a hardened star
speaking

before the obligatory meeting
with twilight
How easy it would be
to nourish
the horses of reason
straight from
the manger of clouds

The earth
flat or round
What's the difference?
if we must inevitably
retrace our steps
and find nothing
but collapsed bridges
carcasses of houses
where crows have made nest
profaned gardens and graves
concrete arch from whose mast
the same flag hangs half-mast
and no living soul
to recount without adding
the thousandth episode
of this pitiful apocalypse

The human-inhuman beast
more and more intelligent
still using
old worn out ruses
such as this one-way path
to salvation

where today bulldozers carve
the highway of a civilization
as basic
as the hamburger
that serves as its mascot
And enslaved people
scrambling to the gate
with perfect awareness
and last-ditch despair

As if one could choose
from the range of horror
covering the planet
Reason wavers
but we must recover
Be indignant
denounce
certainly
For all that
will our debt be paid?
Anger cools down
while other raging fires
present themselves
to the permanence of horror

At dinner time
images announced as unbearable
We look away
no longer knowing what distinguishes
decency from indecency
and when we look

the line is just as thin
between cowardice and courage
At the end of the meal
We sometimes wonder
if we have not eaten
the flesh of our neighbor
more precisely
that of our own children
The soccer match
or the prime time movie
comes just in time
to sweep away these little worries

Hell is well stocked
but the shelves
are empty
except for the ever more
sophisticated cameras
The tours are led
by scholars in uniform
and ethnicolor headwear
“In the name of God” proclaims one
“What you must know” warns the other
and all start singing the same war cry
“Get thee behind me, Satan!”
Modern hell
has a damn good advantage
over its predecessors
It is shot in a studio

Unlike all the messages
constantly drummed in
on compassion, justice
hope, love
the wrath of heaven descends first
—let it be said in passing—
on the convicts of existence
the helpless ones
without teeth and shoulders
And the ones whose hearts cannot hear
the narrow-minded in spirit
the toothy ambitious grave diggers
with faces completely remade
barking in the face of the survivors
and right in the ear of the dead:
Atone for your sins!

From one disaster to the next
immutable scenario
Help is slow
eventually arrives
The neediest
are the last ones served
Scraps as usual

Note to illegals:
with those poorer than they are
the poor
can be pitiless
They have that at least in common
with the rich bastards

How beautiful she is
today's Africa!
It was yesterday
—and it already seems unreal—
that we celebrated the wedding
of her newfound freedom
and the bride
more desirable than in our dreams
“dressed in her color that is life”
insolently young
exhibiting her flower and heated breasts
leading the trance
that gives soul to the body
light to the eyes
inspired words to lips
the nigger finally standing
united in the recognition of blood
the only approved human color
That was yesterday
orphaned day
of an aborted genesis

Africa!
Your pariah peoples
withered limbs of the primary stump
conceived in your alluvial silt
Your errant peoples
in the frozen furnace of an enclosure
with the dimension of the continent

Your blinded peoples
harnessed
bending under the yoke
turning the wheel
that crushes
the fruits of their womb
The envious
who insidiously praised your youth
have condemned you to die young
The announced extinction of the species
will commence with you

Under so much abuse
the vessel of memory
risks overflowing
and besides no one knows
if its bottom is watertight
Should it be warmed up gently
or left to cool?
The soup of crime
naturally abundant
is more widely distributed
than soup from soup kitchens
It often sits in the stomach
and can cause nausea
but its vapors
numb consciences
cyclically

The list cannot be exhaustive
There are children tossed aside
for the scavengers of sex and war
the blackmail of famine
the dealing in despair
the organ trafficking of thought
the white-washing of filthy ideas
There is the abduction of rebels
who raised their hand to the Temple
the crushing of the least bud
that had the idea to open
in memory of dead hope
There is the perfect crime
the immunity of Power
knighted and hailed at the Stock Exchange
There are the glasses they clink
the decent smutty ones
and the laughing of the winners
two steps from the mass graves

Knowledge is unforgiving
It gnaws at you
Of what would you be guilty?
Of some omission
or of having gone too far
Of feeling yourself burning with the words
that you gave to the unspeakable
and staying screwed down to your seat
while sipping your coffee?
Just say it:
even innocent of evil
you are its hostage

Can one pacify the hearts of executioners
change humanity?
No one has the answer
Redemption, Redemption
you murmur
that unsolvable equation

Let us not talk about the tyrants
who lately sought to impose on you
the law of silence
nor of the small-time dictators
peddlers of renown
only lending to the rich
at the cost of revenge
More unworthy are the cultists
of an immaculate poetry
who not only keep silent
or prevaricate
but who would like
to gag you
at the first opportunity

No matter what happens
you will use your right of insurrection
You will acquit yourself
with an open face
of the duty to discern
unveil
lacerate
each face of abjection
You will be guardian and vestal virgin

of the speck of light
dispensed to your species
sunken into your guts
With these prerequisites
you will merit your true name
man of his word
or poet if you wish

It is not a matter of shoulders
or of biceps
the burden of the world
Those who have come to carry it
are often the most frail
They too are subject to fear
to doubt
to discouragement
and sometimes end up cursing
the splendid Idea or Dream
that has exposed them
to the fires of Gehenna
But if they bend
they do not break
and when by frequent misery
they are cut and mutilated
these human reeds
know that their bodies
lacerated by betrayal
will become as many flutes
as the shepherds of awakening will play
to capture
and convey to the stars
the symphony of resistance

Commentary

“Les Épaules et le fardeau” is perhaps one of the best-known poems by the prize-winning contemporary Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi. The final stanza in particular has been widely circulated online by bloggers, enthusiasts, and poetry lovers. A translation of the poem by Donald Nicholson-Smith appeared in 2016 under the title “Back and Burden” in an extensive bilingual volume of Laâbi’s works.¹ However, our version translates Laâbi’s *épaules* as “shoulders” since we felt this word more effectively imparts the sense of the weight of the world carried by the poet. The image reverberates with the mythical tasks and woes of a Sisyphus or Hercules. In addition, beyond the fact that multiple translations often reveal different aspects of the writer’s work and different impacts the work has on the literary imagination, eight out of the nineteen stanzas of the version of the poem published in *Tribulations d’un rêveur attiré*² do not appear in Nicholson-Smith’s translation. This is not to slant Nicholson-Smith’s formidable and admirable undertaking, but rather to suggest that a more comprehensive version of the poem might illuminate other aspects of Laâbi’s work. Sections of the poem that did not appear in Nicholson-Smith’s version include passages pertaining to controversies such as illegal immigration and criticism of “liberated” post-colonial Africa.

Three stanzas at the beginning of the poem that are not in Nicholson-Smith’s translation introduce a surrealist scenario of vertiginous destruction and decadence, weighing it against a wish for peace. Thus the third stanza, not in Nicholson-Smith’s translation, reads:

*Si seulement une trouée d’azur
la percée d’une étoile aguerrie
parlante
avant le rendez-vous obligé*

¹ *In Praise of Defeat: Poems by Abdellatif Laâbi*, Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2016, pp. 672–689.

² It should be noted that the stanzas are not numbered in Laâbi’s poem, so all references to stanzas by number are only meant to enable discussion of their location in the poem.

*du crépuscule
Comme il serait aisé
de nourrir
les chevaux de la raison
à même
la mangeoire des nuages*

If only an azure gap
the piercing of a hardened star
speaking
before the obligatory meeting
with twilight
How easy it would be
to nourish
the horses of reason
straight from
the manger of clouds

The passage divides into two main ideas, one pertaining to a wish (“If only...”) and the other, perhaps, to a consequence that would exist should that wish be fulfilled (“How easy it would be...”). Neither of these concepts is “fulfilled” in the sense of being presented as a complete sentence, illustrating one characteristic feature of the poem that affects the translation process—Laâbi’s general avoidance of punctuation. Here, capitalization and grammatical sense suggest the division of the stanza into unfulfilled wish and unfulfilled consequence of that wish—the piercing, hardened star that would speak before the meeting with twilight would allow “the horses of reason” to nourish themselves from “the manger of clouds.” Symbolically, illumination by some natural celestial event or presence, perhaps something akin to the shining “star of wonder” of Christian mythology that leads the Magi to the newborn child, would allow reason to nourish itself on nature, permitting connection between “reason” and “heaven” (“the manger of clouds,” again an image echoing the Christian nativity). The passage establishes tension through the double-edged confrontation of wish with denial, positing a distinction of the poetic from the pragmatic.

A reading such as the above is of course highly interpretive, as the poet and the poem are working here through im-

agistic juxtaposition to create surrealistic effect rather than rationalistic discourse. The word *aguerrie*, which we translate as “hardened,” could for example also mean “experienced,” “seasoned,” “veteran,” or “expert.” Since many of these meanings relate to humanistic qualities, we thought “hardened” best suited the portrayal of a celestial body while offering the connotations of “seasoned,” “experienced,” and “veteran.” The hardness allows the piercing, perhaps related to a visionary seeing. The piercing, or coming through, pertains to the speaking, which animates the star. A non-rational cause/effect relation is set up between the piercing star and the speaking that would permit reason, or its horses, to nourish themselves from the clouds. Can we say that the piercing refers to starlight coming through the clouds? We also interpreted *du crépuscule* as “with twilight” rather than “of twilight” since the passage hints at interaction between twilight and the (unidentified) speaker, even though the meeting is described as obligatory (*obligé*), since twilight is an expected moment in every day’s cycle.

As noted above, also not appearing in Nicholson-Smith’s version are some stanzas that confront contemporary issues such as illegal immigration, and a triad of stanzas about Africa, sometimes addressing the continent in direct apostrophe. We believe these stanzas help the reader see some of the issues that fuel the poem and lead the poet at the end to claim his “right of insurrection” (*Du droit de t’insurger tu useras*) to become a “man of his word / or poet” (*homme de parole / ou poète*) so he can help, as the last lines of the poem notably mark, “convey to the stars / the symphony of resistance” (*convoyer jusqu’aux étoiles / la symphonie de la résistance*).

Some of the difficulties presented in translating Laâbi’s work stem from the fact that he seldom uses punctuation, relying instead on capitalization and stanza breaks to convey distinctions between thoughts. This approach runs ideas and lines together in uncharacteristic ways, as we see in the stanza quoted above, and in the following one, also not in Nicholson-Smith’s translation:

*D’une catastrophe l’autre
scénario immuable
Les secours tardent*

finissent par arriver
Les plus démunis
sont les derniers servis
Des rogatons comme d'habitude

From one disaster to the next
immutable scenario
Help is slow
eventually arrives
The neediest
are the last ones served
Scraps as usual

Laâbi's style can be seen here in the telegraphing of lines such as "Help is slow / eventually arrives," which conveys urgency even while pointing out how slow relief often is in moments of crisis. The narrative itself can be applied to disasters ranging from famine to ethnic cleansing, horrors linked to later passages on Africa that use imagery evocative of the works of Césaire and the *Négritude* movement.³ Indeed, from the stylistic and literary perspective embedded in the stanzas pertaining to Africa come echoes of Césaire, whose *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* made history with its virulent words and message portraying the fate of slaves exported from Africa, their suffering, and their intention to remain standing in their rebellion against their situation. One can also hear echoes of messages put forth in Senghor's poetry and in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnés de la terre*) in Laâbi's passages on Africa. Yet one also senses Laâbi's disappointment at a world that has not changed as dramatically as one might have wished, since despite these writers' warnings the now-independent colonized territories have not achieved complete harmony and freedom. Additional literary connections to other poets or writers may suggest to the reader the human condition in light of the path of history. For instance, Laâbi's use of the expression *la bête humaine*-

³ For example, the passage [*La*] *négraille enfin debout / unie dans la reconnaissance du sang / seule couleur agréée de l'homme*, ("The nigger finally standing / united in the recognition of blood / the only approved human color") may echo a passage from Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*:

inhumaine, “The human-inhuman beast,” may allude to Zola and the Naturalist movement, which sees humanity as trapped by genetic predispositions and socioeconomic determinism.

A particularity of style we often confronted involved inversion of words or even lines. One could look, for example, at stanza 2. Emphasis here is put on adjectives describing the reefs, the prayer, and the boat (*Frêle est l'embarcation / Redoutable les récifs / Oubliés les mots de la prière....*; “Frail is the boat / The reefs redoubtable / The prayer words forgotten”). We switched the positions of nouns and adjectives in this passage to make it closer to conversational English, as the inverted adjectival structure we retained in the first instance, “Frail is the boat,” sounded stilted when continued in the other lines. By putting the adjectives after the nouns, we also put emphasis on the obstacles and linked them with the repetition of “the” at the beginning of each line, creating a rhythmic cadence through repetition.

Another use of inversion occurs in the penultimate stanza of the poem, which begins as follows:

*Du droit de t'insurger tu useras
quoi qu'il advienne
Du devoir de discerner*

*la négaille assise
inattendument debout*

*debout dans le vent
debout sous le soleil
debout dans le sang
debout
et
libre*

the seated nigger scum
unexpectedly standing

standing in the wind
standing under the sun
standing in the blood
standing
and
free

Aimé Césaire: *The Collected Poetry*, tr. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, pp. 80–81.

dévoiler
lacrérer
chaque visage de l'abjection
tu t'acquitteras

The syntactic inversion of placing subject and verb at the end of the line (*Du droit de t'insurger tu useras* instead of *Tu useras du droit de t'insurger*) puts greater emphasis on the poet's responsibility to himself and to others to fight for the good of humanity. This gives the passage an imperative style worthy of the "commandment" the poet is addressing to himself and the world. Inversion introduces a tonality one might associate with incantation and urgency. But this strategy seemed to render the lines too oblique or stilted if presented with the inversion in English. This stiltedness intensifies if one considers impact of the use of the familiar, second-person pronoun *tu* in the passage, a distinction that has become archaic in English.⁴ Following the French syntax, and respecting the pronoun usage and subsequent verbal declension, a literal translation into English would read:

Of the right to rise up thou shalt make use
no matter what happens
Of the duty to discern
unveil
lacerate
each face of abjection
thou shalt acquit thyself

The first two lines could also be rendered in English as "The right to rise up thou shalt use / no matter what happens." Either way, in French the inversions have a commanding effect, while in English they are confusing, making the subject/actor

⁴ The obliqueness or stiffness is accentuated by the distinctions between English and French 2nd person pronoun forms. French retains the distinction of the polite/plural "you" (*vous*) from the intimate/singular "you" (*tu*). Old English bore a similar declension in *eow* (modern "you") and *þu* (modern "thou"). But in modern English "thou" is archaic. Comparing the Ten Commandments in English to the Commandments in French, one notes that the "Thou" of "Thou shalt not kill" seems archaic and perhaps overly formal when compared to the French *Tu ne tueras point*.

(the poet, the reader, or both) ambiguous, and may even seem pompous. In French the line *Du droit de t'insurger tu useras* puts emphasis on the right to insurrection, but English loses its subject (thou) in the list of possibilities. Part of the effectiveness in the French comes from the alliteration of the **d** sound in **Du droit de** or **Du devoir de discerner / dévoiler**, and the assonance of **oi** (English “wah”) in *droit, quoi, devoir*, and *dévoiler*, as well as of **u** in *t'insurger tu useras*. These effects are lost in the English, so we rendered the passage as

No matter what happens
you will use your right of insurrection
You will acquit yourself
with an open face
of the duty to discern
unveil
lacerate
each face of abjection

Our inversion of the first two lines here permits us to tie the actions together, and to include both in the realm of all possibility (“No matter what happens”).

Evocation of the poet’s role sets us up for the last stanza of the poem, the famous passage that concludes this impressive work. The potential incapacity for acting that has been contradicted by this invocation of the need, or duty, to act—one that will allow you to “merit your true name / man of his word / or poet if you wish” (*A ces conditions préalables / tu mériteras ton vrai nom / homme de parole / ou poète si l'on veut*). The potential incapacity for acting presented earlier is contrasted with the “human reeds / ... / lacerated by betrayal” — *[des] roseaux humains / ... lardés / par la trahison*—who become

... as many flutes
as the shepherds of awakening will play
to capture
and convey to the stars
the symphony of resistance

*... autant de flûtes
que des bergers de l'éveil emboucheront
pour capter
et convoier jusqu'aux étoiles
la symphonie de la résistance*

These powerful words invite the reader to recognize the role of the poet as the bringer of hope and presents the poet as the “shepherd of awakening” who shows us how the human condition can be overcome.

Source text:

Laâbi, Abdellatif. *Tribulations d'un rêveur attitré*. Marsam, 2009, pp. 33–53.

Roselee Bundy

The Love Letter Poetry Contest

康和四年内裏艶書歌合

Introduction and Commentary

The Love Letter Poetry Contest Held in the Japanese Imperial Court in 1102

On the second and seventh days of the intercalary fifth month of 1102, Emperor Horikawa hosted a poetry gathering, in which men and women poets exchanged love poems: this was the *Kōwa yonen urū gogatsu futsuka, dō shichinichi Dairi kesōbumi uta awase* (The Love Letter Poetry Contest Held on the 2nd and 7th Days of the Intercalary 5th Month of 1102 in the Imperial Court). On the first occasion—the 2nd day of the intercalary 5th month—the Emperor paired each of the poems the men had sent to the women declaring their love with a woman’s poem of rebuff. On the second occasion—the 7th day of the same month—they gathered again to hear the poems the women had sent to the men, voicing their resentment at their lovers’ neglect, and the men’s responses, justifying their behavior. On both occasions, a designated reader recited the poems.

These events are a fascinating intersection of two courtly practices: The first is the poetry contests held at the court, in which compositions on assigned topics by members of Left and Right teams were put into competition and often evaluated by a judge who determined a winner. Topics on love were also common in poetry contests and were frequently sub-divided into such specifics as love in a particular season or at a particular time of day—“parting at dawn,” for instance, or a certain stage of love: unrequited love” or “love after first meeting.” Lacking both judge and judgments as well as the clear designation of Left and Right teams, *The Love Letter Contest* should not, strictly speaking, be called a poetry contest, despite the name by which it is generally known. Still, it preserves the notion of two sides, each attempting best to fulfill the requirements of a topic and engaging in verbal competition, although in this case, the

poets do not compose on a shared topic but rather address each other.

The second practice that the contest invokes is the customary exchange of verses between lovers first during courtship, then at the consummation of the relationship, and, finally, at least in literature, the telling of the inevitable, bitter unraveling of the affair. The arrangement of compositions on love in the royal collections follows this narrative arc; poetry contest topics on love grow out of the same understanding of the narrative progression of love.

The Love Letter Contest stages two moments of a love affair, loosely borrowing the poetry contest format but with a nod towards realism, incorporating the actual exchange of poems, which were then, however, publicly recited. The two moments are, first, the beginning of the man's courtship and the woman's rejection of his interest, and second, the woman's laments as she sees the affair dissolving and the man's attempt to defend himself. Each stage has ten rounds of verse or twenty poems. Although it was not uncommon for men to write verse in the voice of a woman or vice versa, here the poets' gender performance and actual sex align, underscoring the pretense of reality. The poets, chosen from among the courtiers and retainers and women who served at court, included major poetic figures of the day. Among the women were Chikuzen (also known as Yasusuke Ô no haha) (who died after 1106 at probably over 90 years old) and Suhô no naishi (c. 1036–c. 1110). Both women were frequent participants in poetry contests and were well represented in the imperial collections. Most prominent among the male poets was Minamoto Shunrai or Toshiyori (c. 1055–c. 1129), arguably the most significant poet of the first half of the twelfth century. All would have been well aware of the customary emotional shape of a love affair and the sentiments appropriate to each stage.

The piquancy of the events must have been this pretense of love exchanges and the verbal sparring that it invited. And sparring it was, for the goal was to cleverly turn the words and images of one's correspondent against him or her, to the delight, in this case, of the assembled audience of the events, including the emperor himself. The translations below will show the poets' attention to properly staging their verses by for exam-

ple, carefully preparing the paper on which their missives were written. Entering fully into performance, Chikuzen even sent a poem, outside the scope of the contest, to the male poet who had also corresponded with Suhô no naishi, complaining of his inconstancy (*Yasusuke Ô no haha shû* 3). He played along and sent a response, vowing his love for her alone (*Yasusuke Ô no haha shû* 4). The contest thus was a stage of wit and play, and yet a number of its compositions were also chosen for inclusion among the volumes of love poems in subsequent royal collections as exemplary expressions of love.

I have translated below four exchanges each from the two events, choosing verses by the two prominent women poets as well as those by other poets that seemed to capture best the spirit of the events. Many of the poems allude to earlier compositions, or more precisely, the conventional significance of certain images, and where I felt a contemporary audience would have readily recognized such connotations, I have chosen to incorporate into the translation the understanding that a contemporary audience would have brought to the poem as a matter of course. The verses often also employ puns, which mostly are not visible as such in the translations. The language of the translation is more formal than colloquial. The verses were recited in the imperial court, and a certain formality seemed appropriate to this performative aspect. I employ the five-line translation format and attempt to keep the order of images, etc., of the original, insofar as the English is not distorted. No attempt is made to reproduce the 5-7-5-7-7 mora count of the originals. Finally, these verses seldom use personal pronouns, and my choice among the English first, second, or third persons was a matter of which seemed to fit the context the best. One comment on Chikuzen's poem of complaint to her faithless lover: A spider spinning its web was believed to portend a lover's visit. Finally, most of the male participants are identified by their court rank or post; I have translated these into English followed by the man's name. Court women of this period were identified and known by the household in which they served, their husband's or father's post, or familial affiliation—the daughter of so and so, mother of so and so, etc. These served as their names, and I treat them as such, leaving them untranslated.

I. The Love Letter Poetry Contest: 2nd day of the 5th month, 1102.

Hearing that the courtiers were composing poems in the court, Emperor Horikawa urged them to send poems declaring love to the women serving in the court, and so the men composed. On the 2nd day of the 5th month, the women's responses were received, beautifully ornamented, written on sheer paper with a design in accord with each poet's tastes.

Exchange 1

Major Counsellor Kinzane wrote:

My heart too full,
How shall I show her my longing?
A hidden spring
In a valley deep in the hills,
Pent up among stones.

Response by Suhō no naishi:

Why should it be
That my heart should be drawn
To the mountain stream,
Whose babbling voice reveals
The shallowness of his heart?

Exchange 2

The same Major Counsellor wrote on sheer crimson paper, rolled up in a wrapper twisted at the ends:

Though the years go by
And the log buried in the mud

Decays in silence,
Untouched by time will be
The love held deep in his heart

Response by Chikuzen:

Not deep at all
Rests the log in the dried out mud
Of Minase's riverbed.
Just so, no danger of his decay,
Though the years may go by.

Exchange 3

Consultant Middle Captain Tadanori wrote:

Weary of my thoughts,
I wander lost on the muddy path of love
With none to guide me
Save the steady flow of my tears
That runs on before me.

The response by Saki no saiin no Kii (or Settsu) was written on a crimson seven-layered paper on which was drawn a shoreline with reeds, attached to a silver sprig of garden rampion:

I shall not tread
That muddy path of love,
Nor read your notes,
And so what would I know
Of those flowing tears?

Exchange 4

Captain Toshitada wrote:

Unknown to her,
My thoughts rise like the wind
At Ariso beach,
Where waves draw near in the night,
I would draw near to tell of my love.

Response by Ichi no miya Kii:

I have often heard
Of those wayward waves
Of Takashi shore.
But they will not draw near to me
Lest my sleeves be drenched.

II. Follow-up event:

On the 7th of the same month, the emperor having notified the women who had received poems that they should write poems [of resentment], those poems were submitted.

Exchange 1

Chikuzen wrote:

Keenly awaited you are
As the song of the summer thrush,
And I seek each night
For a sign you will come to me,
Among the threads in a spider's web.

Response by the Major Counsellor:

Though the web augurs well,
Surely there are nights he does not sing,
That summer thrush.
Do not seek to know its resolve
In the activities of a spider.

Exchange 2

Suhō no naishi wrote:

He does not know
How drenched in dew are my sleeves.
So seldom we meet,
Unheeding, his heart withers away
Like grass shaded in the mountains.

Response by the Consultant Middle Captain:

The grass that grows
In shade deep in the mountains
Indeed will wither.
But I am become a weed
That clings nowhere but your eaves.

Exchange 3

Ichijō no Kii wrote:

Still wanting him,
Unable to stop from loving,

I thought perhaps in dream—
And in secret turned my night robe inside out,
But no comfort did I find.

Response by the Governor of Mimasaku:

Be not so ready to doubt,
Turning your robe inside out,
To conjure me,
A man single-minded in his love,
Who will never turn from you.

Exchange 4

Shijō no miya Kai wrote:

Not to my liking,
Till I learned of his coldness
Was this love of ours,
And now, though it makes no sense,
My tears have begun to fall.

Response by Minamoto Shunrai:

Should any man
Stand condemned in this way
For trivial absences?
It is not only your tears
That make no sense to me.

Source text:

Hagitani Boku and Taniyama Shigeru, eds. *Utaawase shū*, *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* 74. Iwanami shoten, 1976, pp. 263–270.

Hager Ben Driss
Three Poems from
The Blind Glassblower

Adam Fethi
نافخ الزجاج الأعمى

The Ship

السفينة

A ship sailing to a faraway island, they said. Somewhere else. To where eyes have insight and the soul is unruined. This land, drained by vampires, has sapped us.

Let us go away before we expire, they said. Meanwhile, we are depleted breath after breath. Fighting wars unarmed, hungry, and thirsty. From port to port, trench to trench, we share a bunch of embers, bite on earth with our last breath.

A ship sailing to Maram,¹ to nowhere, they said.
It takes us, goes round and round and never arrives.
Perchance sometime later the ordeal will fade away.

A ship that appears to disappear like the sea's desire for fishermen's night conversations. It looms and disappears year after year, generation after generation.

As if it were a shipwreck. Draped in wonders as if it were empty. Full of ghosts as if it were haunted.

Nobody heeds the silent passengers, gesturing with agony each time stung by the smell of earth.

Year over year, the ordeal doesn't fade away. The ship never arrives. Its dwellers never return.

Some of them slipped into desolation, grew old in dreams, hid behind blindness or a joyless laughter.

¹ *Maram* is a disguised city living in the poets' fantasy. Perhaps it is a desired city; it may also be an undesirable one.

Some of them sank in their egos, as if their egos were a lifeline; as if drowning were the way home.

But when they came back, they had prolonged the ordeal.

The Missing Eye

العين الناقصة

She springs up your throat, the grandmother, the way a sob springs up the throat of a staggering drunk musician.

She falls down all the stairs. Goes up all volcanoes. Your grandmother, sleeping since forever yesterday. Your grandmother, ever tender since your cruel question: where did your eye go?

With an extinguished eye she looks inside herself, replete with frightened travelers, with trains aging long before they reach the north.

“He bestowed upon me the eye that sees the good. The one that sees evil, he took away. God is merciful,” she says while stroking your hair.

I, a piece of white lean frail chalk, love the winter getting warm in her warm lap.

I get transported by the spreading fire, drawing wings for my soul, furrows onto the room’s wall.

Why do you have a missing eye? You don’t say one-eyed? Just as the pot calls the kettle black, you, like everyone else, do not realize you too are one-eyed.

Cheerful, she meets you with the fragrance of amber rolling down her headscarf. She sows stories in your head:

Once upon a time, there was a star in the sea. How can I see the sky? Said she. Once upon a time, there was a fish in the sky. How can I see the sea?

said she. Once upon a time, there was a blind glassblower. How in the sea can I see the way to my star? Then my way to the fish in the sky? Said he.

—What happened next, grandmother?

—God is merciful, he took my missing eye so that stars can find their way at night. Fishes can see in water. The blind man can find his way.

Behold. Many a woman stands like me with a single eye; the other she uses to complete defective people.

The story takes you from inside out. You turn around, and you're in your fifties, afraid you'll be caught red-handed knocking on her chest; rummaging, with a child's irascibility, the chest of stories.

Your grandmother rests in peace now.

Your present absent grandmother, watchful in her last picture, with her amber necklace and silver earrings, hanging on the room wall like a crystal star.

Did ophthalmia damage her eye? was it eaten up by a termite? I've stopped asking, and yet how can I write without her now?

You spoke truly, O Fatima.

I locked your lies in the chest of my stories; I open it now, alone, in the solitude of dawn, earlier than the cockcrow, so that nobody can see where I bring my words from.

Blow your soul in this sand. If you want to see,
look for your missing eye wake up your music
sing the eulogy of light sing the eulogy of dim light
drink a toast to the eye of loss. Remember:

the beautiful lies are alone. So let us wet the pen
when truth dries up.

1

Next war (I hear its drums beating behind the nearby hill) I'll put my cane in the hands of every soldier. I'll tell him: make a pen out of this cane.

Write to the general: "Don't make us drink another glass of blood even if it were your own blood. Don't bereave us of another soul even if it were your own soul. Don't commit a last perfect crime for us even if it were your own suicide ..."

2

Next war (I hear its drums beating behind the city wall) I'll put a pen in the hands of every soldier. I'll tell him: make a cane out of this pen. Don't ever believe that war can bring peace. Say you killed the beast as you refused to go to war. I won't seal your lips. I won't serve fire instead of wine. I won't feed you stone instead of bread.

3

Next war (I hear its drums beating behind the garden fence) I'll put a cane in the hands of every soldier. I'll tell him: make a flute out of this cane. Join the orchestra of the earth. Listen to it sing:

"The earth shall bare its arms for us to graze on
love wheat and hope mallow.

The soldier's helmet shall grow into a nest
and the policeman's baton a violin bow
and let this be far from my home
and let this be far from my time

4

Next war (I hear its drums beating behind the door) I'll make children sit on the floor in a circle, safe, in each hand a citrus bee, listening to elements and dreams playing, pouring out from the magic flute. Meanwhile the drumbeats vanish behind the poem.

Commentary

Fathi Gasmi, better known by his pen name Adam Fethi, is one of the most celebrated dissident poets in Tunisia. Born in 1957 in southern Tunisia, his poetry of political engagement and protest was written under the political repression in the 1970s and 1990s. His support for freedom of thought and speech was channeled into songs that made him popular among students. His poems were set to music by several groups, including *al-Bahth al-Musiqi* ("Music Research") and *Awled al-Manajim* ("Children of the Mines"). He also wrote songs for famous singers such as the Egyptian Cheikh Imam, the Tunisian Lotfi Bouchnak, and the Lebanese Marcel Khalifa. He is the author of *Ughniat al-Naqabi al-Fasih* (*Song of the Eloquent Unionist*, 1986), *Anachid li Zahrat al-Ghubar* (*Songs to the Dust Rose*, 1992) and *Nafikhu al-Zujaj al-A'maa* (*The Blind Glassblower*, 2011), which won the prestigious Abou Kacem Chebbi Prize. He is also the translator of several literary works including *Journaux intimes* by Charles Baudelaire and *Syllogismes de l'amertume* by Emil Cioran. Fethi received the Sargon Boulous Award in October 2019 as a tribute to his decades-long contribution to poetry and translation.

Fethi's latest collection *The Blind Glassblower* offers an interesting case of a poem sequence or poem cycle, which is similar in its conception and aesthetic orientations to the short-story cycle. The collection is energized by an intricate network of reverberations, cross-references, recurrent images, places, and themes. The blind glassblower is the major persona linking the collection which chronicles his life and work. While glassblowing symbolizes the act of writing poetry, blindness stands as a metaphor of dissidence. The poet refuses to take part in a corrupt world.

Fethi's consistent use of prose poetry shows a subversive aesthetic stand that confronts the traditional Arabic poem, *al-shi'r al-'amudi* (literally vertical poetry). His texts offer an interesting arrangement of the poetic textual space, wherein the reader's optic encounter with the poems stands as an ironic nod to the metaphor of blindness. Rhythm, traditionally created by a rhyming pattern, here is rather activated by the visual distri-

bution of lines on the page, the flow and hiatus of words, and a playful use of punctuation. Music and space coalesce in his poems; they yield a spatial rhythm rarely found in Arab poetry.

I maintained the layout of the three poems to preserve their aesthetic orientation. Being written in prose poetry, however, does not make them easy to translate. In “The Ship,” for instance, Fethi’s punctuation is quite challenging. The deliberately omitted full stop in the third sentence between *al-’uyun* and *al-ruh* creates an ebb of words that matches the liquid context of the poem. I added “and” to recreate a continuity in “To where eyes have insight and the soul is unrusted.” A similar encounter with a strong flow of words happens towards the end of “The Missing Eye.” This time I recreated the same stream-of-consciousness style in which punctuation is obliterated in order to create a free play of words.

Translating neologisms or concocted words is a particularly hard venture. *Maram* is an invented name that stands for an imaginary city. It is composed of two parts: *ma* and *ram*. *Ram* is from the verb *rama*, which means to seek, desire, or want. *Ma*, however, creates the undecided meaning in this word, for it refers both to “that which is desired” as well as its negation, that is “that which is not desired.” I opted to transliterate this word and add a note to explain it.

In “Amadeus Flute” the major challenge resides in translating the word *qasaba*, which is used frequently throughout *The Blind Glassblower*. Literally, *qasaba* means a blowpipe, the instrument used in blowing glass. Glassblowing refers to poetry as a craft, an idea found in ancient Arabic description of poetry as *sina’a* (craft, trade, profession). The act of blowing, however, is akin to the divine act of creation. The story of genesis in the Islamic tradition attributes to God the power of blowing: “I blow into him [Adam] from my own spirit” (*Surat al-Hajar*, or “Verse of the Stone”). The Romantic image of the poet-prophet, used in Tunisian Abu al-Qassim al-Shabi’s work, is displaced by a God-like figure who is able to blow spirit into words. Fethi, however, makes a playful use of this word, which changes according to the context. It can be a flute, a cane, reed, a walking stick etc. I opted for the word cane as it encompasses almost all of these meanings. It also refers to a glass cylinder used in glassmaking, and thus preserves the idea of glassblowing.

Tunisian poetry in English translation is rather rare. My translation stems from the urge to provide more visibility to Fethi's wonderful work, which is already translated into French and Spanish.

Source text:

Fethi, Adam. *Nafikhu al-Zujaj al-A'ma*. Manshurat al-Jamal, 2011, pp. 20–23, 69–70, 83–84.

George Held
Martial, VII. 61

Marcus Valerius Martialis
VII. 61

Aggressive merchants had taken over
the whole city; no shop stayed within its bounds.

You, Germanicus, outlawed expansion
into narrow streets, and mere paths became roads.

Now no pillar is girded by chained flagons
nor must the praetor walk in the midst of mud.

Nor is the barber's razor's brandished blindly
in crowded streets, nor does the dingy diner

dominate the whole block. Barber, butcher,
barkeep, and cook serve within their bounds.

This now is Rome; before, it was Macy's.

Commentary

To thank (and flatter) the emperor Domitian (Germanicus, line 3, a name earned by his sanguine feats in battle against the Germans), Martial wrote this paean to the ruler's edict forbidding shops from expanding into the thoroughfares of Rome. A similar grab for space can be seen today in the streets of New York, where some restaurants have built sidewalk cafes leaving beside the curb only a narrow passageway for pedestrians. Other merchants display goods along their storefronts, giving the city the air of a bazaar. That was apparently the condition of Rome before Domitian's edict, and Martial notes the improvements in the aftermath, clinched in the last sentence of the poem, a "stinger" like those in his typically shorter epigrams: before the edict, Rome was just one big store.

In this poem, Martial assumes the role of a city historian or preservationist, a Jane Jacobs of imperial Rome. The narrator offers, in the first sentence, a view of the city before Domitian's edict and then, having given him credit for banning the expansion of shops streetward, in the second sentence, lists some of the improvements that have accrued for pedestrians. For example, no longer do wine merchants chain flagons to sidewalk pillars, and the inspector of local commerce, perhaps satirized by Martial as "the praetor" (one of two high-ranking magistrates) on an inspection tour of the once-sprawling stalls can now avoid the muddy pathway by walking on the uncluttered sidewalk. The list, by the way, is one of Martial's favorite ploys in his writing, as is the summary in the penultimate sentence.

Instead of Martial's elegiac couplets, I use blank-verse couplets here, and take an extra line, eleven, compared to the poem's original ten. His lines, however, alternate dactylic hexameter and dactylic pentameter, or sixteen and thirteen syllables; my couplets have an average of ten: 145 to 120 syllables all told. Thus, Martial's poem has slightly greater duration when read aloud.

Source text:

Martial. *Epigrams*. Ed. and trans. by D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Vol. II. (Loeb Classical Library), Harvard University Press, 1993, pp. 126–127.

Sharon Fish Mooney
Autumn

Jules Breton
Automne

The river slowly flows; its waters weave
A path round stumps of alders, stained blood-red.
Tall yellow poplars scatter their golden leaves
Among blond flaxen reeds. The riverbed

Awakes and murmurs as a soft wind moans
And blows clear silver wrinkles from dark regions,
Where trembling trees dip down their domes and cones
As if agitated by birds in the thousands.

A thrush repeats its sharp and tiny cry.
Then, darting from the grassy shore it sings
And sparkles, jewel-like in the clear blue sky

As its prolonged note is heard, pitched shrill and higher—
The kingfisher takes flight on flaming wings
In a furtive ray of emerald and of fire.

Commentary

Jules Adolphe Aimé Louis Breton (1827–1906) was born in Courrières, Artois, France. A popular artist of the realist tradition, Breton became known in America for his 1884 oil on canvas, *The Song of the Lark* (Henry Field Memorial Collection, Art Institute of Chicago). Willa Cather's 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark* takes its name from this painting. Breton exhibited his work at the Salon de Paris and received several awards/medals for his art. He was elected to the *Académie des beaux-arts* in 1886.

Breton is less well-known for his poetry, but that, too, served to define his life. His poetry was published during his lifetime in a number of journals and in two books: *Jeanne*, a novel in verse, and *Les Champs et la Mer*, a collection of poems (1875).

My interest in Breton initially was sparked while doing research in the Van Gogh Museum library, Amsterdam, for my ekphrastic book of poetry after the art of Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh made reference to Breton's art and poetry nearly one hundred times in letters to friends and family members and considered Breton one of his most admired artists and poets. One of the poems Van Gogh sent to his artist friend, Anthon van Rappard was "Automne," dedicated to landscape artist Jules Dupré (1811–1889). Breton's choice of subject would have appealed to Dupré's love of nature.

In a letter to Breton in 1875, poet and literary critic Eugène Manuel wrote:

Today I have no hesitation in telling you that you are a poet with the pen as well as with the brush, and an excellent poet. The same deep sense of nature which has inspired so many wonderful paintings, you have found it and managed to reproduce it equally purely, seriously, and penetratingly with words, sound, rhythms and images.¹

Letters from other poets and art critics also expressed admiration and delight in Breton's dual artistic roles.

¹ Lacouture, Annette Bourrut. *Jules Breton: Painter of Peasant Life*. Yale University Press in association with The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 2002, p. 185.

Thirteen of Breton's poems, including "Automne," have been translated into English and published in *Vincent van Gogh—The Letters*, though without adherence to rhyme or meter.²

My desire to maintain metrical structures comparable to the original poems has necessitated, at times, substitutions or equivalents, though I hoped to adhere to both language and imagery that mirrored the spirit of the metrical literary traditions of the Victorian era in which he lived and wrote and the character and personality of Breton himself.

Breton's poem, with its focus on the kingfisher, also raises questions I'm exploring for a future book. Breton wrote "Automne" ca. 1875. Van Gogh's oil on canvas, *Kingfisher by the Waterside* was painted in 1887. Was this painting perhaps inspired in part by Breton's poem? Gerard Manley Hopkins, the painter who became a priest and poet and who was a frequenter of art museums in Europe and France, wrote his well-known poem, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire" in 1887. Was he, too, perhaps influenced to some degree by Breton's art and poetry?

Source text:

Breton, Jules. *Les Champs et la Mer*. Alphonse Lemerre, 1875. Nabu Press, 2014, pp. 29–30.

² Jansen, Leo, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, editors. *Vincent van Gogh—The Letters*. Van Gogh Museum & Huygens ING, 2009; version: December 2010. <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let435/letter.html>

Louise Stoehr
Five Poems from *Born Into*

Uwe Kolbe
Hineingeboren

the guilty

die, alas, mostly

of a cold
in a big bed
near an airport
therefore

of natural causes

Born Into

High wide green country,
fence-traversed plain.

Red

Sun-tree on the horizon.

The wind is mine
and mine the birds.

Small green country, narrow,
Barbed-wire countryside.

Black

Tree beside me.

Hard Wind.

Alien birds.

to be a bird, to fly like it

1

the shadows of my wings, winged shadows
my weak arms to hold you therein
i burst, the gentle one too gentle, bursting inward
walking into the evening, toward morning without greetings
down from the clouds, down into the surf of your body's
shore for me, furrowed chalk cliffs, wet sheen in fluctuating light

2

storm petrel, a wagtail's tracks near the creek
early dawning morn, blackening day breaks open
you are sand between pines, evening meal
hastily forgotten one, failing to meet you at times
when do branches dance, the leaves' chaos at the trunk
breaking hearts cloud-shaped, drivel and the art of love

3

inconceivable world fissure, my hands and yours therein

Hymn

Aggressions come from snowless winter
And from the Am-Already-Here syndrome, which kills.

What do I do with my courage on the new
Ship of imagination, in my German utopia?

Wood lies by wood and between stones mortar
The firmness of which lasts a hundred years, until then
May we hesitate and chat about the coal reserves.

Jester's bells jangle as the head moves
Like the coldness of a cosmos under attack,
Of its suns being sucked up into the myth.

With sloppy work and soft songs we gamble away
The seconds of happiness in this soap-bubble construct.

of desolation this discourse

remains of course desolate
and my experience of bliss, complaining,
remains of course missing.

jumping high i think:
a bounce
follows every jump,
and i keep on flying.

Commentary

Uwe Kolbe is one of the major German poets of his generation. Both part of the dissident scene in East Germany and at the same time fiercely independent, he early on reworked literary tradition, detailed observation, and personal experience into poems that clearly express his own poetic vision in a distinct voice.

Born October 17, 1957, in East Berlin, and growing up very close to the Berlin Wall, which was erected in August 1961, Kolbe was drawn to writing at a young age. He published his first volume of poetry, *Hineingeboren (Born Into)*, in the former German Democratic Republic in 1980 at the age of 23. The title poem alludes to the condition of the first post-Second-World-War generation that literally was “born into” the recently established Communist country of the former German Democratic Republic. Not having lived the parents’ experience of war followed by the hope for a new beginning in a new country, this new generation was confronted with life in a closed society that allowed its citizens only limited freedoms. The poems in this selection are taken from that first volume of poetry. It was that collection that first established him as a new voice in the literary scene of East as well as West Germany.

The poems vary in their form from traditional to experimental. As Kolbe has explained in public readings of these poems and their translations, the early experimental poems (giving up capitalization, reducing use of punctuation, using ambiguous syntactic constructions) are based on his attempt to *dissolve* form in order to *solve* poetically the problems of the world. Kolbe currently lives in Dresden and continues to be a prolific writer.

the guilty

“[T]he guilty” is an example of many of Uwe Kolbe’s earlier poems that combine political commentary with certain formal characteristics. First of all, Kolbe participates in an approach to German spelling, which is shared by other writers, in which nouns are no longer capitalized and most punctuation is omitted. While some poems, as a result, are hard to read, this particular poem flows very smoothly in the tone of colloquial speech.

The lack of capitalization in German is obviously not evident in the English translation except at the beginning of lines and in the title. In another poem included in this selection, “of desolation this discourse,” Kolbe uses the same formal characteristics, and, in that case, the lack of capitalization does affect the lower-cased first-person pronoun in the English version.

This translation may also serve as an illustration of translation choices that are influenced by the rhythmic flow and physical appearance of the poem on the page. For example, the somewhat old-fashioned word “alas” for *leider* fits the rhythmic flow of the poem better than alternative translations, such as “unfortunately.” Likewise, although “sniffles” may be a more literal translation of *Schnupfen*, “a cold” fits the flow of the poem better.

Most importantly, the translation preserves the poem’s subtle political irony: in a moral universe, we would expect the guilty to pay for their sins; however, that does not represent reality. In the context of the GDR, this poem may be read as a daring political statement. The “guilty” may be understood as the political leaders who are corrupt, but instead of being brought to justice they “die ... of natural causes,” that is, they escape just punishment. Finally, I would speculate that the colloquial tone of the poem not only underscores the poem’s irony but also helped to disguise the political criticism to such an extent that the poem was able to pass GDR censorship.

Born Into

The poem “Hineingeboren,” or “Born Into,” has become Kolbe’s signature poem because it has become the term used to refer to the first generation of writers born into the former German Democratic Republic. At first sight, it has a much more traditional appearance than some of Kolbe’s other early poems: it has regular capitalization and punctuation, including capitalization at the beginning of most lines. It is a tightly-woven twelve-line poem in two stanzas in which each line of the first stanza directly corresponds to the equivalent line in the second stanza. Lines 1 and 7 refer to the country, lines 2 and 8 to fences, lines 3 and 9 to color, lines 4 and 10 to a tree, lines 5 and 11 to the wind, and lines 6 and 12 to birds.

These corresponding lines are used to create a stark contrast between the two stanzas, which is heightened by syntactic constructions that do not contain verbs. This poem has been interpreted as a reference to the real political situation in the German Democratic Republic at the time. In addition, it may be read even more metaphorically.

As is so often the case when translating poetry, an initial translation choice influences subsequent translation choices. For example, lines 1, 7 and 8 of the original poem contain the German word *Land*, either alone or embedded in the word *Stacheldrahtlandschaft*. The obvious choice for translating the German *Land* in lines 1 and 7 is “country.” For *Stacheldrahtlandschaft* “landscape” might have seemed appropriate, but that would not have retained the internal *land* echo. “Barbed-wire countryside” retains the internal reference and, as a result, fits the flow of the poem. Moreover, while “landscape” refers to natural scenery, there was nothing natural about the former German-German border. Additionally, translating *Stacheldrahtlandschaft* as “barbed-wire landscape” might also suggest the idea of “landscaping,” that is, an attempt to make natural features more attractive. I do not see this type of irony in the German original. The choice “countryside,” however, suggests a rural region, which is fitting for the geographic location and desolation along most of the former German-German border. It therefore evokes the image of empty spaces that were created in the bleak border regions and then filled with barbed-wire, which here stands metonymically for other border fortifications.

to be a bird, to fly like it

“[T]o be a bird, to fly like it” also does without capitalization, and it is possible to reflect this device in the English version by not capitalizing the first-person pronoun “I.” This poem is an early example of Kolbe’s interest in the imagery of flying, often expressed through allusions to birds.

In this particular poem, Kolbe delights in the specificity of bird names. The poem’s speaker refers to a “storm bird” (*Sturmläufer*) and to a wagtail. The category of “storm bird” encompasses various sea birds, including the storm petrel, which

is perhaps the most specific translation of *Sturmläufer* because the English bird “storm petrel” and the German bird *Sturmläufer* are both believed to be bad omens. While some readers may be inclined to interpret *Sturmläufer* as something other than a bird, such as a reference to the military, in a personal communication Kolbe has affirmed that the poem refers simply to the bird. This is also the case for the reference to the wagtail.

The use of such specific names in the context of poetic devices such as alliteration may lead to translation challenges. I rendered the alliteration of the s-sound in *stelzenspuren* with alliteration with the t-sound in “wagtail’s tracks.” In the same vein, the last two lines of the first stanza include alliteration and wordplay that fuse images of the body and the sea, thus combining sexuality and nature. The “s” in “surf” in line 5 anticipates the “sh”-sounds in “shore” and “sheen” in line 6; the “f”-sound in “furrowed” and “fluctuating” in line 7 also alliterate.

“to be a bird, to fly like it” contrasts public and private spheres. The reader, of course, has to supply the context of what “inconceivable world fissure” in the last line means. This may be a clear reference to the political situation at the time the poem was written, that is, the East-West conflict of the Cold War. This may also be a more general reference to the experience of a lover and his beloved in a hostile world. It is a testament to Uwe Kolbe’s poetic genius that he was able to craft a potentially critical poem that nevertheless slipped through the censors of the publishing world in the former GDR. As with most of Kolbe’s poems, this poem’s strength lies in that ambiguity that the reader has to resolve for him- or herself.

Hymn

It is difficult to discern which poem by Uwe Kolbe is the most ironic. His original German “Hymne” certainly is among the top contenders in this category. “Hymne,” at first sight, means “Hymn” in English, but it also may refer to a country’s national anthem. The translation of this title as “Hymn,” however, is the correct choice because of the poetic tradition in which Uwe Kolbe places himself.

A hymn is a song of praise, typically of a god. As Nor-

bert Gabriel argues, a hymn is “always with reference to something other, sublime.”¹ There is a long-standing tradition in German literature of writing hymns. One of Kolbe’s literary heroes, Friedrich Hölderlin, is well known for his hymns, such as “Patmos” and “Andenken” (“Memories”). The irony in Kolbe’s “Hymn” results as the poem abruptly shifts from the expectation created by the exalted title to its anticlimactic concerns of a worldly nature. The main point here is that the poem itself is not about praise but about concerns. A line-by-line examination of this poem is more appropriate for a lengthier article, so one example may suffice to illustrate this main point.

Nowhere is the anticlimactic nature of “Hymn” more evident than in the poem’s final stanza’s reference to “sloppy work and soft songs” with which “we gamble away” our happiness. I understand this as a direct and ironic reference to Hölderlin’s hymn “Andenken.” The famous line of Hölderlin’s poem, *Was bleibt aber, stiften die Dichter*, is typically translated as “what remains, however, the poets provide.” I would argue that while this is an adequate translation, it might help to think about the word *stiften* in terms of the English word “legislate.” This is in line with much of Romantic thinking, such as when Shelley says in his *A Defence of Poetry*: “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” As a result, the Romantics praised the poet as a prophet who may save the world. This is in stark contrast to the poetic project of “sloppy work and soft songs” in Kolbe’s “Hymn.” And just to leave no doubt about the degeneration of the Romantic project of high hopes, the last line of this poem makes clear that even the gambled-away happiness is just wishful thinking in its “soap-bubble construct.”

As with all translations, choices abound, and this not the space to go into minute detail; however, a few examples deserve mention. First, in line 4, translating *Fantasie* as “imagination” is preferable to the almost self-obvious cognate “fantasy” because “fantasy” primarily denotes wild, visionary fancy and illusion. While this may indeed have turned out to be the case in political reality of the former GDR, there was no way the Kolbe at the time of writing this poem could have predicted this outcome;

¹ Norbert Gabriel. *Studien zur Geschichte der deutschen Hymne*. München, W. Fink, 1992. (p. 54, my translation)

moreover, the positive terms of “courage” in line 3 and “utopia” in line 4 support the choice of “imagination,” which Webster’s defines as “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality.”

of desolation this discourse

The final poem in this selection, “of desolation this discourse,” is another of Kolbe’s formally non-traditional poems. It reflects the poet’s underlying optimism in the face of adversity, and leaves open the question of what nature this adversity might be, perhaps personal, perhaps political, or even existential. This poem posed an interesting translation issue. The use of the German words *Ödnis* and *öde* evokes the German translation *Das öde Land* of T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*. In order to maintain the play between noun and adjective, it was not possible to include this allusion in the English version of Kolbe’s poem. However, it was possible to maintain this play with words by using “desolation” and “desolate.”

On the other hand, translating *Reden* as “discourse” was a natural choice because *Reden* in the context of this poem seemed to be less casual than “talking,” “speaking,” or “speech” but also less formal than such options as “oration.” As a consequence of this translation choice, the English title includes an alliteration, and there is a slight resonance between “discourse” and the English translation of *natürlich* as “of course” in lines 1 and 3 of the poem.

As Uwe Kolbe has stated, “With few exceptions, translations are just about the best thing that can happen to a poem.” Thus I wish the readers of these selected poems the best experience of Uwe Kolbe’s early works.

Source text:

Uwe Kolbe. *Hineingeboren: Gedichte 1975–1979. Mit einer Nachbemerkung von Franz Fühmann*. Suhrkamp, 1982, pp. 25, 39, 46, 115, 129.

Xinlu Yan
Three Poems from
Flowing Toward Serenity

Tan Xiao
涌向平静

*Returning to the Mountains*¹

百年归山

Ten years ago, grandpa had his coffin made.
Since then, grandpa had his burial clothes made, had his photo taken to be
used at his funeral.
Last winter, he selected a grove of pines
as the burial ground for his return to the mountains.
The pine trees are abundant, the fallen pine needles soft,
an ideal resting place.
There is not much left for him to do.
He's made all the necessary arrangements of his life.
These days, he is raising a goat; he takes the goat to the pine grove.
Sometimes he cuts the branches from the chestnut and banyan trees to
make charcoal.
The goat has grown bigger, in the grove,
only pine trees remain. Grandpa is still alive.
He attends banquets for weddings and funerals in the village.
Everybody he meets there is a stranger.
He invites each of them to his funeral.

¹ Refers to death.

Fabrication

虚构

A person contains some inevitable fabrications.
The surname, birthplace, and ethnicity on the resume
do not describe a specific person, for example, what he cares about,
or whether he has to endure it alone,
when there is no door opening up to him.

When I describe, fabrication begins along with it.
Born in poverty, therefore desiring very little,
I regard every gain as alms,
every achievement, a fluke.

Showing my weakness in words is like taking a shortcut.
My scribbling doesn't make the paper thicker.
Over and over, I try to write neatly,
as if graceful penmanship could hide my incompetence in everything else.

The Moon Knows

月亮知道

I have seen Yangtze River at dusk,
its surface tinted by sunset but the colors forgotten shortly after.
Later in the evening, the lights from the earthly world
brighten the flowing water, but they are unable to resurrect a person.
When the moonlight sprawls on the river,
there is nowhere better than here as my final resting place.
I cannot own more in the span of my life than in this moment.
On the shore, one rises and becomes the deceased.
The water rises along and becomes waves,
swelling and receding, babbling and burbling loudly under the moonlight.

Commentary

Tan Xiao was born in 1987 in Enshi, Hubei, China. He has published two poetry collections, *In Your Name* and *Flowing Toward Serenity*. The three poems cited above are from *Flowing Toward Serenity*.

As an east Asian language, Chinese has sentence structures, syntax, and linguistic customs that are quite different from English. Additionally, Chinese frequently contains polysemic expressions, homophones, homonyms, and idioms, which tend to be exceptionally difficult to translate. As a result, quite often the translator must make compromises by weighing linguistic fidelity against literary readability for an optimized reading experience. I encountered such decision-making processes when translating Tan's poems.

The title of the first poem "Returning to the Mountains" is *bainian guishan* 百年归山. This is a phrase comprised of two expressions: *bainian* 百年, which means "a hundred years," and *guishan* 归山, which means "return to the mountains." They are euphemistic expressions for death. *Bainian* 百年 ("a hundred years") is more well-known but linguistically plain. It could be simply translated to "death." However, when followed by *guis han* 归山 ("return to the mountains"), the phrase becomes more interesting.

First, *guis han* 归山 ("return to the mountains") is visual. It paints a tranquil scene with elegance and a subtle emotional touch. When a Chinese reader reads "return to the mountains," she may picture towering peaks embellished with rushing waterfalls with a small figure at the foot of the mountains, like one would see in a traditional mountains and water painting. She might feel peaceful and melancholic.

Secondly, the concept of mountains is culturally rich. The idea that humans are in harmony with nature is a vital tenet of Chinese philosophy. Mountains are central to the concept of the universe. The numerous shapes, colors, and ever-changing moods a mountainous landscape emits are believed to reveal the way of the universe. Mountainsides are also viewed as destinations for those seeking refuge from the secular world as well as spiritual enlightenment. Correspondingly, the idiom *guis han* 归山 ("return to the mountains") refers to not only the

death of one's physical body, but also to one's spirit reuniting with the universe. Another aspect I considered when translating this idiom was its location in the original poem. Because it is used in the title, it carries extra weight. However, the other idiom used in the title, *bainian* 百年 ("a hundred years"), also means "death" and is linguistically plain, so I decided to leave it out. The title therefore becomes "Returning to the Mountains." Knowing that this translation will probably not portray death to Western readers, I decided to add a footnote to help them understand. It is not an ideal solution, but I believe it's a justifiable compromise.

In *The Moon Knows*, the fourth sentence is *que wufa wanhui yige ren* 却无法挽回一个人 ("but cannot bring back a person"). The literal meaning of *wanhui* 挽回 is "hold back or tie back." As an expression, it is polysemic. It could mean "recover the situation," "make someone change her mind," or "save someone's life." Judging from the context—the use of "the earthly world" in the third sentence, "my final resting place" in the sixth sentence, and "deceased" in the eighth sentence—I settled on translating *wanhui* 挽回 ("hold back or tie back") as "resurrect" for consistency and a more direct reference to death. I believe this is more truthful to the poet's intention.

Source text:

Xiao, Tan. "Bainian guishan" ["Returning to the Mountains"], "Xugou" ["Fabrication"], "Yueliang zhidao" ["The Moon Knows"]. *Yongxiang pingjing* [Flowing toward Serenity]. China Youth Press, 2017, pp. 4, 9, 53.

Nina Youkhanna
An Axe Falling on a Blind Statue

Mohamed Fouad
تمثال أعمى يهوي عليه فأس

With the roots of earth
My veins entangled
And this death
Strips me of my youth
And I have roamed distant lands until
I was content with the spoils
Of return

—Imru' al-Qays¹

And Sorrow
—before the departure of the soul—is weakness
And sorrow does not exist
After departure

—Al-Mutanabbi²

1

Would it have been enough
To pull away the curtain
So on the wall could spill
A darkness
And on the basin,
The ink of absence.

¹ A renowned pre-Islamic poet of the 6th century, credited with inventing the *qasida*, or Arabic ode.

² A prominent Arab poet in the literary canon, known for reviving the *qasida* in the 10th century.

There is no sorrow
—after you shut the door—
The heavy air in the room
The plant frozen near the glass
A boisterous laughter in black and white
Of dead ones emerging from photos

There is no sorrow
Your life squandered like a joke
Your life is not good enough
Like a stupid stain on a wall
Except that the spoils
Are a handful in the void
And it would be wise also
Not to repeat the game

2

From reeds we create our days
And with the same ease
We scatter pain
Hesitating
Despite that, love captures us
Our souls
Feathers suspended in the air
Descending
Like a two-winged angel
On a school notebook.

3

We had nothing to reveal, in the beginning
We sketched a fissure in the wall
And we did not pass through it
And we were on the verge of crying
And on our heads alighted the bird
Outside, someone is judging our lightness
We are worthier
—we know—
Of our swift dead.

4

We laugh from foolishness
To deceive defeat
And nothing falls against which to retaliate
We have nothing to lose
Or weep over
No angels to protect our sleep
No body to gasp from pleasure
A blind man leads our life
With a severed thread
A wax statue on the edge
A wooden bench
On which
Falls
An Axe.

5

What disgrace dragged us, just like that,
Openly
What hairdresser engraved us
With black henna
And sprinkled salt in our eyes.
Leech offspring
On empty dinner tables
And it was a losing deal from the start
We will cease being raging bulls
In calcareous wastelands
And the blade in the neck
Gave us a pretext to fall.

6

We will confess, sometimes,
That we were not worthy
As becoming of vanquished kings
Who left their keys on the doorframe
We peep through fissures we created
To lament what we lost and what followed
We weave anguish after anguish
With the thread of regret
Vagabonds
On wooden horses
Humming a mysterious melody
And from our hands
Falls the ball of wool
And rolls away.

Commentary

Walter Benjamin posits that “[u]nlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one” (258–259). In undertaking this translation, it was this echo of Mohamed Fouad’s poetry that I sought in English. In addition, I was intrigued by Benjamin’s assertion that “[a] real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light,” requiring “a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator” (260). Reading Fouad’s poetry in the original Arabic, one is struck by the accessibility of the language and the scarcity of convoluted expressions or allusions. Hence, in this translation, I was guided by the individual words and their intention whenever possible. This freed me from forcing the translation into a distinctly English mold by embracing all the blemishes of the echo.

Mohamed Fouad is a Syrian doctor and poet. He was born in Aleppo where he practiced his medical profession for many years. He has published several acclaimed poetry collections, and this translation appears in his second collection, *Al-Matruk Janiban (Cast Aside)*, published in 1998. Fouad was forced to leave Aleppo in the wake of the Syrian civil war and currently resides in Lebanon, working as an Assistant Professor of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut.

The epigraphs at the beginning of the poem usher in the subject as depicted by two of the most important poets in the Arabic canon, Imru’ al-Qays and Al-Mutanabbi, who were celebrated for developing and reviving the classical *qasida*, respectively. Translating these few lines was a feat of its own, and I had to read various interpretations to understand their meaning. In the first epigraph, an elegy by Imru’ al-Qays mourning his father, death reminds the poet that life is but a distraction and an illusion. Despite all his wanderings and gained glories, it (death) will ultimately claim him and return him to the “roots of the earth.” Conversely, Al-Mutanabbi praises living boldly and pronounces fear of death as nothing but cowardice or weakness. If death is

certain, then there is no point in wallowing in sadness while one is still alive, and one cannot be sad after perishing.

Fouad's poem is an answer to his two classical predecessors, a subjective depiction of life and death in modern landscapes. Fouad is a master of words—each one serves to intensify the poetic image while maintaining fluidity and unity through association and repetition. For this reason, I favored literalness whenever possible in order to do justice to the poem, and I found that Fouad's language easily lent itself to translation because of its clarity and sheer force. Furthermore, the Arabic poem is filled with bleak and absurd visions, like a surrealist dream, which reinforce Fouad's experience of life in the 20th century—futile, solitary, and aimless. Any attempt to bring a logical organization to the poem would have inevitably resulted in the distortion of its ethos. I have also opted to remain faithful to Fouad's scarce punctuation and the recurring , (“and”) at the beginning of a line to mimic the paradoxical languid urgency produced by the poem. Various static images such as the blind statue of the title, walls, and wooden horses yield a sense of inertia. There is an urgency, however, in the imminent falling axe, the darkness filling the room at the beginning of the poem, and the ball of wool unravelling as it rolls away at the end.

Experimenting with literal translation, as every translator knows, has its limits. Sacrificing comprehensibility for literalness was not my mission, and I rarely had to choose one or the other. I did, however, make occasional creative choices by changing the syntax, simply in favor of better flow rather than a desire to explain the poem to the English reader. It is my belief that Mohammad Fouad's poem is powerful enough to traverse language barriers and speak to our universal loneliness in this modern wasteland.

Source text:

Fouad, Mohamed. *Al-Matruk Janiban (Cast Aside)*. Publications of the Ministry of Culture, 1998, pp. 29–38.

Work cited:

Walter, Benjamin. “The Task of the Translator.” *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*. Harvard University Press, 1996. pp. 253–263.

Elizabeth Dodd
Four Poems

Dieurat Clervoyant

Inaudible Voice

Voix inaudible

Haiti
you are the deaf song
which resonates
in nature's closed heart

You are the mute
tambourine
which reverberates
through God's deaf heart

Impassible Nature

Impassible nature

I gather your silence
Like a ripe fruit
That will end up in the grave of my mouth
In the opalescence of that bleached tomb
Its remains will lie just like the bodies
Of those three hundred thousand brothers
Sadistically uprooted from the light
And thrown into the hell of eternal night
My pen will avenge them
And raise a monument
Engraved with their names
I gather your complicit silence
Like a ripe fruit
That will end up between

The assassin teeth
Of my rebellious fingers
Dangerous nature

Blank Dreams

Chimère blanche

Stretched out, lounging on the blue shores
Of our flowering youth
We lived in our pipe dreams
We would dream of three lovely petals
In our own budding garden
Some of us dreamed of flowerbeds where
Blossoming girls stretched, as far as the eye could see
Some dreamed of odes and villanelles
Some of pink or black Porsches
Some of white stalks and black or green earth
Some of explorations, some of regalia, some of holy orders—
You and I, we would imagine three petals
Three lovely flowers in our garden
Contented, we would dream up three stars
Gracefully, charmingly placed
In our full basket of happiness
You and I, we spent years dreaming—remember—
Of tomorrow and red-marble, jasper dreams
But we got nothing but white smoke, blank dreams.

The Blood of One Heart

Le sang d'un coeur

More than once my heart's blood
Has overflowed the urn holding my soul.
It bleeds, giving far too much
When it's received so little.
The dagger of grudging
Hearts and hands—those that count—
Has jerked its criminal blade
A thousand times through my life.
And yet my heart has burned
A thousand bright fires
And a thousand volcanoes
Have spewed billions of maggots
Like swift eighth-notes,
Quavering, in this hearth
That has forged nothing, ever,
Except sweetness and gentle roses.
You see how it is: I wasn't made
To know those moments
Where joy is most profound.

Commentary

Dieurat Clervoyant is a Haitian writer (born in 1965 in Dessalines) who has lived in exile in France for thirty-one years. As a young man he was active first in the struggle to overthrow Jean-Claude Duvalier and then to resist the military's concentration of power in dictatorship; he then fled to France and was granted refugee status. Later, he gave up the official status of refugee; he now considers himself a stateless person. He has published one collection of poems, *Haïti: Entre Beauté et Blessures* (2012) and he appears in the anthology *Les Douleurs de la Plume Noire: Du Camaroun Anglophone à Haïti* (2010). A new volume, *L'Étoile Poignardée*, is forthcoming. He regards his writing as a continued form of militancy on behalf of Haitian people. "Even though I am not present on the ground," he explains, "I continue to extend what I call my offering to the country through my writing. I hope that my voice, mingled among others, will be heard by the population throughout their setbacks, in their search for well-being."¹

Throughout his work he expresses rage and regret over the course of events in his homeland, feelings offered most succinctly and directly in "Inaudible Voice." Elsewhere he explains,

After seeing the government collapse, we were totally euphoric. We all thought that once having finished with Duvalier himself, we would be done completely with his regime. But it didn't take long to disillusion us and we realized that the military that had succeeded him was even worse, because they were the very core of the system.²

The poems convey the extreme emotions of the young activists, filled with the Romantic language of idealism together with adult

¹ Personal correspondence. 3 April 2019. "Bien que je ne sois pas présent sur le terrain, je continue d'apporter ce que j'appelle ma contribution au pays, à travers mes écrits. J'espère que ma voix, entre autres confondue, sera entendue par la population en déboires et à la recherche d'un mieux-être."

² Personal correspondence. 3 April 2019. "Après avoir vu le gouvernement s'écrouler, nous étions dans les meilleures euphories possibles. Nous pensions tous qu'une fois avoir fini avec Duvalier lui-même, on avait fini totalement avec le régime. Mais il ne fallait pas longtemps pour nous désillusionner et nous rendre compte que les militaires qui lui ont succédé étaient bien pires encore, parce qu'ils étaient l'épicentre même du système."

cynicism that surveys decades of lost opportunity and betrayal. Whether his topic is the government's—and the world's—failed response to the Haitian earthquake of 2010 (which he decries as a “complicit silence” in “Impassible Nature”), or an individual's feelings of betrayal (which he articulates in “The Blood of One Heart,”) Clervoyant presents great amplitude of emotion.

These poems do not employ Creole turns of phrase. Instead, they carry a timbre of French formality, despite the author's anger and energy. Consequently a challenge for the translator lies in combining his rhetoric and conventional symbols along with quirky, individual specifics. In “The Blood of One Heart,” the classical-sounding urn and the romanticized roses and dagger all combine with semi-surreal imagery of maggots or larvae invading the domestic hearth. Further, Clervoyant's syntactic repetition and abstraction, when rendered in English, may detract from the poem's powerful imagery. While Clervoyant relied on syntactic repetition (*et pourtant, a saigné*), I often chose repetition of sound (“overflowed,” “holding,” “soul”). I had some difficulty in particular with the line *A la croche dans ce foyer*. In correspondence, Clervoyant confirmed that here *croche* denotes an eighth note, a musical quaver. He intends many simultaneous meanings: the action of larvae falling on the hearth is quick, taking no more than an eighth-note of time; the larvae wriggle and squirm, a kind of visual quaver; and that his poems themselves, like reverberating music, spew forth from his own volcanic depths. “There is a double desire to materialize actions and to refuse any idea of logic in my poems,” he explains.³

I sought to find a way for that particular line to convey, with subtlety, both the auditory/musical and the physical/motion aspects of *a la croche*. In my translation, I wrote the line “like swift eighth-notes,” a brief run of one-syllable words to interrupt the surrounding multi-syllabic phrases. In the following line, “quavering,” set off by commas, helps broaden the literal eighth-note of music to include the physical possibilities of quavering, since in English the word can apply to objects such as leaves or flags in the wind. Additionally, the assonance of “eighth” and “quaver” present a level of musicality to further engage a reader's attention. *C'est que* is a rhetorical phrase that

³ Personal correspondence. 15 August 2018.

doesn't rely on grammar to implicate the reader in understanding; it could be translated simply, "In truth." But I thought it would be powerful in English to address the reader directly, to demand that she or he feel implicated in the moment of understanding, so I arranged the line to place the poem's reader and speaker both poised on opposite sides of the colon, as if gazing at one another.

Clervoyant's enraged rhetorical style might recall spoken word poetry, but he doesn't rely on the tight, pyrotechnical rhyme and rhythm that often add textured complexity in English. Instead, chez Clervoyant, there's often a more formal, periodic syntax. In translating "Impassible Nature" for U.S. readers, I chose to include a tight, perfect rhyme ("light / night") in the heart of the poem to introduce a bit of spoken-word style energy within the poem's violent imagery.

In "Blank Dreams," Clervoyant combines conventional images and language (blossoming girls and flowering youth) with idiosyncratic details of the young peoples' dreams given as a mixture of surreal imagery ("red-jasper dreams") and a brand-name luxury car. I worked to heighten the wild energy of these shifts. *Jaspe* from the original is simply "jasper"; the adjectival *jaspé* is "marbled." To intensify the surprise of linking the concept of the couple's future with concrete and tactile elements of beauty, I layered literal and figurative translations through imagery and idiom. Idiomatically, *chimère blanche* would be rendered "pipe dream," while literally it translates to "white dream." I chose to render the term with the cognate "blank dreams," not only to avoid the English cliché, but to emphasize the harsh emptiness of the young people's futures. The stakes are high, their disappointment massive. In order to preserve the contrast of vibrant, bright colors with the *blanc* ("white") of the original, I doubled these images—red marble and jasper; blank dreams and white smoke.

Source texts:

Clervoyant, Dieurat. "Voix Inaudible," "Impassible Nature," "Chimère Blanche." *Haïti: Entre Beaute et Blessures*, Langaa RPCIG, 2012, pp. 4, 5, 28.

Ndi, F., and Dieurat Clervoyant. "Le Sang d'un Coeur." *Les Douleurs de la Plume Noire: Du Cameroon Anglophone À Haïti*, Langaa RPCIG, 2010. p. 93.

Andrew Gudel
Four Poems by Yao Nai

Yao Nai

A Trip in the Mountains

山行

Sown grain flies, encouraging the early plow,
The spring hoe thumps as the sky clears.
Layer upon layer of rocks and trees follow the road;
A belt of mountain fields fills with the sound of running water.

Summer Night

夏夜

The shower that started at dusk stopped at night.
I begin to see glowing clouds spit out a white jade hook,
And stand for a while in the sharp shadows beneath the stairs.
The wind that touches the branches hints of autumn.

Autumn Arrives

秋至

As the rainy spell clears, wind fills the front of my robe.
The setting sun scatters long shadows into the empty courtyard.
Whose business is it that summer's gone and autumn's here?
Let the cold cicada on the tree cry out.

It Snowed at Jingfu Academy

敬敷書院值雪

Leftover snow flutters bleakly in the empty hall;
Now and then a perching crow speaks of his being alone.
I sit for a long time, not knowing where or when I am,
Then stand and climb the pavilion to watch the Yangzi flow.

Commentary

Yao Nai (1731–1815) was born in Tongcheng in China's Anhui Province. In 1763, he not only passed, but came first in the Qing Dynasty's national-level examination. Yao served in several imperial government bureaux, but retired for reasons of health and spent the rest of his life teaching at various academies in central China. He was also one of the early members of the Tongcheng School of writing, which stressed natural, straightforward prose and maintaining harmony between theme and form.

These four poems were not written as a set. The body of Yao Nai's poetry stretches to over 700 individual works, covering topics as diverse as seeing off friends departing on official travel, flowers, landscapes, reading, historical events, and even meditations on growing old. Reading through page after page of titles, I felt the need to pick some sort of overarching theme by which to select just a few poems. I decided to use the four seasons and began looking for works I thought were appropriate. This quartet of poems was the result.

As always happens in translations, unexpected difficulties cropped up. Sometimes these difficulties become humorous. In the first poem, the word translated as "grain" in the first line took over an hour to define. None of my usual dictionaries contained a definition that made sense in context. I was finally able to confirm a definition (and my original guess) when I consulted the *Kangxi Dictionary* (康熙字典), compiled in 1716. Two weeks later, I discovered that the simple lack of a cross reference in the first dictionary I consulted had led me on an hour-long quest to define a word that I later was able to find in just a minute or two.

The second poem forced me to add words for clarity's sake. In China, jade is not always green in color and one kind of white jade (known as "mutton-fat") is, in fact, highly prized. Thus the addition of "white" to describe the "jade hook" of the moon that is spit out by the clouds.

Both the third and fourth poems posed questions of whether (and how) to personify an animal. In the third poem, the last word in the last line can mean both a cry of sadness and the cry of an animal (吟), while the fourth poem uses the

verb “to speak” (語) when describing the sound the crow makes. Ultimately, I decided to leave the cry of the cicada ambiguous, while maintaining a direct translation of the verb for the noises the crow made.

The fourth poem also contained a pleasant surprise. The Jingfu Academy was one of the schools where Yao Nai taught later in life, so it’s possible that events in the poem were based on first-hand experience rather than being born of poetic imagination. The realization that Yao Nai might be describing something that actually happened made me feel as if I were standing beside him, watching events unfold, even though translator and poet were actually separated by more than two centuries and thousands of miles.

Source Text:

Yao, Nai 姚鼐. *Xibaoxuan shiwen ji* 惜抱軒詩文集 [*The Poetry and Prose of Xibao Studio*]. Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 2008, pp. 516, 558, 561, 605.

Kathryn Kimball
Four Poems from
House of Razor Blades

Linda Maria Baros
La Maison En Lames de Rasoir

*If the Lintel of the Door
Cleaves Your Head in Two,
It's a Bad Sign*

*Si le linteau de la porte
te tranche la tête,
c'est mauvais signe*

I was born in the workers' lunch pail of the ninth decade,
at a time when my house was only a wall.

I am coming to you from the land of the blind.

A long time ago my left eye dribbled
onto the buttons of my shirt.

I've been walking now for seven years, my right eye
in my right palm.

At home, the one-eyed made the law.

As for me, I left the country of my childhood,
where I used to weep, hidden away in the junk cupboard,
under the sink.

But I've forgotten those stories that once polished
the counterfeit coin of my ravings.

I'll tell you only one thing: I made it; here I am.

*The Lack of Walls
Makes for Strange Shapes*

*L'absence des murs prend
des formes bizarres*

From the door to the window,
you pace the livelong day,
like a horn honker on the A4:
the straight lines cut up the view,
demarcate the wide expanse into plots,
clear off the stubble and brush.

You repeat a well-known fact: on the highway,
the lack of walls makes for strange shapes.
Horn honkers from other solitudes show up, quadrupled;
they move onto the herringbone zone and pick up speed.

Their voices fade, rot,
erased to the bone, down to the very lime
—allegories of the day, of the night—
remaindered on the ceilings.

But you, at top speed,
you open up the view every day,
as if it were a tricky Zipper of Lightning:
because from the door to the window,
the A4 leads straight to the sky.

There are days when you would like to make yourself a spot,
on the window sill, take a walk in secret,
your eyes closed, like on a hypnotic bridge,
like on the edge of a deep silence.
(From below, only emptiness looks at you, its height.)

Like you were someone else,
legs sunk to the knees
in a deep silence,
someone taking a walk there in secret.

For a moment only, because the air
behind the bars of the window shoves you back
like in a high security ward.

And the room re-absorbs you into itself.

<i>Always Keep a Bottle of</i>	<i>Avoir toujours une bouteille</i>
<i>High Octane Under Your Pillow</i>	<i>d'essence sous l'oreiller</i>

Tie yourself solidly to the bed,
during the wet mornings,
with glistening ropes of alcohol. You're as hoarse
as crack-voiced boys,
who in a big hurry hustle
divine, narrow-hipped girls
into the glass elevators of the night.
(Their shadows alone could land you in jail.)

Do not try, in your treacherous way,
 under the ceiling's filters, there where the bromide blooms,
do not even try to understand the walls,
 and their right-angled strategy,
 nor to plough them systematically
 with the salt stores from your own damned temple.

And furthermore, do not try to pull out the electric plug with your teeth,
 you've done it so often it's become a habit,
 or crunch up the light switches, and like some crazy bastard,
 bite into the doorknob—its verdigris will result in burns—
 or, even worse, swallow in one gulp
 the magnet that shuts the window.

Do not ever again try using the skin
 you've torn from your chest,
 to polish, from high above, through the windows,
 to polish long and hard like a person possessed,
 — even if you wanted to do it on the way! —
 that brand new, red, shiny chassis
 moving slowly up your street
 like a hooker...

During wet mornings, with its bilious reflections,
 tie yourself nicely to the bed; do it deliberately;
 as if you wanted to cling to a mast,
And never again listen to the crackling coming up from the street,
 teaching you how to burn yourself alive,
 up in your attic room, under the sloping roof,
 as if in the central train station.

Commentary

Linda Maria Baros, Francophone poet, translator, and literary critic, was born in Bucharest, Romania, in 1981, during the Communist dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu. When only seven years old, she wrote and published her first poem in a literary journal.

In 1998, she left Bucharest to study in Paris. In 2011, she received a doctorate in comparative literature from the University of Paris, Sorbonne. An accomplished translator as well as poet, Baros has translated over twenty books into French or Romanian. She directs numerous poetry festivals in Romania and France and also serves on editorial boards for literary magazines. She currently lives and teaches in Paris. Her poems have been translated into twenty-five languages.

La Maison en lames de rasoir (*The House of Razor Blades*), from which these poems are selected, won the prestigious *Prix Apollinaire* in 2007. Baros has published four other books of poetry, including *Le Livre de signes et d'ombres* (*The Book of Signs and Shadows*), which won the *Prix de la Vocation* in 2004.

Baros sees poetry as a means to expand her reader's sympathies and understanding: "I simply want to forge a greater capacity in the [reader's] heart," (trans. by Jane Holland, http://www.lindamariabaros.fr/en_poetry.html).

This selection of poems by Linda Maria Baros presented several translation challenges. Baros's prevalent use of surreal or dream imagery, evidenced in the very title of her work, *House of Razor Blades*, can be difficult to ferry from one language to another. I found it helpful to settle on what I saw as the import of each poem and proceed from there to word choice. Each poem presents the translator with its own unique quandary and excitement.

Some of these difficulties required finding ways to suggest in English the double meanings available in a single French word. For example, in the poem "If the Lintel Cleaves Your Head in Two," the single word *la gamelle* can signify both a worker's lunch pail or a soldier's mess-kit. Because the line suggests time and place (Romania under Communism, 1981), I preferred the evocation of factory workers instead of soldiers, but either connotative meaning would have worked. In the same poem,

the single French word “*le débarras*,” means junk cupboard. I struggled to capture the connotative echo of *bon débarras!* (meaning “good riddance!”) and first translated the word as “good-riddance cabinet.” But perhaps the image of a forlorn girl weeping under the sink among old sponges and cleaners is effectively relayed by the English work “junk” without the “good-riddance” echo. It’s certainly more concise.

The title “*L’absence des murs prend des formes bizarres*” calls for an aphoristic-sounding translation because the line is later introduced as “a well-known fact.” After several attempts at translating freely (“No Walls and You Start Seeing Things”), I came back to a more literal rendering. “The Lack of Walls Makes for Strange Shapes” serves as both title and aphorism and also makes the philosophical point that absence can be an agent. The lack of demarcating walls on a stretch of A4 highway is likened to the blankness of a sheet of A4, the standard size paper used in the E.U. Both an open landscape without visual barriers and a blank sheet of paper can give rise to high-speed and startling movements of the imagination.

The point is forcefully made again with the mention of the herringbone pattern (“*en épi*”), often used to demarcate a merging or safety lane (which, as the poem mentions, impatient motorists sometimes use to speed ahead). The herringbone pattern is imaged again in “*fermeture Éclair*.” *Fermeture Éclair* is a well-known brand name of zipper in France—so could have been left perfectly comprehensible as “zipper.” But *éclair* means lightning and thus suggests not only the jagged, herringboned formation of a zipper (and streaks of lightning) but also the electric speed of the imagination—hence “Zipper of Lightning.”

Translating titles can indeed present problems, as in the use of an acronym with no equivalent in English. “*Q.H.S.*” stands for *Quartiers de Haute Sécurité*, which could be rendered into English as “Maximum Security Ward (or Wing).” I chose “ward” to underscore the poem’s mention of hypnosis, engulfing emptiness, and window bars, suggestive of a psychiatric hospital rather than a prison. In this case, there seemed no way to preserve in English the sterility and coldness of an acronym’s shorthand.

The final poem, “*Avoir toujours une bouteille d’essence sous l’oreiller*,” also presented a title challenge: preserving in English the suggestion in the original of a correspondence be-

tween the alcohol of drunken stupor and the flammable gasoline of self-immolation. The choice of “High Octane” (“Always Keep a Bottle of High Octane Under the Pillow”) hints at both. The poem’s speaker, with dripping irony, seems actually to advise doing all the self-destructive things the poem mentions by *not* advising them, a use of the cunning rhetorical device of apophasis.

I render *la salière de ta sacrée tempe* as the “the salt stores from your damn temple,” which refers to the side of the head and its drip of salt sweat. If I translate *tempe* as “temple,” then a partial misreading may occur in English; one could well think “sacred structure” before thinking anatomy. But I have risked this suggestive misreading and have used the cognate instead of choosing a word with a close but inexact meaning, such as “brow.” “Brow” might clarify but would do away with the word and sound play of the original (*tempe/temple*, which hints at the metaphor of the body entire as a “temple”). The walls of this “house of razor blades” are emblematic of the blank canvas/paper upon which the artist creates—and no “crazy bastard” of a lover is to sow the body’s destructive salt on the fertile ground of art.

Published when Linda Maria Baros was twenty-six, this award-winning collection of poems is a stunning achievement. Translating these carefully crafted poems has been a discipline in finding meaningful English equivalents for Baros’s searing revelations.

Source text:

Baros, Linda Maria. *La maison en lames de rasoir*. Cheyne, 2006, pp. 17, 42, 43, 65.

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“Si le linteau de la porte te tranche la tête, c’est mauvais signe.”

“L’absence des murs prend des formes bizarres.”

“Q.H.S.”

“Avoir toujours une bouteille d’essence sous l’oreiller.”

Leanne Ogasawara
A Selection from Takamura Kōtarō's
Chieko Poems

Takamura Kōtarō
智恵子抄

My Heart One Night

或る夜のころろ

The moon in July
—Feverish and shining—
See it burning in the poplar woods
The fragrance of the cyclamen wafts gently
As you quietly cry
The forest, the road, the grass, the faraway town—
All cast in senseless sadness
Sighs are white in the cold
Side by side we walk
I take your hand as we tread across the dark soil
The sound of the night's last train echoes across the landscape
An unseen devil takes a swig of sake
Mocking our fate
The soul succumbs in convulsions
Your batik obi, slightly damp with sweat
And like a Zoroastrian martyr you suffer in silence
The heart, the heart
Wake up my heart
Wake up thy heart
The meaning of this feeling
Seeking to escape
This insufferable thing
This excruciating thing
And yet, too sweet
Unbearable to wrest ourselves away
The heart, the heart
Arise from your sickbed
From these sweet hallucinations
No matter where we look

Nothing but madness
And, the moon in July
—Feverish and shining—
See it burning in the poplar woods
My feverish heart
Writhing in pain
Tormented by a beautiful scorpion
Lying in the grass of a hothouse
The heart, the heart
What is it you call me to do?
On this night ruled only by silence

—August 1912

Song for a Storyteller's Picture Show
(In praise of peering into a children's
picture box and seeing a story
unfold before our eyes)

からくりうた
(覗きからくりの
絵の極めてを
さなきをめつ)

Deep in the Northeast,
In the land known as Michinoku
Lies the town of Nihonmatsu
And there, in a red brick building
Stands a *sake* warehouse
One day, a woman popped out of a sake bubble
—A woman just like sake—
Bursting free of the bubbly brew—
Running away from there
Running as far as Kichijōji
But before long Kichijōji would burn
In a fire
That not all the waters of the Abukumagawa River could quench
Sake and water—like born enemies
Can't hardly stand each other—
That's just the way it is

—August 1912

Shooting Long Range

人生遠視

A bird takes flight from beneath my feet
My wife is going mad
My clothes are tattered
Shooting long range
At three thousand meters away
Alas, too far to hit anything

—January 1935

Atomized Dream

噴霧的な夢

Chieko and I are in one of those elegant railway carriages
Riding up to see the crater at Vesuvius.
Dreams—like perfume—are atomized
And I am sprayed by this atomized dream of Chieko in her twenties.
From the end of my telescope—like a thin bamboo cylinder—
Gas flames blow out as if from a jet engine.
I could see Mount Fuji from my telescope.
Down in the crater, something is happening
A crowd stands there watching.
Chieko throws in a bouquet
—Made from the “seven grasses of autumn” found around Mt. Fuji—
It lands deep into Vesuvius’ crater.
Beautifully innocent and heartwarming
Chieko is endlessly fascinated by the world.
Her body—transparent like the waters of Mt. Fuji—smolders
As she leans against me walking across the crumbling gravel.
We are suffocating on Pompeian fumes.
The angst of yesterday, gone in an instant
I awoke at 5 a.m. in the crisp autumn air of my mountain hut.

—September 1948

Commentary

Theirs was one of the most famous love stories in Japanese literary history. In an age when marriages were arranged and romantic love of one's spouse rarely spoken of, Kōtarō and Chieko's story took the Japan of the 1940s by storm. The "Chieko Poems" tell the story of the poet's love for his wife. Reading the anthology chronologically, we begin with poems that describe the passion of their early romance and elopement against the wishes of their parents, following along as the poems become concerned with the trauma of Chieko's mental illness and early death in 1938. The four poems selected here were written between 1912 and 1941. Even after she was gone, Chieko remained the central figure in Kōtarō's life, and he would continue to write poem after poem about her. That these were love poems written by a man about his wife makes them unique even today, but in the Japan of the time, these poems created a tremendous stir. They have continued to remain a best-seller in poetry in Japan up to today—yes, in Japan poetry can be a best-seller.

My Heart One Night (August 1912)

Love as sickness—around the time this poem was published in September 1912, the two lovers had spent a few days together at a beach in Chiba Prefecture. Staying by plan in the same inn, they were seen walking on the beach and sketching together, sometimes even sharing a meal. In those days, this was scandalous behavior, and when news of this reached their parents it caused quite a stir. Kōtarō and Chieko, however, had fallen—madly—in love. It had been during a previous visit at that same inn that Kōtarō had by chance caught a glimpse of Chieko naked in the bath, and he had written that she was his destiny. Their path would not be easy, however, with parents and social mores working against them. The repeated incantation-like use of the word *kokoro* (which in Japanese conveys the mind and heart, but also the soul and self) were challenging to translate. The use we see here is perhaps closer to Soseki Natsume's use of *kokoro* in his famous novel by the same name, as Kōtarō is conjuring up the feverish, tormented state of a lovesick person's heart and

soul. The moon and the fragrance of night blossoms all contribute to the frenzied feeling of a tropical fever.

Song for a Storyteller's Picture Show (August 1912)

In Kōtarō's day, old-fashioned storytellers could still be found entertaining audiences on the streets. There were also peep-shows, where people could peer into a box and see pictures of a story unfolding before their eyes. This poem is unique, because Kōtarō tells the story of their early romance in words that evoke pictures in an old story. So the reader "listens" to the tale of a woman born to *sake* merchants in Nihonmatsu (as Chieko's parents were), who one day runs away to Tokyo (Kōtarō's atelier was located in a Tokyo neighborhood known for its temple named Kichijoji). This causes quite a fuss when their parents discover them living together there. But as the poem relates, so passionate was the woman that nothing could put out her fire, not even all the waters of the Abukumagawa River back in her hometown. This is the most challenging poem I have ever worked on—both because of the local dialect (which I tried to convey in the last two lines) and its fairytale quality.

Shooting Long Range (January 1935)

This is the first poem that directly deals with Chieko's schizophrenia. The poem describes Kōtarō's acceptance of the reality that with her mental condition, all their goals and dreams now appear impossible—like trying to shoot a bird from 3,000 meters away. Indeed, by this time, her condition had deteriorated to extreme instability and sometimes violence. I chose to cut the word *rifle* in the last line to try to retain the clipped and despairing tone of the Japanese poem. A closer translation would read: *Alas, still too far to hit anything with this rifle.*

Atomized Dream (September 1948)

Chieko, long since passed away, appears to Kōtarō in a dream. He is still in the mountains, having evacuated from Tokyo dur-

ing the war. His memories of her comfort him, reminding him of the time they had once spent time together walking in the mountains in Kamikochi. The Seven Grasses of Autumn (*aki no nanakusa* 秋の七草) have figured in Japanese poetry from ancient times. Traditionally associated with moon-viewing festivities in autumn, there are many poems about them in Japan's oldest poetry anthology, the 8th-century *Manyōshū*. The grasses are *hagi* (bush clover), *susuki* (Japanese pampas grass), *kuzu* (arrowroot), *nadeshiko* (pinks, or *Dianthus superbus*), *ominaeshi* (maiden flower), *fujibakama* (*Eupatium foltnei*), and *kikyo* (also called *asagao* or balloon flower). Kōtarō had visited Italy while studying in Europe. At that time, there was a mountain switch-back train that traveled up the slopes of Vesuvius.

Source text:

Kōtarō, Takamura 高村 光太郎. 智恵子抄 [*Chieko Shō*]. Shinchōsha, 1967, pp. 17–19, 27–28, 83, 104–105.

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George Held has translated more than 160 of Martial's epigrams and published many of these translations in such journals as *Circumference*, *Ezra*, *National Poetry Month*, previous issues of *Transference*, as well as in *Martial Artist* (Toad Press Translation Series, 2005). A ten-time Pushcart Prize nominee,

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Allan Johnston earned his M.A. in Creative Writing and his Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Davis. His poems have appeared in over sixty journals, including *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, and *Rhino*, and his translations and co-translations of French and German poetry have appeared in *Ezra*. He has published two full-length poetry collections (*Tasks of Survival*, 1996; *In a Window*, 2018) and three chapbooks (*Northport*, 2010; *Departures*, 2013; *Contingencies*, 2015), and received an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, Pushcart Prize nominations (2009 and 2016), and First Prize in Poetry in the Outrider Press Literary Anthology competition (2010). He teaches writing and literature at Columbia College and DePaul University in Chicago.

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